

Algeria's political destiny hostage to Russia-US arms exports rivalry

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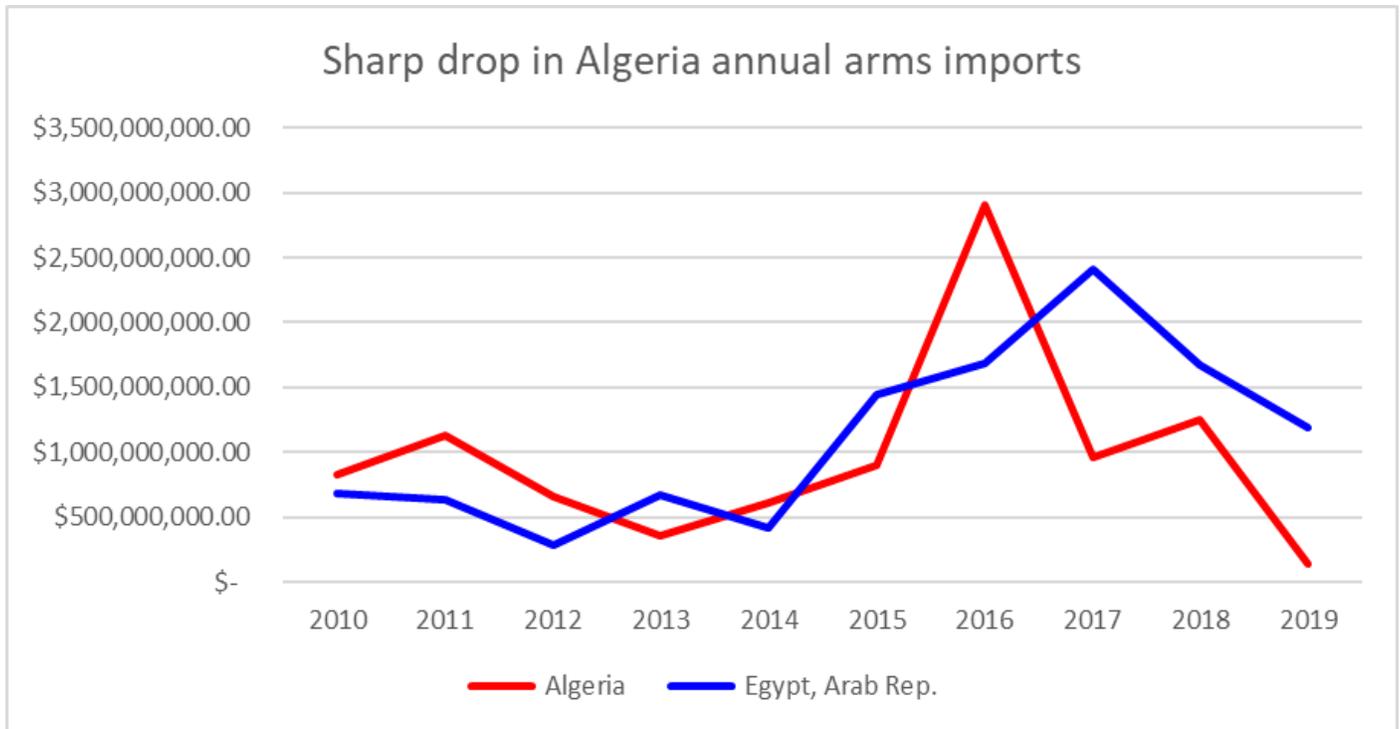
With Algeria's political factions deadlocked and the president's legitimacy in question, Algeria's political destiny is increasingly hostage to Russia-US arms exports rivalries. With an over -1,971% drop off in arms imports by Algeria since 2016, and a 495% drop off in arms imports over the past decade, Algeria's President Abdelmadjid Tebboune stability in office may over the months ahead largely depend on whether he forms a strong military alliance with either Moscow or Washington DC to keep opponents at bay.

Since Tebboune was elected in December 2019 his legitimacy has been questioned as the elections were rushed forward by the military, with a low turnout 39.93% in his presidential election, the lowest rate of all pluralist presidential elections in Algerian history. In a search for legitimacy, Tebboune has made the revision of the Constitution, the umpteenth since gaining independence in 1962, his flagship political project. The Algerian authorities presented the new Constitution as the basis of a "new Algeria" and as a response to the demands of the Hirak. But the opposition Hirakists reject "in substance and form" an initiative perceived as a façade. Looking at the facts, the new Constitution puts forward a series of rights and freedoms but does not offer major political change: it maintains the essence of an "ultra presidentialist" regime and even broadens the prerogatives of the army. The protest movement continues to call for a profound change in the system in place since independence, demanding a constituent assembly, an independent judiciary and fairer distribution of the nation's wealth. In vain so far, even if the movement pushed Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign in April 2019 after twenty years of reign, Hirakists prompted a boycott of the referendum on November 1st. The final turnout stood at 23.7%, an all-time low for a major election - with a "yes" in favor of a change in the Constitution.

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Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Arms Transfers Programme

Algerians are discontent with the regime. Regarding the covid pandemic, there is an explosion of cases in the hospitals. Regarding the justice system, the National Bar Association calls for a lawyers’ strike for an independent justice. Widespread poverty, the lack of employment opportunities for more than 11% of the population, and the difficult economic context are likely to fuel larger discontent. Algeria is known for its major oil and gas reserves, its potential for shale gas, agriculture, renewable energy and tourism, as well as for its low external debt. On the other hand, Algiers is highly dependent on hydrocarbon revenues, has an overly large public sector, a weak financial sector and an uncertain business environment. The country also has an acute political and social crisis and a high youth unemployment rate. The North African state continues to suffer from the global fall in oil prices and the economy growth is affected by the political situation of the country.

The Hirak Movement has been demanding a new constituent assembly. Algeria’s outburst is considered to be the Arab Spring in North Africa. Hirakists were weakened by a campaign of repression, and by the forced halt of protests in mid-March due to the coronavirus health crisis. The crackdown has escalated in recent weeks, and is now targeting all dissenting voices and all segments of society. Though the Movement is momentarily affected by COVID-19 restrictions, it is expected to resume its activities with greater intensity once the sanitary crisis is under control.

US’s attempt to grow its influence in the region, curb Russian influence

The United States tried to enhance its influence in the Maghreb region, and curb Mosco’s growing influence. In early October, the outgoing US Defense Secretary Mark Esper had a meeting with Tebboune to expand security cooperation – particularly in terms of coordinating surveillance and operations in the Sahel, which did not result in the signature of any agreement. Indeed, the United States is not Algeria’s main military partner, as Algiers buys 85% of its military gear from Moscow – and practically none from the USA.

Seeing the growing relations between Russia and Algeria – and the fact that Algeria is seen as the military powerhouse in North Africa, the US is attempting to counter the Russian influence in the region by preventing other North African states from following Algeria’s footsteps. As Washington cannot afford to also lose its connection with Morocco, Esper went on a North African tour, which resulted in signing a ten-year agreement centering on military cooperation with Morocco on October 2nd. This agreement buys the US a decade to focus on expanding its partnership with the African nation in ways beyond military. He also signed a military agreement between the United States and Tunisia.

The Hirak Movement has never shown its preferences towards either Russia nor the United States and puts its focus on internal politics. A future shift could have a ripple effect on the region and affect broader relations in the world. Therefore, the resumption of protests could mark the entrance of the US in the picture and could act as a step towards countering Russian influence in the region.

Contact DaMina for a more detailed briefing from our risk analysts:

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