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The 2019 *Hirāk* and the Arab Spring Uprisings

The Limits of the Algerian Exception Narrative?***

حراك 22 فبراير 2019 وانتفاضات الربيع العربي: حدود سردية الاستثناء الجزائري؟

Abstract: This study examines the 2019 *Hirāk* movement in Algeria using a trans-disciplinary perspective spanning the sociology of social movements, comparative politics, and international relations. It compares the *Hirāk* to the two waves of Arab Spring uprisings (2011 and 2019), using the "Algerian exception" narrative as an analytical tool. The paper examines this narrative's arguments and debates its limitations. This approach allows for an understanding of the *Hirāk's* local particularity that distinguishes it from other Arab uprisings and permits its recontextualization as part of a regional social phenomenon with transnational dynamics and subsequent repercussions.

Keywords: The 2019 *Hirāk* Movement; Social Movements; Arab Spring Uprisings; Algeria; the Algerian Exception.

الملخص: تتدبر هذه الدراسة حراك 22 فبراير 2019 في الجزائر من منظور عابر لثلاثة اختصاصات، هي: سوسيولوجيا الحركات الاجتماعية، والسياسة المقارنة، والعلاقات الدولية، وتقارنه بالموجتين الأولى والثانية لانتفاضات الربيع العربي (2011 و2019)، موظفةً سردية "الاستثناء الجزائري" أداةً تحليليةً للمقارنة. وتسعى إلى فحص الحجج التي تعزز هذه السردية في خطوة أولى، ثم تفكيكها ومناقشة حدودها في خطوة ثانية؛ ما يسمح بفهم الخصوصية المحلية التي تميز حراك 22 فبراير من غيره من الانتفاضات العربية، وإعادة وضعه في سياقه الإقليمي، بوصفه جزءاً من ظاهرة اجتماعية إقليمية لها ديناميات، وفي النتيجة آثار عابرة للأوطان.

كلمات مفتاحية: حراك 22 فبراير 2019؛ الحركات الاحتجاجية؛ انتفاضات الربيع العربي؛ الجزائر؛ الاستثناء الجزائري.

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Introduction: The Two Exceptions of the Algerian Case

The Arab Spring began on 17 December 2010, when Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation sparked a major uprising in the city of Tunis, with popular protests soon spilling out of the capital into the rest of Tunisia. Less than three weeks later – and only one day after Bouazizi's death was announced publicly – violent demonstrations erupted in a number of Algerian cities in what would subsequently become known as the "oil and sugar uprising" (5-7 January 2011). It would take the revolutionary bug several weeks to spread to other Arab countries: Egypt on 25 January, Yemen on 27 January, Bahrain on 14 February, Libya on 15 February, Syria on 17 February, and Morocco on 20 February. But unlike those, the Algerian uprising did not develop into a popular revolution and had no significant consequences.¹

Accounts of what happened in Algeria in early 2011 vary. According to one narrative, the prices of basic foodstuffs had risen rapidly, in some cases by more than 40 per cent, driving people out to protest. While these protests began "peacefully", they were subsequently hijacked by "saboteurs", degenerating into rioting and violent confrontations with the security forces. Another account narrates that street vendors in neighbourhoods around the capital, frustrated by the government's determination to crack down on the informal market, provided the initial spark. The flames were further fanned by general discontent with rising prices and a collapse in purchasing power. Bloody clashes between protesters and police left a number of people dead and wounded on both sides. Others relayed that some young rebels wanted to imitate their Tunisian counterparts, with the situation in Algeria not being very different from that in Tunisia after all. Another account attributed the events to a law that was about to be implemented, one which would have obliged big business to put its financial resources at the disposal of the campaign to crack down on the informal economy. Consequently, some powerful oligarchs might have taken advantage of general resentment and the uprising in Algeria's eastern neighbour to mobilize the public and pressure the government into changing course.

The protests that took place in several Algerian cities in January 2011 were not purely domestic in character. They were influenced by the revolutionary wave that had just begun in Tunisia. Furthermore, the 2011 uprising was snuffed out in a matter of days, by dynamics that were more domestic than regional, and as a result, Algeria remained resistant to revolutionary fervour that lasted through to February 2019. Thus, this paper is not primarily about the uprising of January 2011, but it is a useful steppingstone towards a comparison of the 2019 *Hirāk* and the Arab Spring revolutions that provided the context for that uprising. The further we get from 2011, and the closer we get to 2019, the more difficult it becomes to distinguish between domestic and external influences.

It is this interaction between the domestic and the external factors in February 2019 that motivates our particular interest in the ways in which the *Hirāk* is similar to, and different from, the Arab Spring uprisings. How did Algeria remain so insulated from the effects of those uprisings spanning eight years? During this period, the country experienced violent protests, often larger in scale than those in other countries.² But these protests quickly broke up (or were *broken up*), the 2013-2015 Ouadi Mizab demonstrations or the 2015 anti-fracking protests in the south being good examples.

Why did these protests fail to bring about a revolution in Algeria? Was it because they did not take on a national dimension and remained relatively local? Because their demands never moved beyond the

¹ Algeria was no different than Morocco when contrasted with countries that witnessed the Arab Spring and had significant consequences. On the other hand, Bahrain saw a popular revolution (in terms of scale and duration) but with no fundamental impact.

² Algeria also saw various uprisings before 2011, the most notable being the protests in Kabylia (1981), in Constantine and Sétif in the east of the country (1986), in Algiers and other cities (1988), in Kabylia again (2001), and in the Aurès (2004). See: Abdennour Benantar, "al-*Hirāk* al-Jazā'iri: Sardiyyāt wa-Sardiyyāt Muḍāda," *Siyasat Arabiya*, vol. 10, no 55 (March 2022), p. 9.

specific issues that had occasioned them in the first place? Because they degenerated into riots and acts of violence and property damage, giving the government a pretext to crush them with brute force? Because they did not develop into a social movement? Because political actors (primarily from the opposition) did not take the opportunity to politicize them and turn them into a force capable of putting pressure on the government? Because both state and society had learned the lessons of the Civil War and were eager not to make the same mistake? Because a regional climate marked by Europe's fear of even greater unrest in its southern neighbours made it difficult for the revolutionary bug to spread west from Tunisia? Or was it because of some combination of these factors?

Addressing these questions assists in studying the 2019 *Hirāk* using a multidisciplinary approach; as part of a series of domestic protests on the one hand, and on the other within the regional context of the Arab Spring uprisings. Earlier narratives of the 2011 uprising cite a broad range of background phenomena to account for its outbreak and, similarly, for its dissipation. These have to do either with the domestic context or with the regional context, which produce and reproduce protest as a social movement that is or can be extended over time and place.

On the first anniversary of the 5 January 2011 uprising, *Deutsche Welle's* correspondent interviewed a number of young men in the working class Algiers neighbourhood of Bab El Oued, a popular spot with street vendors and the place where the protests had broken. "Watching what was happening in Tunisia and the whole thing with Mohamed Bouazizi, we all saw ourselves as Bouazizi," one of them told her. "When he set himself on fire, that had a real effect, especially because we live under the same terrible conditions as him." According to his account, "the protests in Tunisia coincided with a lot of talk about the Algerian authorities' determination to crack down on illegal commercial activity [i.e. unlicensed street vendors]". He added that "if one of them laid a finger on my stall, I'd set the whole country on fire, not just myself [...]. Our uprising broke out just after that, because it was a matter of our livelihoods". But he claimed that "thugs" (*balṭagiyya*) had taken the opportunity to engage in theft and violence, "and so the idea got around that the reason for the protest was the rise in the price of oil and sugar, while actually, it was bigger than that".³

This appears to be evidence that a transnational protest movement was taking shape back then⁴. The collapse in citizens' purchasing power, the general sense of frustration, the accrual of injustices – all this had already been present before 5 January 2011, and would persist afterwards. These domestic factors combined with the element of regional contagion to produce an uprising that was no less violent than the events that took place in Tunisia. But attempts to escalate the protests, to give them a greater degree of organization, and to keep them going as long as possible, all failed, with the protests petering out after a few days. Here, it was domestic factors that took precedence (state violence, the policy of buying quiescence, collective memory, etc), while the external influence, although prominent, proved to be less important (i.e., the attitude of major powers committed to maintaining the status quo).

Algeria was then a notable exception, especially given its long history of protest. By the end of winter 2011, the regime had dodged the tumult of the Arab Spring. If anything, Algeria proved to be stronger than ever and had become a symbol of stability in the region. Major powers had come to see it as an indispensable regional actor, especially with regard to the fight against terrorism. As time went on, and the Arab Spring degenerated into civil wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria (with the latter becoming a hub for transnational

3 See: Ratiba Bouadma, "'Ām Ba'd Iḥtijājāt al-Jazā'ir... Shubbān al-Ahyā' al-Faqīra Yabḥathūn 'an al-Khalās,'" *Deutsche Welle*, 4/1/2012, accessed on 14/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Dn1j4U>

4 One of the slogans adopted by protesters in Yemen was "Ali Abdullah Saleh, Tunisify us [*tawnisnā*], don't Somalify us [*lā tuṣāwmiḥnā*]". Tunisia and Somalia both had deep political and economic significance in the conscience of those chanting.

terrorism), it became clear that the more space Algeria could put between itself and the 2011 revolutions, the better it could consolidate its position.⁵

The Algerian regime thus grew ever more confident that Algeria was a bastion of stability, impervious to the unrest that had swept across the region (and which in autumn 2016 would take root in Al Hoceima in Morocco). As a result, its behaviour was entirely at odds with the Arab Spring dynamics (or the grounds for it at least). It pursued a "change for a no change" approach, institutionalizing corruption, doubling down on its policy of social peace at the expense of development, and proceeding to feed the collective sense of deprivation and resentment. More importantly, it generalized feelings of humiliation and abjection.

In spring 2013, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika suffered a stroke that made it difficult for him to move, speak, or even appear in public except for brief periods and in a wheelchair. Nonetheless, in 2014 he stood for, and won, a fourth term in office. The Algerian public expected him to hand over the presidency at the end of this fourth term, but a campaign for what was then referred to as the "continuity option" suggested otherwise. Statements emanating from that campaign, sometimes even official statements, were considered by the Algerians as humiliating for a nation that had shed blood to cast off the indignities of colonialism.

People began to ask how a country the size of Algeria could be run by a man so ill that he could not even speak. The "Algeria of pride and dignity" that Bouteflika had promised on his accession to the presidency in 1999 seemed far out of reach. There was a bitter collective resentment. But even as Bouteflika and his supporters fed this resentment, their proud and myopic faith in the "Algerian exception" led them to ever greater provocations, culminating in the announcement on 10 February 2019 that Bouteflika would be standing for a fifth term. It was this announcement that was to spark the *Hirāk* on 22 February, which began with limited protests against the nomination in Béjaïa and Khenchela in the east of the country and eventually developed into a huge popular uprising.

This has given rise to a lengthy debate on the nature of the *Hirāk*. Was it a social protest/ movement of local origin? A delayed "Arab Spring"? The end point of a protracted "Algerian Spring" stretching back to the 1988 protests that brought down the single-party regime (1962-1989), or perhaps even further than that? It is this debate that we will be grappling with here, in an attempt to draw out the similarities and differences between the 22 February *Hirāk* and the Arab Spring uprisings. The *Hirāk* is a protest movement in which the social, the political, and the economic are closely intertwined and in which the domestic overlaps with the regional and the international dynamics. As such, we make use of insights from three different disciplines: the sociology of social movements, comparative politics, and international relations.

Although the various Arab uprisings have generally shared the same strategic goal – removing an existing regime and replacing it with a democratic system responsive to popular aspirations for freedom, dignity, justice, and development – there are also many aspects in which they differ. The first and most fundamental axis of differentiation is the domestic context. While the regional context is certainly important, the domestic situation in each country is the main determinant of the causes, trajectory, and ultimate fate of an uprising. Any answer to the question of similarities and differences must also highlight how each uprising has simultaneously influenced and been influenced by the trajectories and outcomes of the others.

This paper compares the Algerian *Hirāk* and the Arab Spring uprisings using what we call the "Algerian exception narrative" as an analytical lens for comparison. It demonstrates the distinctiveness of the *Hirāk* by examining its motivations. The paper further unpacks how the *Hirāk* resembles other Arab uprisings by exploring its limits. As we will see, there is a certain irony to the "exception narrative": Algeria has been

5 Louisa Dris-Aït Hamadouche, "Le soulèvement populaire algérien à l'aune du printemps arabe," *Pouvoirs*, vol. 1, no. 176 (2021), p. 17.

exceptional not only in that a major uprising failed to manifest in 2011 at the height of the Arab Spring, but also in that an uprising that is distinct from its Arab spring counterparts *did* manifest eight years later.

This paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, we will introduce the Algerian exception narrative. In the second, we will pursue a more dialectical approach to comparison, testing the claims on which that narrative rests. In the third, we deconstruct the exception narrative and discuss its limitations, putting the *Hirāk* back in its regional context after drawing out its domestic specificity. We hope that this will provide a foundation on which a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences between the Algerian case and the rest of the mobilisations of the broader Arab Spring that the region has witnessed over the last ten and a half years.

The Name *Hirāk* as an Embodiment of the Algerian Exception

A quick glance at the Arab protests between 2010 and 2020 – with the exception of Iraq's (1 October 2019) and Lebanon's (17 October 2019) – suffices to show why it is often said that the "Arab Spring moment" took so long to reach Algeria. The protests of 5 January 2011 were crushed or failed to mature into an uprising of the characteristic of the first wave, and the second (2019) wave, which began in Sudan on 19 December 2018 and took several weeks to manifest in Algeria.

In their collective imagination, however, Algerians have quite a different self-image. In their account, their country experienced its own "Arab Spring Moment" more than twenty years before Tunisia. Whether with respect to the nature of the uprising (spontaneous and national, i.e., not geographically limited), its slogans and demands (regime change, transition to democracy, political pluralism), Algeria had the same experience as other Arab countries, but much earlier. On the eve of 22 February 2019, Algerians felt that they had already experienced the hopes and sufferings of the Arab Spring – in fact, that they had achieved more in autumn 1988, and suffered more during the 'Black Decade' of the 1990s, than any of the uprisings had in 2011. On the one hand, despite the many disappointments that followed, they had managed to leave behind the single party regime and achieve a transition to a pluralist system back then. On the other, they had experienced the serious violent unrest, frequently characterized as a civil war, and all the tragedies and sacrifices that came with it.

At the beginning of the *Hirāk*, Algerians came to see this painful ordeal as something of a blessing. There was a broad sense that the events of the late 20th century must not be repeated. As the protests expanded without ever turning violent – and as the security forces, on the other hand, maintained their own policy of non-violence against the protesters – this sense became a source of pride. A narrative of the "Algerian exception" began to take shape. One of the most significant components of this narrative was a refusal to call the protest movement a "revolution" (*thawra*) like those of the Arab Spring in 2011. Instead, protesters used the term *hirāk* ("mobilization" or "movement"), called themselves "*hirākīs*" rather than "revolutionaries", and rejected any association – explicit or implicit – between their movement and the 2011 revolutions.⁶

Fear and deliberate attempts to cultivate it among the populace are a tool commonly used by governments, irrespective of local context. There is a broad literature on how fear can be instrumentalized for political ends, particularly when terrorism is involved. The discourse adopted by the Algerian regime on the eve of the *Hirāk* was no exception: it drew heavily on a narrative of the "securitization" of the Arab

6 We might add to this two other basic semantic points. The first is a general one: a "revolution" is typically a matter of rebellion against the status quo and indeed often of armed action. The second has to do with the Algerian context, where no matter how revolutionary the *Hirāk* may have been, it seemed crucial to distinguish it from the Algerian Revolution of 1954 - 1962 that brought to the country independence from France. For a broader critique of the concept of revolution in the Arab context, see: Yadh Ben Achour, *Tunisie: Une révolution en pays d'islam* (Tunis: Cérés éditions, 2017).

Spring. The underlying strategy here was to contain social mobilization by evoking three major anxieties: the fear of a return to the tragedies of the "Black Decade" should the demonstrations develop into violent clashes with the security forces (or if the state elected to deploy the army, as it had in 1992); the risk that terrorist groups would infiltrate the protests and take advantage of large public gatherings to carry out bombing attacks; and the threat of an abortive "Arab Spring" of the kind experienced in Syria, Libya, or Yemen.

The *Hirākis'* attempts to distance themselves from the Arab Spring, in terms of their choice of name and content of their movement, are indicative of a defensive posture. Protesters responded to the regime's two-pronged strategy (fomenting anxiety about the Arab Spring on the one hand and the Black Decade on the other⁷ with their own two-pronged strategy. One part of this strategy was the insistence on entirely peaceful mobilization, preventing any degeneration into violent action and forestalling any attempt to legitimize crushing the protests by force. The other was to differentiate the Algerian *Hirāk* from the Arab Spring revolutions, both the first wave (2011) and the second wave (2019).⁸ This was particularly important in light of the rioting and violent clashes with the security forces that had already taken place in Sudan.

It is notable that the demonstrators in Algeria, just like the ruling and opposition elites, were products of the same security imagination and the same patriotic political culture produced by the 1954 revolution against the French occupation. The *Hirāk* adopted a patriotic rhetoric that did not differ in tone or in lexicon from that of the regime, particularly with respect to two points that were especially important in its discursive struggle for legitimacy: rejection of meddling in domestic affairs and the depiction of the foreign as a threat. It is worth noting here that the official narrative of the foreign threat (adopted socially via discourse) has had serious consequences, because anyone accused of collaborating with foreign powers is therefore being accused of undermining national security and thus of treason. This narrative has also made it possible to adopt a rhetoric of overlapping "foreign" and "domestic" enemies.⁹

By distancing themselves from the Arab Spring revolutions, therefore, the *Hirākis* were trying to refute regime attempts to compare their movement with what had happened in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, hoping to allay fears of civil war¹⁰ and of inevitable state collapse. They rejected this association and worked hard to free activists from the grip of "Black Decade" anxiety.¹¹ If comparisons had to be made, then they preferred to make them with Egypt. But even here, it was a completely different logic that prevailed: the point was that the *Hirāk* must not lead to military rule,¹² as the slogan "a civil state, not an army state" demonstrated.

The use of the term *Hirāk* was not an Algerian innovation. It had been used in other Arab countries before, and might be considered a borrowing from the 2009 Southern Movement (*al-Hirāk al-Janūbī*) in Yemen, where it first appeared, or from the 2016 Rif Movement (*Hirāk al-Rīf*) in Morocco, Algeria's closest neighbour.¹³ Indeed, it was soon incorporated into official discourse, later even with the word "blessed"

7 Referred to in its rhetoric as "the national tragedy", a term previously used in national reconciliation legislation. See for example: People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, "Amr Raqm 06 - 01 Mu'arrakh fī 28 Muḥarram 'Ām 1427 al-Muwāfiq 27 Fibrāyir Sanat 2006, Yataḍamman Tanfidh Mithāq al-Silm wa-l-Muṣālaḥa al-Waṭaniyya," *Official Gazette*, Year 43, Issue 11, 28/2/2006.

8 Benantar, pp. 10 - 11.

9 Ibid., p. 11.

10 Farida Souiah, "Rhétorique de l'ingérence et lutte pour la légitimité," *Mouvement*, vol. 2, no. 102 (2020), p. 36.

11 The slogans used by the demonstrators bear witness to the trauma of the 1990s and their desire to avoid violence: "Algeria isn't Syria", "the army and the people are brothers", "the police and the people are brothers", and "the Black Decade is over, we'll build a White Decade". See: Faouzia Zeraouia, "The Memory of the Civil War in Algeria: Lessons from the Past with Reference to the Algerian Hirak," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2020), p. 43.

12 Benantar, p. 11.

13 Although the term *Hirāk* was shared by some countries, different national contexts have generated a rich and specific vocabulary of protest, giving new meanings to old terms that often refer to the same thing: *azlām al-niẓām* [regime's men] in Tunisia and Libya, the *fulūl* [holdovers from the old regime] in Egypt, the *shabbīḥa* [state sponsored mercenaries] in Syria, and the *'iṣāba* [regime thugs] in Algeria. The terms *baqāyā al-niẓām* ("regime remnants") and *rumūz al-niẓām* ("regime figures") are also widely used in all Arab countries. See: Ibid., p. 10.

(*mubārak*) attached. This was not, in our view, a simple attempt to placate the *Hirākis*, or part of the policy of "coping with the *Hirāk*" ultimately adopted by the military establishment. It was also intended to reassure an international audience that the regime was still in control, and that Algeria – the ever-reliable protector of regional security in the Sahel – was not about to meet the fate of the other Arab Spring countries. After all, this was not a "revolution" capable of undermining the regional balance of power by destabilising Algeria domestically. It was a mere "movement". Even in academic circles, the term *Hirāk* has escaped critique or scrutiny. It has been widely used to refer to a protest movement bringing together several other more limited protest movements.

Nonetheless, the use of a term borrowed from other regional movements did nothing to undermine the *Hirākis*' image of themselves as an exception and a unique Algerian phenomenon. They called their movement the "peaceful" *Hirāk*, the "civilised" *Hirāk*, the "blessed" *Hirāk* (a phrase adopted by the same regime that the *Hirāk* was targeted against), the "conscious" *Hirāk*, the "inspiring" *Hirāk*, the "incredible" *Hirāk*, or the "historic" *Hirāk*. Each of these descriptors evoked its opposite, reinforcing the idea of the *Hirāk* as distinct from other Arab protest movements. "Peaceful", for example, evoked "violent" and "bloody" (clashes, dead, and wounded). "Civilized" evoked "barbaric" (rioting, property damage, destruction of public space), while "blessed" juxtaposed the demonization of other Arab movements. "Conscious" contrasted with an impulsivity blind to the plots and schemes of foreign and domestic enemies. "Inspiring" and "incredible" contrasted with "normal" movements in which a historian would have little interest. And "historic" implied that it was no mere passing moment but would have major long-term effects.

For any of the other adjectives to be applied, "peaceful" had to be there first. It was impossible not to notice the general atmosphere of the protests. There were young families present, couples, young people, children, and babies in prams. Women both young and old moved unbothered through large groups of people, with and without headscarves or dressed in traditional *Ḥayiks*. Demonstrators gave flowers to policemen and sometimes exchanged hugs. There were displays of social solidarity between people from very different backgrounds – political, ideological, religious, cultural, linguistic, demographic, and urban. The streets came alive as a site of protest. And rather than degenerating into scenes of chaos and confrontation between different groups of people, it came to resemble most of all a celebration of the reclamation of public space, intermingled with resentment and an overwhelming desire for change and liberation. It became a melting-pot capable of containing the various political, social, and cultural conflicts that had long been fomented and exploited by the regime as a way of staying in power. It was impossible, too, not to notice the scenes of people from every walk of life coming together, debating with one another, sharing water and food, and – on every occasion – volunteering in large numbers to clean-up when the gatherings came to an end.

Even when signs of division began to appear on the horizon – particularly with respect to the constitutional option imposed by the military establishment – protesters on the streets maintained the peaceful character of the *Hirāk*. The heated debates between those for and against the constitutional option never degenerated into violence, whether between demonstrators themselves or between the demonstrators and the security forces. And when the number of Covid-19 cases began to rise, shortly after the first anniversary of the *Hirāk*, public areas were transformed into educational spaces raising awareness about the disease and distributing masks and bottles of hand sanitiser, a practice that continued until voices within the *Hirāk* itself called for a temporary suspension of activities.¹⁴ All this contributed to the *Hirāk*'s self-

14 This account is taken from direct observation of the *Hirāk* protests, both in Algeria (where one of us was present from the beginning of the movement in February through to October 2019) and abroad (where the other witnessed all of the protests organised by the Algerian community in France). There is a wealth of material, both audio-visual and written, as well as extensive media reporting demonstrating all this.

image as an Algerian exception unparalleled in the regional environment. Some went as far as to suggest that the *Hirāk* itself should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.¹⁵

It is clear that although the "Algerian exception" narrative and the *Hirāk's* self-image maintain that these protests absolutely do not constitute an "Arab Spring" or even a "popular revolution", it has nonetheless ended up as an alternative version of the Arab Spring narrative, an Arab Spring *à l'algérienne*. The next section puts tests the limitations of this narrative by looking at the similarities and differences between the *Hirāk* of 22 February and the first wave of Arab Spring uprisings.

Arguments for the Algerian Exception

This section inspects the arguments supporting the existence of an Algerian Exception, which includes: the national character of the *Hirāk* that overcame the various divisions and loyalties of people from a broad range of backgrounds; the peaceful nature of the protests; the regime's relatively gentle response; the *Hirāk* abroad; the shared rejection of foreign intervention by both the regime and the protesters; and the strategic agreement between domestic and foreign actors that Algerian stability was crucial to regional stability.

1. A national movement cutting across divisions

One distinguishing feature of the 22 February *Hirāk* was its "national" character, in the sense that it managed to overcome both horizontal and vertical divisions between protesters from a range of different backgrounds. In this respect, it is unlike other Arab protests: the uprisings in Bahrain, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, for example, failed to overcome ideological and sectarian divisions and traditional identities. In Bahrain, the Sunni minority did not support the uprising, because its main social vector was Shi'ī; and anti-Iranian rhetoric proved capable of mobilizing a Sunni-Arab coalition that encouraged repression¹⁶ and ultimately led to GCC intervention to rescue the regime. The prominence of these identities and loyalties meant that the approach to the Arab Spring uprisings was inconsistent: in Libya, foreign intervention was intended to save the people from the regime, while in Bahrain it aimed to save the regime from the people.¹⁷ In Egypt, meanwhile, political divisions between Islamist and anti-Islamist forces smothered the popular uprising, ultimately producing a reinvigorated authoritarian regime in the July 2013 coup. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, internal divisions (sectarian, tribal, and regional) became entangled with foreign intervention, dragging all three countries into bloody civil wars. The only exception here is Tunisia, which like the *Hirāk* in Algeria managed to overcome these sorts of divisions.

The *Hirāk* remained unharmed by these various divisions, despite the regime's attempts to exploit tensions within its ranks, for example by driving a wedge between Amazigh and Arabic speakers. On 19 June 2019, Chief of Staff Ahmed Caid Saleh announced an entirely illegal ban on the carrying of the

15 See: Nacer Djabi, "Limādhā Lā Yatimm Tarshīh al-*Hirāk* al-Sha'bī fī'l-Jazā'ir ilā Jā'izat Nūbil li-l-Salām?," *al-Quds al-Arabi*, 28/3/2021, accessed on 14/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3Enm56b>. In April 2019, Moncef Marzouki, the first post-revolutionary president of Tunisia, said that the "Algerian revolution [was] one of the most successful of the Arab Spring revolutions" because it had occurred "without bloodshed", and "Algerians have a very high level of consciousness". See: "al-Marzūqī: al-Thawra al-Jazā'iriyya min Anjah Thawrāt al-Rabī' al-'Arabī," *Anadolu Agency*, 9/4/2019, accessed on 14/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3EjaDbz>. Shortly after Bouteflika's resignation, Nasser Zefzafi, one of the leaders of the Moroccan Rif Movement, published a letter from his prison cell in which he said "I salute you, great people of Algeria, for securing the first of your demands: the cancellation of the fifth term [...] How could it have been otherwise, when you have done such glorious things in the past? And today you are doing them again. Like your brothers and sisters in the Rif, you have taught the world a lesson in peaceful, civilised protest." See: "al-Zafzāfī Yuhayyī al-Jazā'iriyyīn: Anhanī Lakum Ijlālan Ayyuhā-l-Ahrār!" *Aswat Magharibiyya*, 5/4/2019, accessed on 14/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3EwzJED>. For more, see: "Hirāk al-Jazā'iriyyīn Yubhir Ahrār al-'Ālam," *al-Bilad*, 5/4/2019, accessed on 14/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3WRa3ZS>. Such praise can only have further entrenched the idea of an Algerian exception.

16 Hamadouche, pp. 21 - 22.

17 Abdennour Benantar, "Arab Democratic Uprisings: Domestic, Regional and Global Implications," *New Global Studies*, vol. 5. no. 1 (2011), pp. 1 - 7.

Amazigh flag, and the government provided constant support in its official rhetoric for the "Novembrist-Badist" current among the demonstrators, a current that fomented hatred against the tribal areas in which many Amazigh speakers live. It also insisted on pursuing judicial cases against *Hirāk* activists. These semi-authoritarian measures certainly caused tension and anxiety within the *Hirāk*, not least because of the string of arrests and guilty verdicts produced by the courts. But it was nonetheless able to retain its unity and homogeneity,¹⁸ and as a result its coherence.

The *Hirāk* succeeded in peacefully combining political and ideological diversity with unity of purpose and aim. Its social makeup doubtless played a part in reducing the effect of ideological differences within its ranks: young people who had not witnessed the ideological conflicts of the previous decades, present in large numbers, made the *Hirāk* more flexible and were responsible for slogans such as "you can't scare us with the [Black] Decade!"¹⁹ The (other) Arab uprisings, on the other hand, fell victim to an ideological polarization that undermined their ability to confront their governments. Even in those countries that did experience major change, this polarization has brought the transition process to a halt, as in Tunisia (after Kais Saied announced a state of emergency on 25 July 2021), reversed it altogether, as in Egypt, or led to civil war, as in Libya (although here foreign intervention had disrupted the course of the protests at a very early stage).

The *Hirāk*'s success in overcoming political and ideological divisions was not only a regional exception, but also exceptional within Algeria's own history if we distinguish it, as a spontaneous protest movement, from the established bloc of civil society and organised political parties. The *Hirāk* took these organizations by surprise, and they were ultimately unable to do anything other than ride the wave, having failed to take leadership of the movement.

But this is, at least in part, a product of differences between Algeria and other Arab protest movements. For example, unlike Tunisia and Egypt, Algeria had no intermediary entities between the regime and the protesters. There was no Algerian equivalent to the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), and Algeria's Barakat and Peaceful Society Movements (the latter of which is Brotherhood-linked) pale into insignificance next to Kefaya or the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. This is especially true with respect to their capacity for mobilization and politicization – by which we mean their ability to channel and transform social demands into political demands – which is the essence of the intermediary organization's role. The political class remained hostage to their ideological choices, which were incompatible with the makeup and rhetoric of the *Hirāk*.

The progressives closed ranks within one bloc, the Forces of the Democratic Alternative (FDA), which quickly adopted a roadmap for the future of the country. The conservatives, meanwhile, formed a separate alliance, which produced its own distinct roadmap different from that of the FDA. The conservative alliance fell apart as soon as the presidential elections were announced, splitting into a camp that favoured participation and another that planned to boycott. The FDA, on the other hand, has continued to clash with the government, but without succeeding in expanding its membership or increasing its influence. Both blocs have failed to meet with prominent *Hirāk* activists, with the sole exception of the discussions held on 24 August 2019 intended to find common political ground. That meeting, moreover, took place before the Chief of Staff announced the presidential election, which triggered a new round of schisms within the political class. This failure is all the more striking given the political and economic climate produced by the *Hirāk*, which would have been very favourable to

18 Hamadouche, pp. 22 - 23.

19 Ibid., p. 23.

any attempt by opposition politicians to play their expected role and would have offered a very strong hand to use against the government.²⁰

2. A peaceful *Hirāk*

The peaceful nature of the *Hirāk* is often considered one of its defining characteristics. During the first wave of Arab Spring uprisings, popular protests were soon marred by tit-for-tat violence between demonstrators and the security forces. Even the Tunisian uprising witnessed some, albeit limited, violence; in addition to its violent origins in the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, between 300 and 500 people died over the course of the protests. While the Syrian demonstrations were initially peaceful, they were rapidly caught up in a rising wave of violence that claimed more than 5000 lives between March 2011 and January 2012. In Libya, meanwhile, the uprising quickly degenerated into a civil war that by October 2011 had killed between 10,000 and 50,000 people. The first year of the Egyptian uprising left 900 people dead, and the first year of the Yemeni uprising left 350. In Bahrain, a country with less than 600,000 citizens, the number was 55. But during the *Hirāk* in Algeria, only a single death was reported, a young man who succumbed to injuries inflicted by a rubber bullet.²¹

Much the same applies to the second wave of the Arab Spring. The first month of the Sudanese uprising saw no fewer than 40 deaths,²² and within less than a month of the beginning of the October 2019 Lebanese uprising, two protesters had died.²³ Lebanon also saw widespread rioting, property damage and violent clashes between protesters and the security forces. The same might be said of the October 2019 uprising in Iraq, where the tally was even worse: hundreds killed, and thousands wounded in clashes with the security forces in the first three months.²⁴

How can we explain the *Hirāk's* uniquely peaceful nature when compared to the other Arab uprisings? Accumulated experience certainly influenced the trajectory of the protests: domestic experience from the long history of Algerian protest on the one hand, as well as lessons learned from the Arab Spring elsewhere in the region. Previous protest movements had generally been violent but had ultimately succeeded only in reproducing the status quo, because the Algerian security regime's legitimacy is also sustained by violence. Domestic experience, then, encouraged protesters to adopt a conscious strategy of denying the regime opportunities to exploit violent protests to justify repression or stave off their demands. At a more regional level, meanwhile, the violent trajectory of the Arab uprisings seems to have made participants more wary of²⁵ or even deeply hostile to violence, fearing similar escalations.

Moreover, the base of the *Hirāk* was uniquely broad, uniting people from every part of society. Its cross-generational nature allowed for knowledge of previous protests to be transferred to a younger generation through the discussion groups that formed at the end of every demonstration.²⁶ There was also, as has already been noted, an unusually high level of female participation, whether as individuals or as members of whole families who came out to take part in marches. The presence of so many people belonging to

20 Hamadouche, pp. 24 - 25.

21 Hamadouche, p. 20.

22 "al-Sūdān: Dubbāt al-Amn Yulāhiqūn al-Muḥtājīn al-Muṣābīn Dākhl Mustashfā," *Amnesty International*, 10/1/2019, accessed on 14/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/2RqyQ8Y>. Various reports indicate that dozens more protesters have been killed in protests that are still continuing at the time of writing, albeit in a more geographically limited and more scattered fashion.

23 "Lubnān: al-Mutazāhirīn Yushayyi' ūn Muwāṭīnan Qutil fi-l-Iḥtijājāt al-Mutawāṣila dīdd al-Tabaqa al-Ḥākima," *France 24*, 14/11/2019, accessed on 14/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3sGOOfT>

24 "Iḥṣā' iyya Umamiyya: Ḥaṣīlat Iḥtijājāt al-'Irāq Akthar min 400 Qatīl wa-19 Alf Jarīh," *Al Jazeera Net*, 4/12/2019, accessed on 14/4/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3FuxT7F>

25 Hamadouche, p. 21.

26 Ibid.

groups rarely seen at protests, including children²⁷ and senior citizens, made it less likely that the security forces would use violence, and that young people would respond to their provocations.²⁸

3. The gentle response: prioritizing constitutional and judicial action over police action

The 22 February *Hirāk* was distinct from other Arab uprisings (both waves) in that the regime did not use brute force to crush the protests, despite having the power to do so. We have identified four primary factors in the decision not to violently confront the *Hirāk*. The first factor was the *Hirāk*'s own peaceful nature, which would have softened any inclination on the part of the regime to use force. Second, there was disagreement between different wings of the regime itself with regard to the most appropriate way of dealing with the protests, especially once it became clear to some regime elements that the way they chose to face the *Hirāk* might offer them a historic opportunity to legitimately get rid of their rivals. Third, the regime was acutely aware that if a violent response led to deaths, this might open the door to a new "Black Decade" of violent unrest, particularly given the rising number of demonstrators. The regime was clearly unwilling to take on the political responsibility for dealing with any such development, either domestically or internationally. Finally, there was an implicit link between the goals of foreign powers and the means used by the Algerian regime: so long as the regime held back from using violence against the protesters, it would continue to receive international support.

It is also likely that the intense coverage that any event now attracts, from both traditional and new media, helped to restrain the regime response to protesters chanting "peaceful protest, peaceful protest", especially when compared to the protests of the 1980s. We might add another factor: the regime having learned, from both domestic experience and regional example, how to use other tools to break up the *Hirāk* and rob it of its energy. This kind of "soft" or "invisible" repression, although it still occasioned media criticism, attracts far less attention than brute force, the deaths, rioting, and violent clashes between demonstrators and the security forces. The most significant example of this was the rhetorical recasting of the *Hirāk*'s political demands for radical change as constitutional demands for reform of the status quo and thus for its preservation. Another major tool was the growing politicization of the judiciary through a campaign of continuous arrests and sentences targeting not only the public faces of corruption in the Bouteflika regime but also many leading activists from the *Hirāk*.

4. A *Hirāk* in the diaspora too

Another distinguishing feature of the 22 February *Hirāk* was the involvement of the Algerian community outside the country, who organized marches and protests in parallel with those in the interior. According to Didier Le Saout, the extent to which the Algerian diaspora was involved in the protests set the *Hirāk* apart from all other protest movements in the Arab World between 2011 and 2019, especially in France, home to the largest Algerian community outside the country itself. There are many points in common between the diaspora protests and the mobilization in the homeland. Despite often being referred to as the "Diaspora *Hirāk*", it was in fact an extension of the *Hirāk* in Algeria itself, albeit in a different context. Its slogans and demands were aimed squarely at the government in Algeria, as well as being directed at the French government (during the protests in France) and even to international bodies and NGOs.

The Diaspora *Hirāk* was quicker to mobilize, beginning before the 22 February 2019 *Hirāk* in Algeria itself. The first mass demonstration of Algerians in France against Bouteflika's decision to stand for a fifth term was held on Place de la République on 17 February 2019. Ever since, regular demonstrations and

27 "Iḥṣā' iyya Umamiyya: Ḥaṣīlat Iḥtijājāt al-'Irāq Akthar min 400 Qatīl wa-19 Alf Jarīh", *Al Jazeera Net*, 4/12/2019, accessed on 14/3/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3FuxT7F>

28 Hamadouche, p. 21.

gatherings have been held there every Sunday, with tens of thousands of people turning out to demand change in Algeria, chanting the same slogans as their counterparts in the mother country itself. Protests have also been held in other French cities, albeit smaller and less frequently than those in Paris (the Sunday protests), which are unique in both their size and their regularity.

The weekly gatherings of Algerian protesters and the marches that they have organized in Paris have celebrated key moments in the history of Algeria (the events of 8 May 1945, 1 November 1954, independence in 1962, the Amazigh Autumn in 1980, the events of October 1988, and the Black Autumn of 2001).²⁹ By participating from afar in the protest movement, Algerian migrants were taking part in the reproduction of symbols they made as part of "ritual performances" intended to threaten modern Algerian authoritarianism. They appropriated the rhetoric of the liberation war, accusing the government of having manipulated and instrumentalised it, and shouting slogans such as "the country is ours, we're the ones who decide", "a civil state not an army state", and "we're sick of this government". They became the bearers of a "patriotism from afar".³⁰

5. The internal consensus against foreign intervention

The spectre of foreign intervention haunted all the Arab Spring uprisings, particularly the first wave. Every relevant country (with the partial exception of Tunisia) had had to deal with political interference on the part of the "counterrevolutionary powers", which in Egypt had succeeded in ousting the country's first democratically elected president and re-establishing the authoritarian regime. But the worst kind of foreign interference was undoubtedly military intervention, which had torn apart Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In both cases (political interference and military intervention), Arab countries had played a central role, albeit not always with the same objectives. In Bahrain, foreign intervention had also sought to protect the regime and save it from popular demands. Arab powers that had formerly been famous for their moderation within the Arab regional system soon became a source of a new kind of regional radicalism. A dialectical relationship developed between riches and revolution, with the former ultimately beating out the latter.³¹ But Algeria, yet again, was an exception to this general rule, remaining untouched by foreign intervention.

There has long been a consensus in Algeria against foreign intervention, irrespective of its nature or intensity. That this consensus still holds was shown in late November 2019 by the responses of the government, the opposition, and the *Hirāk* to a European Parliament resolution regarding the situation in Algeria. It is important to note that this traditional consensus has never meant that foreign intervention cannot be exploited politically, that is, in mudslinging between different parties. From the very beginning of the protests, the government alluded to ongoing foreign meddling, warning that "external forces" were manipulating demonstrations who had been "seduced" by their charms and were conspiring with them against the country. This sort of rhetoric continued to be used throughout the *Hirāk*. But in the end, it was the government that broke the rule that foreign intervention was always to be rejected, hoping that, by doing so, it could push through its own agenda. In the early days of the *Hirāk*, the Office of the President sent the then foreign minister, Ramtane Lamamra, to a number of major capitals to convince them to support the government's roadmap (that is, keeping Bouteflika in power outside the constitutional framework). This move – and particularly the reliance on the USA, Russia, and France – was met with deep hostility by the *Hirākīs*, who accused the government of relying on foreign powers to prop up its roadmap.³²

29 See: Didier Le Saout, "al-Qiyām bi-l-*Hirāk* fī Bārīs: Mashāhid Thawra Didd al-Nizām al-Jazā'iri," Hasan Zaghdar (trans.), *Siyasat Arabiya*, vol 10, no. 55 (March 2022).

30 Ibid.

31 Abdennour Benantar, "Recompositions interarabes dans le contexte des révoltes populaires: Un conservatisme vecteur de radicalisation régionale," in: Abdennour Benantar (dir.), *Le Maghreb et la crise entre les monarchies du Golfe: Une neutralité positive* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2021), pp. 21 - 32.

32 Abdennour Benantar, "al-Āmil al-Khārijī wa'l-Insidād al-Siyāsī fī'l-Jazā'ir," *Report*, Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 21/3/2019, accessed on 14/3/2023 at: <https://bit.ly/3U4ImKr>

The sympathy shown by western powers – as well as Russia – for the Algerian regime's position, at the expense of the demands made by the *Hirāk*, showed that they continued to pin their hopes on authoritarian stability as a permanent alternative to democratic stability. This attitude only hardened as the consequences of the Arab Spring and the worsening security crisis in Algeria's neighbours (primarily in the Sahel region) became clearer, particularly the subsequent flow of refugees and irregular migrants towards the northern shore of the Mediterranean. These powers had sacrificed authoritarian stability in the uprisings of 2011, in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and temporarily in Egypt. But it was soon restored in the latter with the coup of July 2013, supported by Arab and Western powers alike. In subsequent years, Western powers developed a hostility to protests demanding democratic transitions. In Algeria, they showed a marked bias in favour of the regime, despite the fact that the regime itself had always expressed its absolute opposition to any foreign interference in Algeria's domestic affairs.³³

There are many reasons that could be given for Algeria's unique lack of international intervention during the *Hirāk*. First, the peaceful nature of the protests and the way the regime chose to respond to them were both based on rejection of violence. Alongside the prevailing tradition of hostility to foreign intervention, this made Algeria inhospitable soil for any potential intervention. Second, as previously noted, the regional context meant that Algerian stability – and its capacity to resist those forces pulling it in the opposite direction, whether domestic-political or international-geopolitical – was central to the interests of western powers. Third, the prospective interventionists themselves had doubtless learnt the lessons of the 2011 Arab Spring, which had taught them that intervention could (or most likely would) produce new hotspots or exacerbate tensions that were already present. Although they were willing to exploit these tensions, the latter remained a constant source of concern, and as a result, they had become more cautious and hesitant. Fourth, there are various considerations that connect the fate of one country to that of another. The western powers, having "let down" the Tunisians and the Egyptians, sought to atone for their sins by intervening in Libya and Syria. But the situation in Syria soon became more complex, because while China and Russia had allowed the UNSC resolution that provided the pretext for intervention to topple the Muammar Gadhafi regime in spring 2011, they took up a very different position with respect to Syria. Fifth, Algeria's "balanced" foreign policy meant that it had avoided getting caught up in conflicts that might have made it vulnerable to international or regional geopolitical score-settling, as happened to Gadhafi's Libya.

6. Strategic agreement between local and international actors that domestic stability was crucial to regional stability

The major powers consider Algeria to be a regional stabilizer, particularly in the context of the current instability in the Sahel region. They recognize that it has a regional role to play, but in accordance with their own interests, which do not necessarily overlap with those of Algeria, but do not necessarily contradict them either. Foreign actors thus have no interest in undermining Algeria's stability, contrary to the claims of the official narrative. For its own part, Algeria does not present itself solely as a stabilizer, but as an active force for regional security. And this is, in fact, true. It is the regional country most zealous in its efforts to preserve regional stability while relying on its own resources. However, conflicts have many aspects to them. What stability are we talking about? That is to say, a form of stability in Algeria that meets the needs of foreign powers may not necessarily be in the interests of its people. This may, in fact, be the moral of the 22 February *Hirāk*.³⁴

33 Ibid.; Abdennour Benantar, "Siyāsat al-Jazā'ir al-Amniyya: Taḥawwulāt wa-Mu'dilāt fī Siyāq al-Qalāqil Iqlīmiyyan wa'l-Hirāk Dākhiliyyan," *Siyasat Arabiyya*, vol. 10, no. 55 (March 2022), pp. 35, 38.

34 Benantar, "al-'Āmil al-Khārijī wa-l-Insidād al-Siyāsī fī-l-Jazā'ir."

There is strategic agreement between the major powers and the Algerian regime that the stability of the latter is crucial to the whole region. It is no exaggeration to say that this strategic agreement has become an obstacle to any change in Algeria. Despite official claims that "foreign actors" are keen to destroy Algeria's national security and stability, the major powers have no interest in undermining the stability of the country. Indeed, this is what accounts for their silence and decision not to use the rhetoric of human rights, freedom, and democracy that they have not hesitated to deploy against regimes in other countries. They have proven time and time again that where security concerns are incompatible with moral considerations, the former always wins out.³⁵

It can thus be said that the regional instability produced by the crises in Libya and Mali has helped to strengthen authoritarianism in Algeria. However, sacrificing long-term interests in the name of short-term gains is a gamble of its own by any measure, as the events of the Arab Spring are likely to confirm. There appears to be a conflation of stability with the illusion of stability. The Algerian regime and the various foreign powers are deliberately ignoring a basic fact: that sustainable stability necessarily requires national consensus on the nature of the system and the need for the rule of law. Authoritarian stability is ephemeral, disappearing as soon as the repressive mechanisms that shore it up disappear, always harbouring the seeds of its own demise. The various protests that the country has seen over the last few decades, in particular those of the 2019 *Hirāk*, are evidence of this. They have shown that the stability that had featured so widely in both domestic and international narratives was a mere illusion. This brings us neatly back to our original question: how can a country that is domestically unstable be a regional "stabilizer"?

This approach to Algerian stability carries with it a number of risks. Most notably, it makes the government, and the state as a result, more vulnerable to foreign pressure, because the regime will be willing to compromise to win international legitimacy. It will also affect Algeria's ability to actively pursue regional security, because it will be forced to focus on domestic politics, as happened during the *Hirāk*. It is worth noting here the difference between stability as a *means* (the circumstantial or instrumental sense) and stability as an *end* (the structural sense). Exploiting crises in neighbouring countries to create security anxieties in order to see off protests and maintain an authoritarian status quo is a strategy that will, ultimately, fail. Common sense tells us that it is better to be inspired by the successes of others than to rely on their failures to justify preventing change. Democracy remains the least risky means of producing stability in a country. It thus seems perfectly clear that the regime's decision to pin its hopes on authoritarian stability at home – and foreign powers' decision to do the same across the region – will end in failure.³⁶

The Limits of the Algerian Exception Narrative

We will now attempt to draw out the similarities between the 2019 *Hirāk* and the Arab Spring uprisings, outlining the limitations of the Algerian exception narrative. This does not mean overturning it entirely to argue that the 2019 *Hirāk* was a purely regional phenomenon or simply another product of the revolutionary contagion that began to spread from Tunisia both eastwards and westwards in late 2010, with its final wave reaching Iraq and Lebanon in late 2019. What we are discussing here is a domestic phenomenon *par excellence*, as we showed in the last section, which took place within a broader domestic context.

³⁵ Abdennour Benantar, "Implications du printemps arabe sur la sécurité en Méditerranée," *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, no. 89 (2014), pp. 87-98; Abdennour Benantar, "NATO, Maghreb and Europe," *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2006), pp. 167 - 188.

³⁶ Benantar, "al-ʿĀmil al-Khārijī wa-l-Insidād al-Siyāsī fī-l-Jazāʾir."

1. For dignity: when degradation reaches its peak

There is a whole range of theoretical approaches to protest movements: relative deprivation, resource mobilization, rational choice, political opportunity structure,³⁷ or struggle for recognition,³⁸ to take just a few examples. While there is no space here to discuss all of them, this paper focuses on the theory of recognition, which we argue is the best suited to account for all the protest movements that have taken place in the Arab region over the decade of the Arab Spring, in particular the Algerian *Hirāk*.

The theory of recognition reconsiders the idea of justice, approaching it not only as a material concept that pertains exclusively to the distributive dimension but also as a symbolic and ethical concept that includes recognition:³⁹ recognition of the "other" in the presence, identity, differences, and rights of the self, whether material or symbolic. We are not focusing here on the relationship between recognition and the possible formation of a duality of the "I" and the "other", as in the case of minorities and majorities, for example. We are rather interested in the struggle for recognition in the sense of recognition of rights and demands, not only in the sense of a struggle to secure them, but also in the sense of a pressing need, in itself, to resist feelings of humiliation arising from being unrecognized for such a long time.

The concept of a struggle for recognition describes "the various types of struggle that individuals or groups have participated in since the end of the Second World War: national liberation movements and social movements such as civil rights [activism] and feminism; post-Cold War minority movements, particularly movements associated with racial, national, sexual, and cultural minorities; and struggles in the Arab World to put an end to dictatorial rule."⁴⁰ Why the emphasis on the minority phenomenon when discussing the concept of recognition? Because a minority provides the best example of what Gilles Deleuze described as a minority in the sense of a *status* that has nothing to do with numbers:

[minority] does not always mean a small number, as the cases of women and black people show. A minority can sometimes be more numerous than the majority. Minority thus means, in fact, a position, but not the position of those who are few in number, but rather the position of those on whom a minor status has been imposed [...] those who cannot lead themselves without a guardian. In this sense, a minority is the "minor" that the majority refuses to allow to be independent and responsible for itself.⁴¹

This position is thus connected to consciousness of injustice and the experience of humiliation and denial.⁴² If we assume that denial means non-recognition of the presence and value of the self, in the sense of a position, as Deleuze understands it, then humiliation and degradation have to do more with repeated and excessive denial. When this excess reaches a given peak, at a given moment, it creates a spark that may then generate resistance and struggle for recognition, not necessarily of the legitimacy of a group's demands and rights alone, but also of the existence, dignity, and worth of the group making those demands, i.e., of the "other".

Peoples are not minorities in relation to ruling elites, in the key sense of the word, but when a sense of deprivation and denial, both material and symbolic, builds up over time, they are liable to become conscious that they are living in a "minor" position, and that those who rule them are depriving them of

37 For a broader review of such theories, see: Erik Neveu, *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux* (Paris: La Découverte, 1996).

38 Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (London: Polity, 1996); Zouaoui Baghoura, *al-I'tirāf min Ajl Maḥmūd Jadīd li'l-'Adl: Dirāsa fī'l-Falsafa al-Ijtīmā'iyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 2012).

39 Baghoura, p. 14.

40 Ibid.

41 Quoted in: Ibid.

42 Ibid, pp. 14 - 15.

their right to lead themselves, without a guardian. When this process is completed, people mobilise, as communities, in order to struggle for recognition. The more a sense of denial accumulates, the more the struggle will become a conflict – varying in intensity – for recognition and for the restoration of dignity. This conflict often breaks out in non-traditional spaces, such as streets and squares, giving expression to the desire to force the ruling regime to recognise peoples' right to express their opposition outside the channels dominated by the ruling elite (parliaments, political parties, civil society organisations, etc).

All the Arab uprisings, irrespective of their trajectories and ultimate fates, gave expression to a deep-rooted desire to reclaim some dignity and reject the social quiescence that had been internalized by Arab peoples over many decades (and which they had already begun to shake off with the mass strikes witnessed by many Arab countries in the 1980s and 1990s).⁴³ In this respect, the Algerian *Hirāk* resembles the other Arab uprisings – whether the first wave, the second wave, or the Rif Movement in Morocco – rather than being an exception to them. No matter how different the domestic contexts and determining factors that gave rise to these protests may have been, they have had the same basic driver: a sense of accumulated injustice (or *haqra* as it is called in Algerian dialect, *hagra* in Morocco) in every sense of the word: being deprived of basic rights, the suppression of freedoms, arrests, and torture, even murder. This feeling of injustice, in the sense of being unjustly deprived of rights, was not the sole factor. It was fed by a collective sense of humiliation. If injustice was a steady flame smouldering inside every individual, then humiliation was an oil poured onto this flame – not individual humiliation, but collective humiliation, experienced by people as communities. The *Hirāk*, just like other Arab uprisings, thus gave expression to a popular awareness that it was possible to act to reclaim this lost dignity and escape the hothouse of injustice and humiliation.

It is not within the scope of this article to consider all the various ways in which this humiliation played out individually. There are dozens of academic books and media reports brimming with examples. It is enough here to remind ourselves how people felt, throughout the Arab World, when they saw a young Tunisian Bouazizi set fire to his emaciated body after an argument with a policewoman that had ended with her slapping him and confiscating the cart from which he made his living, screaming *dégage* ("get out of here").⁴⁴ Or how people felt when they saw a young Moroccan man, Mohsen Fikri, being crushed to death by a waste collection vehicle, even as the policeman who had ordered them to switch the compactor on shouted "crush him!" (*iṭhan mmu!*). Or how people felt when they saw the children of Deraa in Syria dragged off to police stations (where they were allegedly tortured) for being accused of graffitiing Arab Spring slogans on the wall of their school just like those circulating in the media.

These narratives may not be quite accurate. They may have been recast in order to whip up, or even politicize, popular anger. But we argue that the interesting thing for analysis here is not to find out exactly how these events and others like them took place, but how they spread, adding to people's resentment of humiliation upon humiliation. Although the expressions used by protesters differed from place to place, the idea being expressed was the same: "bullets don't kill people, men staying silent kills people" (Sudan), "bread, freedom, human dignity" (Egypt), "the Syrian people will not be humiliated" or "will not be degraded" (Syria), "O Ben Ali, you coward, the Tunisian people will not be humiliated" (Tunisia), and "we won't have a president by proxy, there are real men in Algeria" (Algeria). This is not to mention the rejection of the tradition of prostrating oneself to the King and kissing his hand set out in the Dignity Proclamation (Morocco).

43 Abdennour Benantar, "Ishkālīyyat al-Isti'ṣā' al-Dīmuqrāṭī fī-l-Waṭan al-'Arabī," *al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi*, Year 24, Issue 273 (November 2001), p. 23.

44 This phrase (in French) soon became a slogan used against the regime in Tunisia and Algeria, and was adopted in various forms in other Arab uprisings.

2. Against life presidencies and dynasticism

Determining causality in social phenomena is always a complicated affair. Small beginnings often have major knock-on effects in faraway places, but not always. This is particularly true given that the complex interaction between cause and effect (or between effect and cause) in social reality often means that results can become "causes of their own cause", especially when the social causes are not given in advance or fixed but in constant flux. As such, it is not possible to determine which of the various ephemeral and independent events were most important in accounting for the Arab uprisings – Bouazizi's self-immolation, for example,⁴⁵ which acted as a trigger and a turning point not only domestically but also regionally. The sociology of social movements, however, provides us with structural approaches which focus on the build-up of feelings of deprivation and frustration and how these feelings interact with the domestic context. Therefore, comparisons often indicate that the causal links that these approaches construct can be generalized.

Nonetheless, one can still talk of a shared causality that is non-structural, short-term, unrelated to the trigger events, and present in all the Arab uprisings. It is opposition to lifelong presidencies and tenacious attempts to hold onto power even longer by creating presidential dynasties. It is true that authoritarianism has been an albatross around the necks of Arab peoples for a very long time⁴⁶ and is not a new phenomenon. But presidents' attempts to make their sons their heirs by force ("either Yazid or the sword", as the old Arab expression has it) as an extension of life presidencies helped to create a climate favourable to protest. The proof of this is that all the Arab countries that experienced popular uprisings – with the exception of monarchies in Bahrain and Morocco, as a result of their political systems – had witnessed the entrenchment of a life presidency and an attempt to pass it down within a family. Syria is the only case in which the president succeeded in positioning his son as his heir; similar attempts in Egypt, Yemen, and Libya all failed as a result of the popular uprisings.⁴⁷

It is clear that life presidencies and the tendency that they have to develop into dynasticism, and the injustice and humiliation that it has caused peoples are a common denominator linking together all the popular uprisings, and served as a decisive issue in the Algerian *Hirāk*. Much the same slogans were chanted in all of the uprisings, albeit with different phrasings: "freedom, freedom, no life presidency" (in Tunisia), "there is no forever, long live Syria and down with Assad" (in Syria), and "Algeria is a republic not a monarchy" (in Algeria). With the exception of the Bahraini and Moroccan kingdoms, in the years leading up to the first wave of protests, all of the Arab Spring countries saw either moves to extend presidencies indefinitely (Tunisia and Syria) or an attempt to set up a son as heir to the presidential office (Egypt, Libya and Yemen). It was these developments that helped crystallise the demand for the complete ouster of the respective regimes in this period specifically.

In Algeria, this factor is intertwined with the sense of humiliation that we described above: Bouteflika insisted on clinging onto power despite being unable to move or speak. People asked themselves how a president disabled by a stroke, confined to a wheelchair, could possibly govern a country and a people the size of Algeria? Over the preceding years, Bouteflika had disappeared from the public eye. A picture of him in a wooden frame stood in for him at public events and parades, while his brother and a close circle of advisors became the real rulers in the country. The "wood-framed picture" era was an unparalleled insult

45 Many such scattered and ephemeral events appear in the prevailing causal narratives as triggers for the uprisings: the death of the Egyptian blogger Khaled Saeed, beaten to death in full view of the public by members of the Egyptian security forces on 6 June 2010; the arrest of the Libyan lawyer Fethi Tarbel on 15 February 2011 after he took up the cause of the victims of the 1996 Abu Salim prison massacre; the killing of the Moroccan fish seller Mohsen Fikri, crushed to death in a waste collection vehicle by a policeman on 28 October 2016. There are various others.

46 Abdennour Benantar, "al-Tasalluṭiyya al-Siyāsiyya al-'Arabiyya," *Fikr wa-Naqd*, vol. 5, no. 45 (January 2002), pp. 27-36; Khaldun Hasan al-Naqib, *al-Dawla al-Tasalluṭiyya fī-l-Mashriq al-'Arabī al-Mu'āšir: Dirāsa Binā'iyya Muqārana*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1996).

47 Benantar, "Arab Democratic Uprisings," pp. 1 - 7.

to Algerians, as were the pictures of a practically comatose Bouteflika greeting foreign guests,⁴⁸ who would then appear on state television to describe in glowing terms the conversations they had had with him. When the regime defied expectations by announcing that he would be standing for a fifth term the humiliation reached a tipping point, resulting in the *Hirāk*.

3. No leadership, no organisation, no dominant ideology

Asef Bayat argues that the Arab uprisings were quite unlike the revolutions that swept across Latin America and Africa (and even the Middle East, if we include the Iranian Revolution), and unlike, even, the protest movements launched all over the world during the final decades of the 20th century, all of which had a strong ideological dimension (leftist, Marxist, nationalist, Arabist, and Islamist). He makes this point not only with respect to their methods of mobilization and organization and the meaning that they ascribed to themselves. He also argues that they were faster, spread further and were more intense, and that there was a total absence of ideology, coordination, unified leadership, or radicalism.⁴⁹ Both waves of Arab Spring uprisings are unique, despite their differences and diversity, in that there was no grand unifying ideology that dominated. Indeed, they were almost completely lacking in a clear ideology to start with. Bayyat describes them as a "quiet encroachment of the ordinary",⁵⁰ without ideology or leaders. He even describes them as "nonmovements", meaning that they "embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organizations."⁵¹

As such, protest action is no longer governed by beatific ideologies, whether secular or religious. During the Arab uprisings, action was taken by huge masses of people; there was no element of vanguardism, because participation was popular, vast, spontaneous, and independent, not led by any organisation and not taking inspiration from any leadership. This absence of a framing ideology was not necessarily in its favour. But it does not follow from the absence of a dominant ideology that these ideologies were completely absent. They were, in fact, present, but they did not determine the behaviour of the protesters and had only a weak influence. Vincent Geisser argues that the Arab popular uprisings were the product of a complex and multifaceted identity (national, Arab-Islamic, transnational),⁵² and that they were neither revolutionary nor radical, unlike the protest movements of the 20th century.⁵³

In this regard, the 2019 *Hirāk* is unexceptional when compared to the other Arab Spring uprisings. Young people with a trans-ideological position and – even, sometimes, hostile to ideology in general – and driven by a sense of marginalization, exclusion, non-recognition, and non-participation were the main driver of the protests. The digital space where protest mobilization began, and in which it continued to formulate and discuss its demands, may have had something to do with this. In any case, they felt that ideology, and all the polarization and mutual exclusion that comes with it, would smother the movement, particularly given that the traditional organization of public space was closely tied to political identities and conflicts between different ideological groups that despised one another. Given that they were driven by a sense of marginalization, exclusion, non-recognition, and non-participation, they would never accept the same ideologies that had given rise to these feelings, reproducing the same causes that pushed them to protest in the first place.

48 Hamadouche.

49 Asef Bayat, *Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), p. 2.

50 Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010) p. 14.

51 Ibid., p. 15.

52 Vincent Geisser, "Les protestations populaires à l'assaut des régimes autoritaires: Une 'révolution' pour les sciences sociales?," *L'Année du Maghreb*, no. 8 (2012), pp. 7 - 26.

53 Bayat, pp. 17 - 18.

Conclusion

This study has provided a preliminary reading of the 2019 *Hirāk* in Algeria, comparing it with the uprisings of the Arab Spring (both waves). We have used what we call the "Algerian exception narrative" as an analytical lens through which to conduct this comparison, distinguishing between the arguments that support this narrative and its limitations. We argued that deconstructing the Algerian exception narrative and discussing its limitations would allow us to take two steps forward simultaneously. On the one hand, it helped us understand the local specificity that distinguished the *Hirāk* from other Arab uprisings, and on the other to put it back in its context as part of a regional social phenomenon with far-reaching and transnational effects. This does not mean that the two contexts (the domestic and the regional) are equally significant to an analysis. When we are discussing the overall trajectory of the protests, the regional context (the origins of the protest movement, its development, and its structural causes, triggers, tools, and internal dynamics) is indeed more important. The domestic context, on the other hand, becomes more significant when we look at the ultimate fate of a protest movement. As noted in the introduction, this comparative reading provides a basis on which it is possible to build and deepen our understanding of the similarities and differences within the broader Arab Spring mobilization that the region has witnessed over the last ten years.

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