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## **The role of Algerian diplomacy in the Libyan crisis: Objectives and obstacles**

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**Abstract.** This article aims to analyse the position of Algerian diplomacy with regard to the Libyan crisis and the attempts to resolve this fratricidal conflict, which has become an economic and security burden for Algeria. Where, the Libyan crisis, due to the proximity of this country to Algeria, has become a source of threats and protean (security) risks, a fortiori terrorism. It should be noted that Algeria's diplomatic approach is based on a "political solution" to the Libyan crisis, which consists of banning any form of foreign intervention, especially military. This approach has come up against the complexity of the Libyan reality and its regional and international ramifications. In this article, we address the following elements - the evolution of the Algerian diplomatic position towards the Libyan crisis since 2011; - the nature of the Algerian diplomatic preoccupation towards the Libyan crisis. We will also try to analyse the deeper issue of the balance between the moral (or principled) dimension versus strategic interests of Algerian diplomacy in the Libyan crisis. Finally, we will try to provide a prospective vision of the possible future paths of Algerian mediation in the Libyan crisis.

**Keywords.** Algeria, libya, diplomacy, crisis, conflict resolution

### **Introduction**

The Libyan crisis constitutes a security, economic and even diplomatic challenge for Algeria. Considering that Libya is the immediate neighbour with which Algeria shares a very long land border of 1000 km. With the explosion of the popular revolution against the Gaddafi regime in 2011, Algeria's diplomatic position was characterised by ambiguity and confusion at times, and by negative isolation at others.

Algeria waited until 2014 to take a clear diplomatic position. Based on the "peaceful political solution", between the Libyans themselves, and avoiding foreign intervention, especially; with the internal Libyan division, which turned into a destructive civil war, Which eventually led to the collapse of the state. This position crystallised after the Algerians assessed the catastrophic consequences (mainly security) of the crisis on Algeria. For this reason, Algerian diplomacy was strongly involved in the efforts to settle the conflict, offering numerous political initiatives. Algerian diplomacy encountered difficulties on the ground, linked to the limit of the internal, political and social Libyan dislocation, and the regional and international ramification of the crisis. Since, Where Libya has become a stage for great power rivalry.

On the other hand, the Libyan crisis has put to the test the principles of Algerian foreign policy, based on non-interference in the internal affairs of states. And its military and security doctrine based on the non-participation of the Algerian army in military operations outside the country's borders. So, for the first time, Algeria finds itself in a real dilemma; between the moral dimension in its foreign policy and especially in its relationship with its neighbours, on the one hand. And its strategic and economic interests in the Maghreb-Sahel region in general. In its fight against the threats arising from the Libyan crisis; terrorism, Organized crime, armed militias, and the risks of the failure of the Libyan state, on the other hand.

### **1. Algeria's position towards the Libyan revolution against Gaddafi**

Since Gaddafi came to power in 1965, Algerian-Libyan relations have not always been solid. They are generally marked by political and diplomatic tensions, and regional rivalry in Africa. Although, the two countries have not displayed their disagreements in public. Where political discourses have continued to assert Arab and Maghrebian 'brotherhood'. For this reason, it is wrong to believe that Gaddafi was an ally of Algeria. On the contrary, the Libyan colonel has often been a source of annoyance and embarrassment for Algiers. One can give several proofs of this; Gaddafi supported armed factions during the Algerian civil war, he also refused to lend Algeria, which was going through an acute economic crisis at the time. However, Gaddafi also helped the Algerian opposition abroad to put pressure on the Algerian regime. (Center for Strategic and Diplomatic studies, 2016)

Moreover, Gaddafi was in permanent rivalry with Algeria in its African initiatives of an economic and political nature. For example, the SEN-SAD initiative (Community of Sahel-Saharan States), which was originally an Algerian idea. But Gaddafi adopted it and made Libya his headquarters. As a result, and after the popular revolution of 15 February 2011, the Algerian regime found itself in a real crisis; between its desire to get rid of the annoying Gaddafi regime on the one hand, and the fear of seeing the revolution move towards the Algerian interior on the other.

When talking about the Algerian position towards the Libyan revolution, one has to distinguish between the official and the unofficial positions. The latter, as in academic circles, the media and certain actors in civil society, were based on moral considerations. Where, they expressed their support and sympathy for the revolution against the Gaddafi regime. Whereas, the official position was subject to "rational" calculations related to the interests of the regime to survive. For this reason, it was characterised by hesitation and confusion, and sometimes by ambiguity

Indeed, from the first months of the Libyan revolution, Algeria adopted a position based on "negative isolation". (Benchiba, 2012) For, it did not call on Gaddafi to leave power, and it did not expel the Libyan ambassador either. (Benantar, 2011) This was interpreted by the Libyan revolutionaries as a hostile position. And they even reached the point of accusing Algeria of sending mercenaries to fight alongside Gaddafi. Although the Bouteflika regime at the time justified this position, it continues to adopt one of the entrenched principles of Algerian foreign policy, namely non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and the search for political and diplomatic solutions to conflicts.

It can be said that the official Algerian position on the Libyan revolution is part of its vision of the Arab Spring in general. (Daguzan, 2015) In other words, the Algerian regime was afraid of the occurrence of what is called "the Domino effect". Because the political and economic situation in Algeria is not very different from that of the countries in which the popular uprisings took place. Although, the aggravation of the Libyan crisis and its

transformation into a civil war, following the political cleavage that occurred in the ranks of revolutionaries, after the elimination of the Gaddafi regime, with foreign intervention (NATO led by France). And its catastrophic effects began to affect Algeria's security, which is what prompted Algeria to show growing concern about the worsening of the Libyan crisis.

## **2. The nature of Algeria's diplomatic concern with the Libyan crisis: regional security.**

The Maghreb-Sahel region in general has been shaken by the effects of the devastating Libyan crisis. There is no doubt that it has rendered the situation in the whole region in a terrible state of insecurity. Notably with the ease of arms smuggling from Libya to neighbouring countries, Algeria has been the most affected. Especially after the NATO military intervention, and the ruins it left behind. Usually, after any foreign military intervention, there is a large-scale reconstruction process by the international community to rebuild the devastated country. But this did not happen in Libya! After NATO completed its mission to eliminate the Gaddafi regime, it left Libya and left behind a country in disarray with dilapidated security sectors. In addition, there is a proliferation of armed militias at war. (Martini, 2014) This grave situation would make Libya a source of all kinds of threats. And by virtue of sharing the same border with Libya, which amounts to 982 km, Algeria had to face major challenges.

Huge quantities of Libyan arms have entered the Maghreb-Sahel region through smuggling groups, including terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. As a result, terrorist networks in the region have become increasingly important. UN reports estimate that the number of Libyan arms smuggled is 45 million pieces, which circulate freely in the Sahel. (Kadlec, 2012) Thus, the region as a whole has become an open market for weapons, and a base from which terrorist groups plan and coordinate their operations. On the other hand, security investigations also reveal that Algeria has become a major market for Libyan arms and at affordable prices! (Amijin, 2014)

The proliferation of Libyan weapons on the Algerian-Libyan border has also become a source of action for Libyan militias. At a time when the central Libyan government has completely lost control of its territory. In this context, the Algerian media reported on the influence of 14 armed militias along the Algerian-Libyan border. The Tibou Battalion is among the most important armed militias operating there. In addition, there are other militias; the Ghadames and Touareg revolutionary battalions and the Touli battalion. As well as other militias operating in the Zuweila, Borj el-gatrone region. (Harchaoui, 2018)

Perhaps the most serious terrorist threat to Algeria from the proliferation of Libyan weapons was the attack on the Tiguentourine gas installations in the town of Tamanrasset on 16 January 2013. Where Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb kidnapped 250 Algerian workers and 30 foreigners of various nationalities, in order to negotiate with their home governments by demanding a ransom. Despite the immediate intervention of the Algerian army, the operation to free the hostages was bloody. Many hostages were killed. The level of terrorist violence also increased during this period. Allegations indicate that hundreds of kilograms of Gaddafi-era "Semtex" explosives were used by terrorists near Algiers in the summer of 2011. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has also hit the security sector in northern Algeria with a wave of terrorist attacks using smuggled Libyan weapons. (Harchaoui, 2018)

One of the catastrophic repercussions of the Libyan crisis on the region in general and on Algeria in particular is the issue of the massive return of African immigrants from Libya to neighbouring countries. With the security and humanitarian problems that this issue presents. Since the 1990s, Libya has become a region of stability for thousands of illegal immigrants, as

well as a transit zone for many of them towards Europe (Italy in particular). ( Report of Amnesty International, 2017) The risk of return of immigrants from Libya creates security and humanitarian problems for Algeria and for the Maghreb-Sahel in general. Given the inability of the governments of these countries to deal with these immigrants. This will create humanitarian problems, where Algeria will be subject to pressure from international humanitarian organisations. Similarly, on the part of the major powers, which exploit this issue as a pressure card that they use from time to time against Algeria.

On the other hand, there are security risks, linked to the investment of terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and the Islamic State "Daich" (as a new actor), in the recruitment of these immigrants who suffer from difficult economic and social conditions. This will increase the capacity of these terrorist groups to carry out larger attacks against Algeria and other countries in the region.

One of the main reasons for Algeria's diplomatic and strategic concern about the situation in Libya is the French-led NATO intervention in Algeria's immediate neighbourhood. The presence of Western forces on its borders allows it to spy on the movement and deployment plans of the Algerian army and the military equipment in its possession. All the more so as its arms programmes in recent years have raised concerns in the West.

### **3. The Libyan crisis has called into question the principles of Algerian foreign policy and security doctrine.**

In its efforts to contribute to the settlement of the Libyan crisis, Algerian diplomacy has found itself in a dilemma. Namely, how to balance the principles of its foreign policy, and its military and security doctrine on the one hand, and its strategic interests in the Maghreb and the Sahel in general on the other? (Benantar A. , 2018) Since independence in 1962, many factors have crystallised the principles of foreign policy and defined its security and defence doctrine, which can be summarised as follows: non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, the search for political solutions to settle international conflicts, the rejection of all foreign interference, and the non-participation of the army in military operations outside the Algerian border. Over time, these principles have been transformed into constants established in the constitution. Thus, Article (29) of the constitution states: 'Algeria refrains from resorting to war to undermine the legitimate sovereignty and freedom of other peoples. It endeavours to settle international disputes by peaceful means'.

In any case, since the outbreak of the Libyan crisis, Algeria has tried hard to preserve these principles. Although, the dramatic events of the Libyan revolution, and the fear of being transferred to Algeria, have forced the Algerian regime to intervene to some extent in the crisis, and to lean more and more on the side of Gaddafi. There is ample evidence that Algeria sheltered Gaddafi's family after the outbreak of the conflict. Similarly, there have been accusations that Algeria sent mercenaries to fight alongside Gaddafi (although there is no concrete evidence of this). And, following the split in the Libyan political and societal scene, Algeria has diplomatically supported the legitimate government in Tripoli against General Haftar.

One of the basic principles of the Algerian security and defence doctrine, as mentioned above, is the non-participation of the army in military operations outside the Algerian border. Apart from the participation of the Algerian army in the wars against Israel in 1967 and 1973, Algeria does not authorise the sending of the army outside its territory to participate in military operations. The role of the army is therefore exclusively defensive. But the change in the nature of the threat from the regional environment in general, and from Libya in particular, has led

many in Algeria (military and strategic experts) to call for a revision of this principle and to question it. We mention at the beginning that article (29) of the constitution forbids the army to participate in 'aggressive' wars against other sovereign states, i.e. state entities. However, the threats Algeria faces from Libya are asymmetric. Thus, the proliferation of terrorist groups and militias in Libya - as mentioned above - will constitute a future threat to Algeria. Therefore, these fluid challenges cannot be met with the same traditional security mechanism and defensive perceptions, which are based on securing the borders, and maintaining the national unity of the soil with defensive options. (Belgacemi, 2017)

Practically, and since 2014, Algeria has started to exercise security behaviours that contradict this principle, since when there were threats from a terrorist group to the Algerian embassy in Tripoli, the intelligence services sent small groups of secret agents to Tripoli, to rescue the diplomats and transmit them to Algiers, without any coordination with the 'Zenten' (Harchaoui, 2018) governors. Moreover, in May 2014, Algeria signed a security agreement with Tunisia, which allows it to hunt down terrorists even inside the Tunisian border. (Benantar A. , 2018) Furthermore, Algeria maintains its security through regional coordination with the countries of the Maghreb-Sahel region. This will oblige the Algerian army to participate in regional security initiatives. Without ignoring the terrible pressure that the great powers exert on Algeria to intervene militarily in the region's crises.

#### **4. The Algerian "political solution" approach to the Libyan crisis: difficulties on the ground.**

With the aggravation of the Libyan crisis, which has turned into a bloody conflict between Haftar, who launched the "Operation Dignity", and the internationally recognised entente government, which for its part launched "Dawn of Libya". Since then, the Algerian position has begun to take shape clearly. Where it has adopted a peaceful political approach to the crisis, based on the rejection of foreign intervention, especially military, which has fuelled hostility among Libyans.

The Algerian approach is based on four main axes. 1) The participation of all parties involved in the crisis, without exception, (except for extremist groups that use violence as a political tool), including the leaders of the previous regime. 2) On the military level, Algeria also calls for the creation of a supreme council of the army, which would supervise the Libyan army and which will control the whole territory. And in this respect, Algeria does not prevent Marshal Khalifa Haftar from being the head of the Libyan army. (Hijazi, 2017) 3) At the political level, Algeria confirms its commitment to support the political institutions that stem from the Libyan "Skhirat" political agreement. This is the principle on which Algerian diplomacy focuses in its support for the Government of National Accord and the Supreme State Council. Which is supported by the western Libyan region, one of Algeria's areas of influence. 4) Algeria rejects any form of foreign military intervention in Libya. Experience confirms that such interventions have made the situation worse and worse.

Since the explosion of the internal conflict between Libyans, Algeria has proposed several political initiatives, And the great powers were always trying to abort it. Starting with the "neighbouring countries mechanism", through which Algeria wanted to push back foreign interventions in Libya. Although, the inability of the participating countries to respect their commitments, eventually led to its failure. Then, Algeria launched another initiative called the "Libyan Interior Initiative" in 2017. It came very close to success, after persuading all Libyan parties to sit at the dialogue table. Before France was able to block it and spoil it after launching a parallel track in Paris. In addition, Algeria tried to reform the "Skhirat" (Akdim, 2015)

agreement by proposing an equitable distribution of power and wealth between the regions. By recognising Haftar as the head of the Libyan army, and the political institutions in Tripoli under the rule of Sarraj. Even these Algerian diplomatic efforts failed on their part, due to the politics of the great powers and the deep divisions between Libyans.

As part of its efforts to resolve the Libyan crisis, Algerian diplomacy operates at several levels. At the local level, between the Libyan parties, and in the regional framework, i.e. at the level of Libya's neighbouring countries affected by the crisis. And finally, at the international level, with the major powers and international organisations.

At the local Libyan level, Algeria has maintained the same distance from all parties in the conflict. For any Algerian public support to one of the Libyan parties will be interpreted as behaviour incompatible with the most important principle of Algerian foreign policy, namely 'non-interference in the internal affairs of states'. Thus, Algeria has established links with all the actors in the crisis, even with Marshal Haftar, whom it knows to have political and military weight. Even if he had hostile positions towards Algeria. In this perspective, Algeria welcomed Haftar in Algiers on 18 December 2016, to discuss a ceasefire agreement. Algeria also hosted Aquila Saleh and some members of the Libyan Parliament on 26 November 2016. Moreover, Algeria continued to establish contacts even with former officials of the Gaddafi regime, and even with tribes in which Algeria had influence.

One of the entries of Algerian diplomacy in the Libyan crisis at the local level is to build strong relations with the conflicting tribal leaders. Note that these tribes have extensions into the Algerian interior, particularly the Tuareg tribe in southwestern Libya. Similarly, Algeria is building bridges of friendly relations with all Islamist currents in the region in general, (Harchaoui J. , 2020) (for example, it has converged with Islamists in Tunisia such as the Ennahda movement). In Libya, Algeria recognises the Islamists because it considers the "Muslim Brotherhood" as an important political current and not as an extremist group. It also maintains direct lines of communication with Ali Al-Sallabi. In 2014, it also hosted Abdelhakim Belhadj, one of the most important Islamist actors in Libya.

At the regional and international level, Algeria has participated in all regional frameworks of Libya's neighbours, which is considered the privileged framework. Algeria has therefore intensified its coordination with these countries, especially with regard to securing the borders with Libya. Here, Algeria has increased the level of coordination with Tunisia, which shares the same perception with Algeria regarding the Libyan crisis. The Treaty of Ghadames is the most important one, because the Algerian-Tunisian coordination has been raised to the level of security. Algeria, on the other hand, supported the Skhirat agreement held in Morocco, and thus; it is the first such agreement between Algiers and Rabat, which has been governed by tense relations for decades. More than that, Algeria has called for consultative meetings between the Libyan parties in conflict, in order to support the Skhirat agreement and make it feasible on the ground.

Moreover, immediately after the Berlin conference, Algeria invited the foreign ministers of Libya's neighbours (Tunisia, Egypt, Chad, Sudan and Mali) to a meeting in Algiers, to confirm that these countries are concerned with resolving the Libyan crisis, not the major powers meeting in Berlin. One of the most important outcomes of this meeting was the rejection of foreign interference and the need to ban weapons and prevent their entry into Libya. At the same time, it was stressed that the only solution to the crisis is the political approach within the framework of the Libyan-Libyan dialogue. The Algerian haste to hold this meeting is to ward off the militarisation of the crisis, and to arrive at a situation in which it would be difficult to

reach arrangements for a political solution on the one hand, and to prevent Libyan soil from turning into a battlefield between the great powers on the other.

It seems that this meeting, of its importance, was built on a fragile basis; due to the Egyptian position, which expressed its rejection of any path that could allow the ideological enemies of the regime to rule, namely the "Muslim Brotherhood", which is supported by the Sarraj government according to the Egyptian subtraction. Although Algeria did not invite any of the parties to the Libyan conflict to this meeting, the Sarraj government welcomed the initiative, while Marshal Khalifa Haftar did not express his acceptance of the results of this meeting. And this is a negative indication, as it suggests a lack of enthusiasm for the Algerian diplomatic role, which Haftar sees as a factor in favour of Sarraj.

As for the Berlin conference, Algeria participated and knows how difficult its diplomatic mission is. Despite its support for the government of national accord in Tripoli, the problem is that this government is pro-Turkey, which is subject to its tutelage. Algeria fears that this government will give Turkey an economic and military advantage in the future, so that Istanbul will have a military base in the Libyan territories. This will undoubtedly constitute a real future strategic threat for Algeria. In any case, Algeria has taken part in the Berlin conference, being fully aware that it is only a "security arrangement" between the great powers, rather than a framework for discussing a political solution to the Libyan crisis. The chances of success of the conference depend on the extent to which the interests of these powers are compatible. So the ceasefire from the beginning was after a Russian-Turkish agreement, not because of the agreement between the Libyan parties!

It seems that the Libyan parties in conflict no longer have their fate in their own hands. And Algeria does not have much leverage over the major powers affecting the Libyan scene. With the exception of the security issue. In other words; Algeria will try to persuade these powers that it will bear the consequences of the war in Libya, where the waves of immigration to Europe will double. And Libya will become a new bastion of terrorism that will threaten their economic and strategic interests in the whole Maghreb-Sahel region.

## **5. Possible ways forward for Algerian diplomacy to resolve the Libyan crisis**

With the arrival in power of a new elite after the presidential elections of 12 December, Algeria is increasingly concerned about the Libyan crisis. So, it is clear that its political initiatives will continue in order to contribute to solving the crisis. But it also seems that its mission will be very difficult. And the limits of success or failure of these efforts are linked to developments on the ground. Since the Berlin conference brought about a fragile peace in Libya, it is not surprising that the peace process is still ongoing. Immediately after the end of the conference, the Libyan parties started to exchange accusations about the violation of the ceasefire, and the conditions of the agreement.

Algerian policy makers consider France as one of the main factors behind the abortion of any Algerian initiative for the settlement of the Libyan crisis. This is why Algeria still feels marginalised in the Libyan issue. There are, therefore, those who believe that Algeria will try to consolidate its position on the crisis by strengthening its rapprochement with Russia, in order to limit French influence. Algeria could try to exploit the Russian-French rivalry by intensifying the security partnership with Moscow, to undermine what it sees as a space of French influence, stretching from Morocco to Mali and Egypt and beyond. (Harchaoui J. , 2020) Algeria will also try to intensify its coordination efforts with Libya's neighbours to involve them in the political settlement efforts, especially with Tunisia. Tunisian President Qais Sayed, anticipated

this when he visited Algeria in February 2020, and the Libyan crisis was at the top of the visit's agenda. Tunisia benefited from an Algerian financial aid estimated at 150 million dollars, as a deposit. In order to strengthen its security capabilities, to address any potential deterioration of the security situation on the border with Libya. In particular the risk of proliferation of terrorist groups in the region.

Algeria will strengthen its military presence on the eastern border with Libya. Since the beginning of the war in Libya, the Algerian authorities have decided to underline the presence of all the organs of the People's National Army on the Algerian south-eastern border with Libya. In order to face all forms of threats coming from Libyan territory, notably arms smuggling and terrorism. (Benantar A. , *sécurité aux frontières : portée et limites de la stratégie algérienne*, 2016) Algeria devotes great efforts to achieving its border security with the Sahel states and with Libya in particular. In this, Algeria depends on its own capabilities, which makes it the most important country in maintaining regional security. Although it does not participate in armed conflicts, it makes a huge 'war effort' to protect its borders. And therefore, the borders of its neighbours. This effort explains the increase in Algerian military spending, which has doubled in a few years, from \$5.313 billion in 2010 to \$10.654 billion in 2016. (Benantar A. , *La doctrine de sécurité de l'Algérie : Pressions de l'environnement régionale et exigences de sécurité*, 2018)

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the analysis led us to say that the Libyan crisis is the main external threat to Algeria in recent years. Libya has become a failed state and is threatened with collapse. This will open the door to hell for Algerian security and its economy. In particular, with the possibility of the growth of terrorism in the region. With Turkey's intention to transfer mercenaries and terrorists from Syria and Iraq to Libya. Despite all these risks, Algeria was long overdue in taking a clear diplomatic stance on this conflict. It waited until 2014 to get its diplomatic machine working to help resolve the crisis. This is partly due to Algeria's absence from the regional and international scene since 2012, following the illness of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who is the sole representative of foreign policy.

Although the Algerian political solution approach is the most appropriate to solve the Libyan crisis. Where, experience has shown that military interventions further aggravate the situation. But, this approach seems difficult to apply in the Libyan case. Because of the deep political and societal division among Libyans. As well as, the policies of the great powers, which have their own strategic agendas, that they work to abort any Algerian diplomatic initiative.

Algeria still adheres to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states, and non-participation of the army outside the country's borders, just at the level of discourse, but in practice it will be difficult, if not impossible, to preserve it. In recent years, Algeria has partially abandoned its commitments to these principles; small-scale operations in Libya have become possible. So, criticism of the principle of eternal non-interference pursued by Algeria has increased, there are those who see that Algeria's commitment to this principle has harmed it in recent years. There is a misunderstanding that makes Algerian leaders insist strongly on this principle, that the constitution forbids external interference! although, article (29) of the Algerian constitution does not forbid sending troops abroad in all cases. It only prohibits it if the objective is to undermine the sovereignty of states, and the freedom of other peoples. And this is what is widely discussed in the upcoming constitutional amendment, so that the army can be allowed to participate in military operations in the Maghreb-Sahel regional space.

The near future of the Libyan crisis is not a source of optimism. The entry of regional and international actors with conflicting interests has complicated the crisis, and made it very difficult to resolve. As a result, Algerian diplomacy has found itself faced with a network of intersecting interests of the great powers. It will be difficult for Algeria to neutralise it from the Libyan theatre and to implement its approach to political solutions. It became clear that the Libyans had lost control and that the fate and future of Libya were no longer in their hands.

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