

ALGERIA-MALI RAPPROCHEMENT: A SEARCH FOR A NEW BALANCE IN THE SAHEL

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 24 August 2026, Malian Prime Minister Abdoulaye Maïga traveled to Algeria and met with President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. The meeting was presented as the closing chapter of a diplomatic crisis that had lasted roughly 15 months. On 10 July 2026, the two countries had recalled their ambassadors and reopened their airspace. Mali's transitional leader, Assimi Goïta, also accepted Tebboune's invitation and pledged to make an official visit. On the surface, the two neighboring countries appear to be returning to the rhetoric of brotherhood shaped by their shared history and geography. Yet the issue goes beyond this. After three years of a severe rupture, Algeria appears to have eased tensions precisely when Mali is at its most vulnerable in security terms. This is less an act of generosity than a calculated move. Mali, meanwhile, appears to be accepting the rapprochement as an additional layer of protection without making concessions on its partnerships with Russia and Türkiye. At the same time, Morocco has been expanding its influence in the Sahel through its Atlantic Initiative, while Mali has moved closer to Rabat on the Western Sahara issue. The fact that these three processes are unfolding simultaneously is hardly coincidental. It indicates that no single patron is now accepted as the dominant power in the region. Algeria's rapprochement with Mali therefore looks less like a reconciliation and more like an attempt to play the cards it still holds in a competition for influence.





SOVEREIGNTY, SECURITY AND THE BREAKDOWN OF MEDIATION

The 1,400-kilometer border between Algeria and Mali has positioned the two countries as “brotherly states” through a shared narrative of resistance to French colonialism. Yet the real foundation of the relationship lies in the family and economic ties of the Tuareg population living across the border region. Through the 1991 Tamanrasset Accord, the 2006 Algiers Agreement and the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation, Algeria served as the central mediator between Bamako and separatist movements in northern Mali for more than three decades. This role was driven less by goodwill than by a concrete security concern. The possibility of a cross-border independence movement linking Tuareg communities in Algeria, Mali, Niger and Libya remains one of Algeria’s most enduring strategic concerns.

The military government that came to power in 2021 placed the restoration of sovereignty at the center of its agenda, distancing itself from France and forging an alliance with Russia. In 2023, it called for the withdrawal of the United Nations peacekeeping mission from the country. Mali’s armed forces, together with Russian paramilitary elements, subsequently launched a comprehensive military campaign against separatist groups in the north, abandoning the political reconciliation approach advocated by Algeria. This campaign accelerated the de facto collapse of the 2015 agreement. Bamako also accused Algeria of hosting opposition figures and providing tacit support to certain armed groups, an allegation Algeria rejected. Tensions reached a critical point when Algeria shot down a Malian reconnaissance drone near the border. The two countries subsequently closed their airspace to each other and recalled their ambassadors. The open support extended to Mali by Niger and Burkina Faso within the framework of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) gave the crisis a broader regional dimension. The sharp diplomatic exchanges at the United Nations in September 2025 further demonstrated that the rift had become entrenched.

Mali has borne much of the cost of this rupture. Separatist movements reorganized under the Azawad Liberation Front and revived their independence agenda. The Malian government’s counterinsurgency strategy, based almost entirely on military means, failed to halt the rise of JNIM. On 25 April 2026, the Azawad front joined forces with JNIM and launched attacks on a scale unseen since 2012. During these attacks, Mali’s Minister of Defense was killed in a bombing targeting his home. The attacks were repeated in several towns in early July. One week later, Bamako and Algiers announced that flights and diplomatic missions between the two countries would be restored. Algeria’s move came at a time when Mali’s bargaining power was at its lowest. The timing suggests that the rapprochement was less a gesture of solidarity than an attempt to extract influence from a weakened neighbor on the most favorable terms possible.




Algeria–Mali
Land Boundary
Mercator Projection, WGS-84 Datum
Scale accurate at 22°N
0 60 120 240 Miles
0 60 120 240 Kilometers
© International Mapping, all rights reserved
SOVEREIGN LIMITS
4°W
Arak
ALGERIA
Taoudenni
22°N
Tessalit
MALI
Aguelhok
Araouane
18°N
Niger River
Timbuktu
Bourem
Goundam
Gao
Ménaka
Mopti
NIGER
BURKINA FASO
Djenné
NIAMEY
14°N

RECONCILIATION OR STRATEGIC REPOSITIONING?

This rapprochement is less a reconciliation than an opportunity window. In theory, it is possible to first restore border security and then move toward negotiations involving all sides. However, there is no mechanism that makes this course inevitable. Fundamental disagreements over security policy in northern Mali, the legacy of the 2015 agreement and the approach toward armed groups remain unresolved. Bamako no longer regards Algeria as the region's natural or sole mediator. The deliberate decision to keep the rhetoric between the two sides focused on sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs, security and development effectively means that unresolved issues have been kept off the table. Here, ambiguity is not a shortcoming but a deliberate strategy. Both sides appear to be gaining the political benefits of normalizing relations without committing themselves to concrete obligations, while keeping the core disputes outside the negotiating framework. The absence of any timetable, sectoral agreement or new bilateral mechanism following the visit reinforces this interpretation. The only tangible outcome of the process has been Goïta's acceptance of an invitation for an official visit to Algeria.

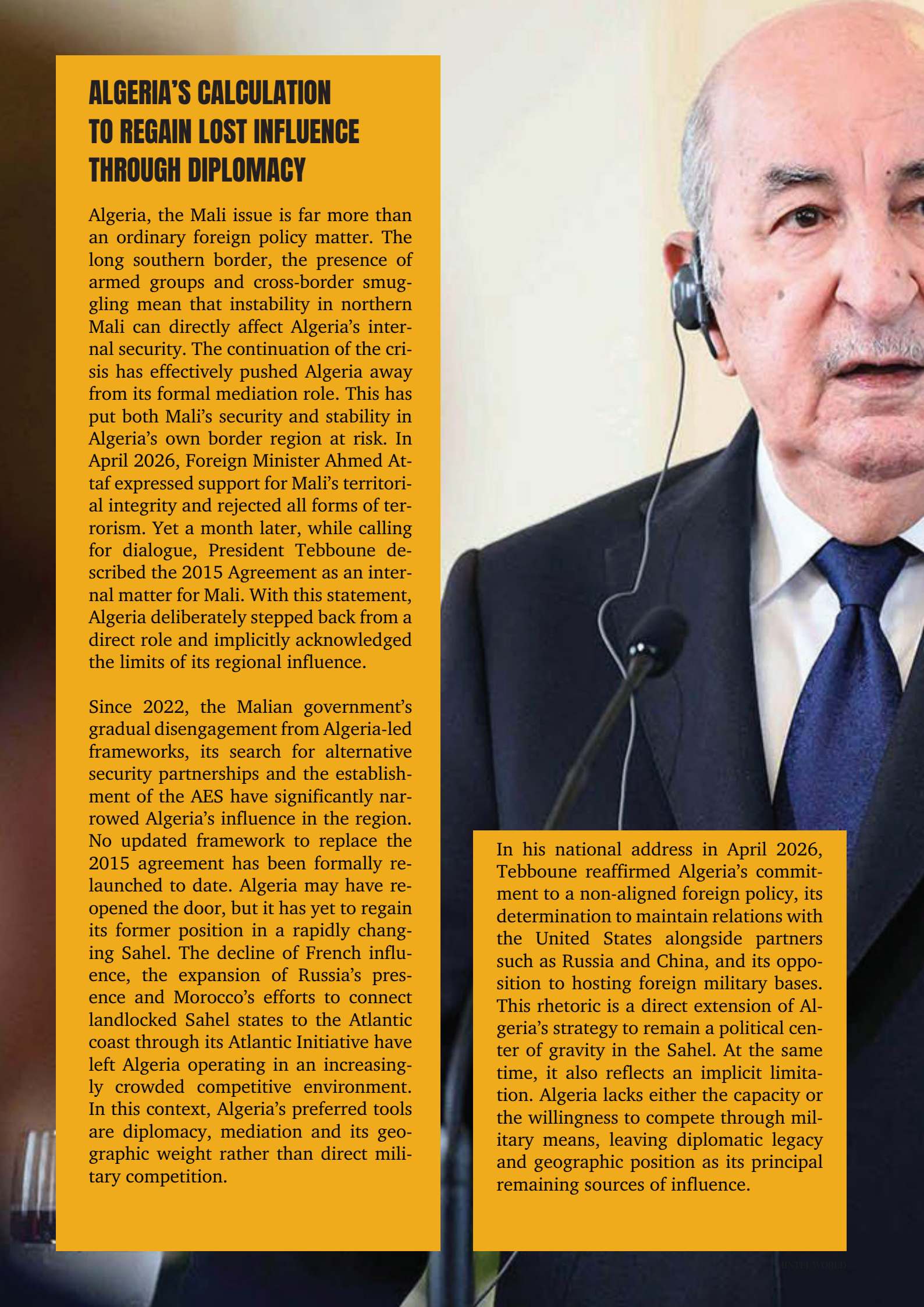
For Algeria, the Mali issue is far more than an ordinary foreign policy matter. The For



ALGERIA'S CALCULATION TO REGAIN LOST INFLUENCE THROUGH DIPLOMACY

Algeria, the Mali issue is far more than an ordinary foreign policy matter. The long southern border, the presence of armed groups and cross-border smuggling mean that instability in northern Mali can directly affect Algeria's internal security. The continuation of the crisis has effectively pushed Algeria away from its formal mediation role. This has put both Mali's security and stability in Algeria's own border region at risk. In April 2026, Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf expressed support for Mali's territorial integrity and rejected all forms of terrorism. Yet a month later, while calling for dialogue, President Tebboune described the 2015 Agreement as an internal matter for Mali. With this statement, Algeria deliberately stepped back from a direct role and implicitly acknowledged the limits of its regional influence.

Since 2022, the Malian government's gradual disengagement from Algeria-led frameworks, its search for alternative security partnerships and the establishment of the AES have significantly narrowed Algeria's influence in the region. No updated framework to replace the 2015 agreement has been formally relaunched to date. Algeria may have reopened the door, but it has yet to regain its former position in a rapidly changing Sahel. The decline of French influence, the expansion of Russia's presence and Morocco's efforts to connect landlocked Sahel states to the Atlantic coast through its Atlantic Initiative have left Algeria operating in an increasingly crowded competitive environment. In this context, Algeria's preferred tools are diplomacy, mediation and its geographic weight rather than direct military competition.



In his national address in April 2026, Tebboune reaffirmed Algeria's commitment to a non-aligned foreign policy, its determination to maintain relations with the United States alongside partners such as Russia and China, and its opposition to hosting foreign military bases. This rhetoric is a direct extension of Algeria's strategy to remain a political center of gravity in the Sahel. At the same time, it also reflects an implicit limitation. Algeria lacks either the capacity or the willingness to compete through military means, leaving diplomatic legacy and geographic position as its principal remaining sources of influence.



USING ALGERIA AS A HEDGE WITHIN A MULTI-ALLIANCE FRAMEWORK

For Mali, rapprochement with Algeria does not mean abandoning its partnerships with Russia and Türkiye. Rather, it is being presented as another pillar of a multidirectional foreign policy. During his visit to Algeria, Maïga emphasized that this vision was not limited to the bilateral level and was also shared by Nigerien leader Abdourahamane Tiani and Burkina Faso's Ibrahim Traoré. In doing so, he implied that the AES had developed a common foreign policy approach. Within this framework, Algeria is neither an ally intended to replace France nor an old-style patronizing mediator. At most, it is being redefined as a neighbor that can provide security coordination without interfering in Mali's internal affairs. The principle of mutual non-interference repeatedly emphasized by Maïga serves as a pre-emptive guarantee against the grievances at the root of the crisis. At the same time, this rhetoric carries an implicit warning. It suggests that the rapprochement could easily be reversed if Algeria continues to host opposition figures or maintain contacts with separatist groups.

Another development that complements this picture, although it has received limited attention in available sources, is Mali's shift on the Western Sahara issue. On 10 April 2026, Mali withdrew its recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, which it had recognized since 1980, announced its support for Morocco's autonomy plan and reiterated this position in July. This move directly contradicts Algeria's official position, which supports the Polisario Front and the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. The issue was not publicly raised during the Maïga-Tebboune meeting in August. This silence suggests that both sides have, for now, chosen to suspend the dispute. Mali is no longer pursuing a strategic alignment with Algeria. Instead, it is following an interest-based balancing strategy. The implication is clear: Mali increasingly treats Algeria as one service provider among several alternative suppliers rather than as an indispensable strategic partner.


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THE MOROCCO FACTOR AND THE LIMITS OF ALGERIA'S DIPLOMATIC LEVERAGE

The way the Algeria-Mali crisis has been resolved follows a pattern similar to Algeria's recent crises with Spain and France. After Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez openly supported Morocco's autonomy initiative for Western Sahara in March 2022, Algeria recalled its ambassador, suspended the 1988 Treaty of Friendship and froze trade relations. Madrid did not change its position on Western Sahara, yet relations were restored within a relatively short period. The same scenario was repeated with France in July 2024 after Macron recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Once again, Algeria's diplomatic rupture failed to produce the intended outcome. The Mali crisis follows the same pattern. After fifteen months of tensions, the relationship was normalized without either side achieving the objectives it had publicly declared.

This recurring pattern suggests that Algeria's use of diplomatic rupture as a tool has become increasingly less effective as a deterrent. Morocco's Atlantic Initiative toward the Sahel and Mali's shift on Western Sahara occurred during the same period, making the connection between the two developments difficult to ignore. The military regimes in the Sahel no longer recognize a single regional reference point. Instead, they seek to maximize their leverage within the competitive environment involving Algeria, Morocco, Russia and Türkiye. Algeria's rapprochement with Mali therefore also reflects the need to counterbalance the ground Morocco has gained in the region. Yet Mali's failure to reverse its position on Western Sahara demonstrates that the political cost of this balancing effort is still being borne by Algeria. Having entered the process primarily for security reasons, Algeria now appears to be accepting the terms of an influence struggle that it has already been losing.

A FRAGILE AND CONDITIONAL REPOSITIONING

The Algeria-Mali rapprochement represents an arrangement that simultaneously serves three different sets of interests. Algeria seeks to close the security gap along its southern border without entering into direct military competition, reopen intelligence channels against JNIM and the separatist alliance, and establish a symbolic counterweight to Morocco's regional expansion. Mali, meanwhile, has secured an additional partner at the most vulnerable stage of its crisis and gained access to Algeria's border security capabilities without abandoning its alliance with Russia. Throughout the process, it has maintained its sovereignty narrative without compromise. Both sides appear to be presenting the rapprochement as a limited and conditional framework for cooperation rather than a return to the 2015 model, in which Algeria played a patron-like mediation role.

The sustainability of this arrangement depends on at least three variables. The first is whether Mali's support for Morocco will become permanent. The two sides appear to have put the issue on hold by keeping it off the agenda for now, but this does not mean that the dispute has been resolved. The second is whether a new military incident along the border would once again lead to the withdrawal of ambassadors. No concrete mechanism has yet been established to prevent such an escalation. The third is whether Algeria's efforts to persuade Russia to support a political solution to the crisis in Mali will produce any results. No concrete step has been taken in this direction so far.

The Algeria-Mali rapprochement should therefore be understood as a temporary repositioning driven by security needs. While Algeria seeks to compensate for its loss of influence through diplomatic engagement, Mali and the AES countries approach this engagement as one component of their broader multi-alignment strategy. Morocco's growing visibility in the region also suggests that Algeria is indirectly framing the rapprochement as part of a broader effort to balance Rabat. Neither side appears to regard the relationship as a priority partnership. Instead, both seem to view each other as the least costly alternative among the options currently available to them. Without resolving fundamental disputes over the political future of northern Mali, opposing positions on Western Sahara and the question of who should hold the region's mediation role, the rapprochement is unlikely to become the foundation of a lasting regional order.



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