Russia and Algeria: Decades of Friendship and Military and Technical Cooperation

Algeria, a large Arab country in North Africa, has had a friendly relationship with the Russian Federation for quite some time. In 1960, during a bloody 8-year war for Algerian independence from France, the Soviet Union recognized the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic. In 1963, when the war ended, the USSR sent a team of minesweepers to help remove mines in the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria. It was reported that the Soviet experts defused 1.5 million mines. Since then the two nations have enjoyed friendly relations with each other. The USSR sent military specialists to Algeria to help strengthen defense capabilities of this young nation, as well as doctors and engineers who ensured a large number of Algerians were trained and qualified for their roles. In addition, the Soviet Union helped the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria build various manufacturing facilities and exploit oil and gas fields. And overall, it made a substantial contribution to the industrial and socio-economic development of this nation.

The friendly relationship was maintained even after the collapse of the USSR, i.e. between Algeria and the Russian Federation, the successor of the Soviet Union. Russia still has a presence in the oil and gas sector of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria as well as its metallurgy sphere and agriculture. The fight against international terrorism has become an important issue on the cooperation agenda of Algeria and Russia.

In 2001, the two nations signed a declaration on strategic partnership.

In 2002, the first Algerian satellite, ALSAT-1, was launched into low earth orbit from the Plesetsk Cosmodrome on Russia’s space launch vehicle Kosmos-3M.

In 2006, the President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, paid an official visit to the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria.
In recent years, trade between Russia and Algeria has increased sharply, and in 2017, the bilateral trade turnover was worth approximately $4.6 billion, which is two times higher than that in 2015. Sales of military goods accounted for $3 billion of the total.

Military and technical cooperation plays a fairly important role in the relationship between Russia and Algeria. For example, the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria has shown its appreciation of the Soviet and Russian military aviation sector for quite some time. In fact, all of Algeria’s combat aircraft, i.e. fighter jets, bombers and reconnaissance planes, originate either from the USSR or modern Russia.

As far back as 1979, Algeria began purchasing Soviet interceptor and reconnaissance aircraft Mikoyan-Gurevich MiG-25, and reconnaissance bombers, MiG-25RBS. From 1990 to 2000, the nation bought more than 30 Sukhoi Su-24M/MK bombers and several Su-24MR reconnaissance planes. In addition, at the beginning of 2000s, Algeria purchased more than 20 used Soviet Mikoyan MiG-29 multirole fighter aircraft from Belarus and Ukraine. Starting in 2007, the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria has bought 58 Sukhoi Su-30MK fighter jets from the Russian Federation.

Su-30 is Russia’s famous heavy multirole fighter aircraft, which were designed at the end of the 1980s in the USSR and then put to use by the Russian Federation. At the beginning of the 1990s, a modified export variant of this jet, Su-30MK, was launched. The letters “MK” stand for modernized and commercial, respectively. Soon after Su-30MKI appeared, the letter “I” stands for India, as this fighter jet was designed specifically to meet the needs of buyers in the Indian market. Later on, Su-30MKI(A) was launched. Accordingly, the letter “A” stands for Algeria. Since the Russian Federation’s leadership became convinced of its partner’s reliability and a high demand for such jets in Algeria, Russian aerospace engineers have designed an aircraft that best fulfills the needs of this nation’s air force.

In addition, most of Algeria’s military helicopters originate from either the USSR or the Russian Federation. Out of 135 helicopters belonging to the air force of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria, 75 are different variants of Soviet Mil Mi-8. There are also 31 Soviet Mil Mi-24, 3 Soviet Ka-32T, 8 Russian Mil Mi-26 and 6 Russian Mi-28NE in the fleet.

However, Algeria’s armed forces are not only equipped with Soviet and Russian military aircraft, the USSR and the Russian Federation also supplied the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria with a large quantity of armored vehicles over the last decades, i.e. more than 1,000 tanks, approximately 1,000 infantry fighting vehicles (IFVs) and more than 800 armored personnel carriers (APCs). Algeria also has six Soviet-Russian submarines (which means that this nation has the most powerful underwater fleet in Africa) as well as air defense systems.

Overall, from 1991 to 2016, the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria purchased Russian military equipment worth approximately $10 billion, which made it the third biggest importer of Russian weaponry after India and China.

Most importantly, however, owing to military and technical cooperation with the Soviet Union and then Russia, Algeria has acquired hundreds of military experts, who were educated and trained in Soviet and Russian specialist institutes.

In August 2018, media outlets reported that the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria was interested in purchasing a new batch of Russian combat jets, and that the two countries were engaged in negotiations regarding the supply of MiG-29M/M2 fighters (a modern variant of MiG-29M that Algeria’s military pilots are more accustomed to).

In October 2018, the Storm 2018 military exercise was conducted in Algeria. During the drills, Buk-M2E missile systems (purchased from the Russian Federation) were on display for the first time.

In January 2019, Sergey Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, came to the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria. Media outlets did not report on signing of any agreements during the visit, but it was meant to demonstrate that both countries were prepared to foster cooperation in all possible areas. A week after Sergey Lavrov’s visit to Algeria, a meeting of the Russian-Algerian Intergovernmental Commission was held in Moscow. During this event the discussions focused on plans to further develop cooperation between the two nations. The Russian Federation and the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria agreed to ensure growing collaboration in areas such as the oil and gas industry, agriculture, medicine and pharmaceuticals, and cyber security.

In March 2019, Sergey Lavrov met with Ramtane Lamamra, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria, in Moscow. Sergey Lavrov stated that the military and technical cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People’s
Democratic Republic of Algeria significantly contributed to ensuring stability in the entire region of North Africa.

In September 2019, it was reported that Algeria had decided to buy 30 Russian fighter jets (16 Su-30MKI(A) and 14 MiG-29M/M2), and also additional equipment and ammunition for these aircraft. The total cost of the purchase was more than $2 billion. In addition, it was announced that Russia could begin work on modernizing combat aircraft that the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria already had. The agreement was signed during MAKS-2019 (the International Aviation and Space Salon), which was held in the Russian Federation in August-September 2019.

The military and technical cooperation between Russia and Algeria benefits both parties greatly. The Russian Federation is one of the undisputed leaders in the global arms market, and products of its military-industrial complex are valued, sold and even copied all over the world. Algeria is one of the most powerful countries in North Africa and is very influential in the whole Islamic world. In addition, the military and technical cooperation between these two nations unequivocally shows that they agree on key foreign policy issues. As a result, this collaboration in the military sphere ensures that Russia’s positions in the entire Middle East are strengthened.

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