

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

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Nigerien authorities on 3 October denies reports that its military regime has accepted an offer from Algeria to serve as a mediator to resolve its political crisis. Algeria's ambassador to the United Nations (UN), Amar Bendjama, and his Moroccan counterpart, Omar Hilale, engage in a heated debate at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on 26 September over the Western Sahara, the vast disputed territory bordering Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria. President Abdelmadjid Tebboune (2019-present) on 2 October fires Toufik Hakkar, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the state-owned oil and gas company, Sonatrach. The sacking of Hakkar continues the trend of chronic instability in Sonatrach which has had 13 CEOs since 1999.

Niger dismisses Algeria's six-month transition plan...

Nigerien authorities on 3 October denied reports that its military regime had accepted an offer from Algeria to serve as a mediator to resolve its political crisis following its coup d'état on 26 July.¹ Algerian officials claimed on 2 October that Niger's junta **Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie (CNSP)** had officially accepted its six-month transition plan to restore constitutional order.² The Algerian foreign ministry released a statement on 2 October that Niger's foreign ministry had sent official correspondence stating that it accepted Algeria's mediation aimed at developing a political solution.³ The CNSP responded that it was surprised by this assertion. The statement also rejected all the conclusions made in Algeria's announcement.

Algerian foreign minister **Ahmed Attaf** announced on 28 August that Algeria had proposed a six-month transition period led by a civilian as a solution to the crisis in neighbouring Niger.⁴ Attaf said that Algeria's six-point plan is a "summary of consultations and contacts" that had taken place since the coup d'état.⁵ Algeria's foreign ministry also said in its statement on 2 October that its plan paves the way for "the meeting of conditions" necessary for a peaceful resolution that is in the best interest of Niger and the entire region.⁶

Niger was plunged into crisis when the CNSP detained democratically elected president **Mohamed Bazoum** (2021-2023) due to "deteriorating security situation and bad governance".⁷ **Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)** leaders threatened military intervention if the CNSP did not return Niger to civilian rule by 6 August. ECOWAS on 10 August ordered the activation of its standby force to restore constitutional order in Niger but thus far no military intervention in Niger has taken place. President **Abdelmadjid Tebboune** (2019-present) declared on 5 August that his country "categorically reject any military intervention" and the ultimatum issued by ECOWAS (see *ARC Briefing Algeria Aug 2023*).⁸ Algeria shares a 1,000-kilometre border, along with human and historical ties with Niger. Tebboune stressed that while his government is critical of the coup, it opposes military intervention as it could exacerbate security challenges facing Algeria.⁹

¹ Bloomberg, 3 Oct 2023; Middle East Monitor, 3 Oct 2023

² Middle East Monitor, 3 Oct 2023; Anadolu Agency 3 Oct 2023

³ Middle East Monitor, 3 Oct 2023; Anadolu Agency 3 Oct 2023

⁴ Middle East Monitor, 24 Aug 2023

⁵ Anadolu Agency, 30 Aug 2023

⁶ Algeria's foreign ministry, 2 Oct 2023

⁷ Aljazeera, 26 July 2023

⁸ Reuters, 6 Aug 2023; DW, 8 Jul 2023

⁹ DW, 8 Jul 2023

Algeria and Tebboune's fears that military coups in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger could boost extremist groups active in the **Sahel** region and fuel instability along its porous borders have been realised. The **United Kingdom**-headquartered **Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (Acled)** noted that attacks by **Islamic State (IS)** quadrupled in the month after the coup.¹⁰ IS and **Al Qaeda** have killed thousands of civilians and displaced over two million people in the Sahel region in recent years.¹¹ Algeria also argued that its military and security services are facing immense pressure from these jihadi groups, illegal immigration networks and smugglers.¹² While it does not appear that Niger's rejection of Algeria's peace plan has damaged diplomatic relations between the two countries, Algeria will be frustrated that it is not having an impact on the trajectory of the crisis. Tebboune also keeps emphasising that there can be "*no solution*" to the crisis in Niger and the Sahel without Algeria.¹³

Heated debate at UN between Morocco and Algeria over Western Sahara...

The Algeria ambassador to the **United Nations (UN)**, **Amar Bendjama**, and his **Moroccan** counterpart, **Omar Hilale**, engaged in a heated debate at the **UN General Assembly (UNGA)** on 26 September over the **Western Sahara**, the vast disputed territory bordering Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria.¹⁴ The UN considers the Western Sahara to be a "*non-self-governing territory*", however, 80% of it is controlled by Morocco, which envisions the region as autonomous.¹⁵ Algeria on the other hand has long backed the separatist movement, the **Polisario Front** formed by the Western Sahara's indigenous **Sahrawi** population.¹⁶ The UN brokered a ceasefire in 1991 but a planned referendum on independence was never held and the final status of the territory remained unresolved.¹⁷

After Hilale delivered his address during the debate in the UNGA, Benjama requested to reply and accused the Moroccan ambassador of "*distorting*" the words of Tebboune. Tebboune the previous week affirmed his support for his country to organise a referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara.¹⁸ In his rebuke of Hilale, Benjama said that Algeria supports the self-determination of the Sahrawi people in the Western Sahara:

"Who have been waiting for nearly half a century for the UN to do them justice...If the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara had really turned it into a paradise, with or without the granting of autonomy, why is this referendum being prevented?"¹⁹

Benjama also denied "*terrorism accusations*" made against the Polisario Front by Morocco and concluded by offering his country's condolences to Morocco for the victims of the devastating earthquake that struck the kingdom three weeks ago.²⁰ Hilale responded to Benjama:

"You can't shed crocodile tears and at the same time attack a country that is still living through a tragedy. You express your solidarity and support, but at the same time you spread your poison, insult the dead, and insult the Moroccans."

Although Moroccan armed forces and the Polisario Front have been fighting for decades over Western Sahara, recent tensions between Algeria and Morocco stem from former **United States (US)** president **Donald Trump's** (2017-2021) administration's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco's normalisation of relations with **Israel**.²¹ The US became the first

¹⁰ Middle East Monitor, 3 Oct 2023

¹¹ Middle East Monitor, 3 Oct 2023

¹² Anadolu Agency, 9 Aug 2023; DW, 8 Jul 2023

¹³ Reuters, 6 Aug 2023

¹⁴ Middle East Monitor, 27 Sep 2023

¹⁵ Middle East Monitor, 27 Sep 2023

¹⁶ Africa News, 27 Sep 2023

¹⁷ Al Jazeera, 11 Dec 2020

¹⁸ Middle East Monitor, 27 Sep 2023

¹⁹ Africa News, 27 Sep 2023

²⁰ Africa News, 27 Sep 2023; Middle East Monitor, 3 Oct 2023

²¹ Al Jazeera, 11 Dec 2020

country to recognise Morocco's claim over Western Sahara on 10 December 2020 and reaffirmed Morocco's proposal to grant limited autonomy to Sahrawis under overarching Moroccan control:

*"The United States believes that an independent Sahrawi State is not a realistic option for resolving the conflict and that genuine autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is the only feasible solution."*²²

Since the US recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the region it has gained more international recognition of its claim. In a massive diplomatic victory for Morocco, Israel's government on 17 July announced its recognition of Morocco's sovereignty over the territory.²³ The Israeli decision comes a year after **Spain** officially endorsed the **Moroccan Autonomy Plan** as the most serious and credible solution to end the dispute. However, while Morocco enjoys increasing recognition of its claim over Western Sahara, the developments appear to further exacerbate tensions with Algeria which has vowed to continue challenging Morocco over the issue. The reluctance of major powers such as **France** and the **European Union (EU)** to back Morocco's claim has also in recent months caused diplomatic rifts with Morocco. While tensions between the two **North African** countries toned down significantly last month when Algeria confirmed on 9 September that it would re-open its airspace to Morocco to allow for aid and medical flights in the aftermath of the 8 September earthquake, it now seems that after the UNGA debacle, the warming of relations was not a permanent development.²⁴

Tebboune replaces head of Sonatrach...

Tebboune on 2 October fired **Toufik Hakkar**, the chief executive officer (CEO) of the state-owned oil company **Sonatrach** for unknown reasons.²⁵ Hakkar was appointed as CEO of Sonatrach in 2020, replacing the previous head **Kamel-Eddine Chikhi**, who was fired by Tebboune weeks he became president.²⁶ Energy and mines minister **Mohamed Arkab**, on 2 October subsequently appointed company executive **Rachid Hachichi** as Hakkar's replacement.²⁷ Hachichi led the energy company from April to November 2019, replacing the then-CEO **Abdelmoumen Ould Kaddour**, in the aftermath of president **Abdelaziz Bouteflika's** (1999-2019) resignation.²⁸ Hakkar's firing continues the trend of chronic instability in Sonatrach which has had 13 CEOs since 1999.²⁹ In recent years, the energy company has also been plagued by a series of financial scandals and corruption allegations, some of which have prompted investigations domestically and abroad.³⁰

Sonatrach was formed in 1963 and is fully owned by the state and focuses on the exploration, production, refining, transportation and marketing of petroleum and gas. Sonatrach employs more than 40,000 employees with the number exceeding 130,000 when considering all its subsidiaries. The company is critical to the economy as the government depends on its profits for about 60% of its budget and 95% of export revenues.³¹ Since the outbreak of the **Ukraine** conflict in February 2022, global demand for natural gas has experienced rapid growth, particularly in the EU, which is searching for alternatives to **Russian** energy supplies, creating opportunities for Sonatrach and Algeria. As a result, Sonatrach exports hit a record 56 billion cubic metres (bcm) in 2022 and is likely to increase in 2023.³² Tebboune has also called on Sonatrach to double its gas production to reach 100 bcm of exports in 2023. Sonatrach data indicates that total local production amounts to 130 bcm of gas annually, of which more than 50 bcm is exported.³³

²² Al Jazeera, 11 Dec 2020

²³ Middle East Monitor, 17 Jul 2023

²⁴ Le Monde, 9 Sep 2023

²⁵ Algeria Press Service, 2 Oct 2023

²⁶ New Arab, 3 Oct 2023

²⁷ Algeria Press Service, 2 Oct 2023

²⁸ New Arab, 3 Oct 2023

²⁹ New Arab, 3 Oct 2023

³⁰ New Arab, 3 Oct 2023

³¹ Middle East Monitor, 3 Oct 2023

³² Radio Algeria, 15 Dec 2022

³³ Anadolu Agency, 15 Dec 2022

Last year, Sonatrach also signed deals to supply additional quantities of gas to **Italy**, amounting to 9 bcm, in addition to supplying 300 million cubic meters (mcm) of gas to **Slovenia** for the first time.³⁴ The chronic instability and corruption at Sonatrach risks these developments though, and could undermine the government's plans for the company and impact state revenues. A local source told **Africa Risk Consulting Briefing (ARC)**:

"Firing of appointees is unfortunately very common in Algeria, especially since Tebboune came in office. This can lead to instability in Algerian institutions".³⁵

Planner

2023 **Paris (France)** President **Abdelmadjid Tebboune** to visit Paris;

Dec 2024 **(Algeria)** Presidential elections;

Chronology

5 Oct 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Bloomberg*. **European Union (EU)** energy commissioner **Kadri Simson** host a high-level dialogue with Algeria today, with the country seen as key to meeting the EU's energy needs;

4 Oct 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Middle East Monitor*. Security services arrest three senior officials of the **Islamic Salvation Front** on 1 October after they warned that blocks were being put in place by officials which would cause a threat to the security and stability of the country;

2 Oct 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Algeria Press Service*. Government says that student associations have hailed the decision by President **Abdelmadjid Tebboune** to increase university student grants to DZD 2,000 (\$14) per month;

1 Oct 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Algeria Press Service*. Algeria condemns the terrorist attack targeting the interior ministry in **Ankara (Turkey)**, on 30 September, expressing full solidarity with Turkey;

30 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Middle East Monitor*. More than a year after Algeria launched a pilot programme to teach English in elementary schools, the country is hailing it as a success and expanding it;

27 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *North Africa Post*. **United Nations** expert **Clément Nyaletsossi Voule** says the current legal restrictions and prosecutions of individuals and associations in Algeria do not conform with the constitution and international human rights law;

27 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *France24*. Algeria has pulled out of the race to host the 2025 and 2027 **Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON)** football tournament;

24 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Morocco World News*. A **European Union (EU)** delegation to Algeria issue a written note to EU companies operating in Algeria urging private and public sector companies to resist procedures imposed on importers, alleging "illegal" harassment and threats amounting to "extortion" linked to a ministerial committee responsible for tax adjustments;

23 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Anadolu Agency*. Algeria says it has put out multiple wildfires that raged across the country, with no casualties reported;

22 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Zawya*. Environment and renewable energy ministry plans to issue a tender shortly for the construction of Algeria's first solar power village;

³⁴ Anadolu Agency, 15 Dec 2022

³⁵ ARC Source, Local Resident

20 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Middle East Monitor*. Algeria calls for an extraordinary **United Nations (UN)** session to vote on **Palestine's** membership;

20 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Business Insider*. **Russian** army general **Sergey Surovikin** is reportedly in Algeria, which has close economic and security ties with Russia, with some experts speculating that Surovikin has been tasked with overseeing **Wagner Group** activity in **Africa**;

15 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Zawya*. Officials confirm that representatives from state-owned **Sonatrach** and **Sonelgaz** will travel to the **United States** to meet with US energy majors **ExxonMobil**, **Chevron** and **Occidental Petroleum** in November;

14 Sep 2023 **Algiers (Algeria)** *Asharq Al Awsat*. **United States Department of State** criticises Algeria's import substitution policy noting that it is negatively affecting the investment climate;

About Africa Risk Consulting:

Africa Risk Consulting (ARC) is a pan-African consulting company that provides timely, relevant information and advice that enables its clients to take informed investment decisions and to safeguard their reputations.

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Getting in touch

Please contact us by email info@africariskconsulting.com or call + 44 (0) 20 7078 4080

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