

Algeria: Essential Readings on the Hirak Uprisings of 2019

Wednesday 13 January 2021, by [DAVIS Muriam Haleh](#), [SERRES Thomas](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2020).

This collection of texts in English, Arabic and French is a first attempt to gather secondary sources discussing the revolutionary mobilization that started in Algeria in February 2019. Since then, the four-term President Bouteflika has been forced to resign and the longstanding Chief of Staff of the National People's Army (ANP), Ahmed Gaium Salah, died of a heart attack. Both have been replaced by longstanding figures in the regime as the Algerian bureaucratic-military machine has tried to maintain its control over the state by staging a democratic transition and a constitutional make-over.

Foreign and local observers were quick to announce the failure of the Hirak and denounce its lack of vision. It seems that Arab revolutions must succeed in their first six months. Otherwise, revolutionary forces are promptly declared to have been defeated.

Yet it is important to point out that revolutionary mobilizations are long-term transformative processes, especially when the revolutionaries refuse to use violence. In this sense, the Algerian Hirak is still a living reality, despite the pandemic, the repression, the stubborn resistance of bureaucratic-military apparatuses, and the tacit complicity of foreign powers (chiefly France and the United States). The referendum held on November 1 and organized by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, whose own legitimacy is shaky at the very best, failed to attract more than 23.7% of the electorate. In other words, the illegitimacy of the regime remains patent. More than ever, it is imperative to understand the trajectory of the Hirak in light of its contradictions and its resilience.

The Algerian Hirak is not only a relevant phenomenon for North African politics, it sheds light on the possibility for resistance in the Middle East and beyond. From Hong-Kong to Belarus, from France to the US, ferocious security-driven apparatuses have been able to contain radical discontent by drawing on fearmongering, police violence and laws of exception. Yet, as the Hirak demonstrates, coercion and catastrophism are not enough to produce hegemony. They merely reproduce a fragile status quo.

Articles Published On Jadaliyya:

Jadaliyya's Maghreb page has published numerous on the Hirak since the early days of the protests. Thanks to the contributions of Algerian scholars, journalists and citizens, we have notably been able to document various aspects of the revolutionary movement, including its different expressions across the territory.

First and foremost, with the support of external contributors (chiefly Hiyem Cheurfa and Abdelbaqi Ghorab), we published a two-part glossary (in English) presenting some of the terms and slogans used by Algerian *hirakiyyeen* (as well as their Moroccan counterparts) in their symbolic struggle to undermine the regime's legitimacy and reaffirm their claims. Some of the terms introduced include the famous "[Yetnahaw Ga'](#)" ("they should all be removed") or "[Fakhamat al Sha'b](#)" ("Their

excellency, the people,” a way to mock former president Bouteflika and celebrate the achievement of the Hirak).

The Maghreb page also featured articles presenting decentered perspectives on the Hirak, as alternatives to the usual focus on the major Northern cities such as Algiers and Oran. In a paper in Arabic written in July 2019, Nadjib Belhimer described the peaceful mobilization in the city of Jijel, a more socially conservative town situated 300km East of Algiers. As Belhimer puts it, the ideological divisions between secularists and “badissistes” did not prevent local activists from seeking unity. In the process, they struggled with – and tried to exorcise – the ghosts of the civil war. Despite an already worrying economic situation, those interviewed repeated their commitment to foster peaceful change. In a piece written in French and published a year later, in July 2020, Raouf Farrah depicted the tense situation at the Malian border, in the Saharan city of Tin Zaouatine. Analyzing the increased securitization of the border and the centrality of smuggling for local youth, he explained that unrest in the region should be seen as part of the broader struggle of Algerians for “active citizenship and the rule of law.”

The Maghrib page also featured English language articles that chronicled the mutations of the Hirak after the beginning of the pandemic. In May, [Youcef Oussama Bounab](#) analyzed the shifting strategies of repression and the transformation of the Hirak due to Covid-19. As activists continued their political struggle on the internet, by posting memes or denouncing the regime on Facebook, they faced a multifaceted and brutal crackdown by the regime in the name of protecting religion or state institutions. Online media and journalists were particularly vulnerable to the growing restrictions on public and political freedoms. The same month, [Hiyem Cheurfa](#) published a paper on the reception of Ramadhan comedy shows in this context of tightening censorship. The article studied the impact of the political and socioeconomic tensions on the shifting field of power that dictates what is considered to be appropriate on Algerian TV. Finally, in the month of August, Jadaliyya featured a piece by [Muriam Haleh Davis](#), in which she presents the newly founded Radio Corona International, a podcast available on Soundcloud. Reviving the format of the pirate radio, RCI kept the flame of the Hirak alive and continued the tradition of satirical humor in a country under lockdown. It also strove to capture the multiplicity of Algerian experiences and touch upon sensitive subjects such as the Dark Decade, all while testifying to the cultural and linguistic diversity of Algeria.

Academic Publications:

Robert Parks, “From Protesta to Hirak to Algeria’s New Revolutionary Moment,” *MERIP* 292, no. 3 (Fall/Winter 2019). ([English](#))

In this interview, Robert Parks presents a comprehensive overview of the first year of the Hirak. He situates the revolutionary mobilization in the context of the last years of Bouteflika’s rule, marked by a growing disaffection for institutional politics and an ever-present movement of protest, that served to articulate claims in the public space. The strength of this piece also comes from Parks’ ability to identify some of the Hirak’s core claims (transparent democratic practices, better management of state resources) and challenges (the prolonged nature of the crisis, the hardening position of the regime).

Thomas Serres, “Vous avez mangé le pays !” Revendications socio-économiques et politisation en Algérie (2011-2019), *Esprit* (Juin 2019). ([French](#) and [English](#))

Focusing on the decade prior the peaceful uprising of 2011, Thomas Serres studies the back-and-forth between political and socioeconomic claims. He argues that new forms of social movements

played a key role in the transformation of the Algerian repertoire of contention over the past ten years. Students and labor organizers developed new ways to occupy the public space, peacefully challenge security apparatuses, and appropriate the nationalist and revolutionary legacy for contentious purposes. Meanwhile, increasingly unpopular electoral processes favored the coalescence of these social movements, resulting in a form of conflictual politicization that was autonomous from - and even in opposition to - institutional politics.

Ratiba Hadj Moussa, "Youth and Activism in Algeria. The Question of Political Generations," *The Journal of North African Studies* (September 2019). ([English](#))

Ratiba Hadj Moussa studies forms of youth activism in the years prior to the uprising. This article focuses on four categories of activists that are located throughout the country: political opponents in the Mزاب valley, activists from the movement for the defense of the rights of the unemployed in Ouargla, members of a youth movement (RAJ) in Algiers, and online activists. Drawing on interviews with these actors, the survey demonstrates their role in promoting new forms of mobilization. These movements, Hadj Moussa argues, have often been misconstrued as non-political, even though they combat what the actors perceive to be a long-term political stagnation and create an "in-common" founded on justice and democracy. This piece is also powerful reminder of the centrality of the issue of intergenerational transmission in the advent of the Hirak.

Frédéric Volpi, "When Elections Hurt Democracy," *The Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 2 (2020): 152-165. ([English](#))

Frédéric Volpi looks at the election of December 2019 to understand the resilience of "electoral authoritarianism" in the region. Despite the victory of Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the historically low voter turnout clearly indicates that the regime is increasingly unable to produce legitimacy. At the same time, Volpi argues that the Hirak is proof of the Algerian society's commitment to democracy, evidenced by its grassroots and leaderless nature. While this form of mobilization appears to be limited in its ability to propose concrete institutional alternatives, and is thus at the mercy of allegedly democratic electoral processes that have been deprived from their initial function, the reforms and internal purges implemented by the regime are but a partial fix given its structural flaws.

Ziad Bentahar, "'Ytnahaw ga'!': Algeria's Cultural Revolution and the Role of Language in the Early Stages of the Spring 2019 Hirak," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* (July 2020). ([English](#))

This paper investigates the cultural dimension of the Hirak, and notably the linguistic stakes resulting from a complex configuration inherited from French colonization and the decolonial policy of Arabization. Ziad Bentahar notably argues that "In its ability to transcend social and economic divisions, and bring together large segments of the population behind a common political cause, the language question in Algeria today possesses federating power to an unprecedented extent since national independence in 1962." While this claim might seem ambitious, Bentahar convincingly shows that the popularity of the slogan "Ytnahaw ga'!" can be seen as a turning point, as it confers to a colloquial form of Arabic a status of national language to be proud of. This "dialect pride" has both local and regional implications, as Darija is a new element in a shared nationalist repertoire, but also a feature common to other countries in the Maghreb.

Giulia Fabbiano, "Le temps long du hirak : le passé et ses présences," *L'Année du Maghreb* 21 (2019): 117-130. ([French](#))

Giulia Fabbiano analyzes the resurgences of the past in the Hirak, and the evolving relationship

between the Algerian population and its history. She shows how the myths and silences that are the foundations of contemporary Algeria (colonialism, war of Independence, Civil war), the memories of the great uprisings (1954, 1954, 1963, 1988, 2001...), and multiple iconic figures (Ali la Pointe, Amirouche, Ben Badis) were appropriated to explain the present and think about the future. The article studies the forms of transposition, commemoration, and presentation of the past in the practices and discourses of political actors associated with the Hirak. As protestors challenge official narratives and introduce a rupture in temporality characteristic of a revolutionary movement, they simultaneously create a burgeoning imaginary for claim-making.

Faouzia Zeraoulia, "The Memory of the Civil War in Algeria: Lessons from the Past with Reference to the Algerian Hirak," *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 7, no. 1 (2020): 25-53. ([English](#))

In this article, Faouzia Zeroualia studies the place of the memories and experiences resulting from the Dark Decade in the current revolutionary mobilization. The firm commitment to remain peaceful is the most obvious consequence of this legacy, but Zeraoulia also mentions the general avoidance of religious slogans and collective prayers during the Friday marches. Moreover, she shows that Bouteflika's signature policy of "National Reconciliation" fueled the grievances because it prioritized a forgetfulness that benefited warring parties at the expense of justice and accountability.

Collective, "Hirak: L'Algérie en révolution," *Mouvements* 102, no. 2 (April 2020). ([French](#))

This special issue of the journal *Mouvements* is without any doubt one of the best collections of reflections on the Hirak, notably thanks to the efforts of Farida Souiah, whose multiple contributions (on the notion of foreign interference, and strategies employed in the face of censorship) shed a welcome light on important yet often overlooked dimensions of this mobilization. This issue is also rich of the various contributions of an ascending generation of scholars whose expertise is informed by a longstanding engagement with the field (Layla Baamara on the practices and discourses of young revolutionaries, Ghaliya Djelloul on the role of the Hirak in undermining male domination, Saphia Arezki on the history of the Army). Moreover, this special issue also features interviews and contributions by figures of Algerian society, such as the cartoonists Slim and Nime, the filmmaker Habiba Djahnine, and social scientists Cherif Dris and Belkacem Benzenine.

Essays, Opinion Pieces and Press Articles:

Brahim Rouabah, "Reclaiming the Narrative of the Algerian Revolt / Se réappropriier le récit de la révolte algérienne," *Foundation Frantz Fanon*, April 2019. ([French and English](#))

Brahim Rouabah argues that the Hirak is nothing short of a "forceful restatement of what it means to be human." This short and laudatory text was published in the early months of the movement and captures the hopes and promises of a revolution in the making. Invoking the heritage of Third-Worldism and anti-colonial Pan-Africanism, Rouabah highlights what he considers to be the central claims of the Hirak: social justice, radical democracy, popular sovereignty, anti-colonialism, principled politics and internationalism. Rouabah rejects liberalism as a source of inspiration for the movement, a provocative claim that warrants further discussion. In short, this paper is a powerful call to listen to and learn from the Hirak's peaceful radicalism.

Akram Belkaid, "Hirak," *Orient XXI*, November 2019. ([French](#) and [Arabic](#))

Journalist and essayist Akram Belkaid presents the origin of the word Hirak, its etymology in Arabic, and its use in different contexts prior to the uprising. He also explains the significance of the word in

the Algerian context, along with other epithets associated with the revolutionary movement.

Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Algérie, La nouvelle indépendance*, Paris: Seuil, 2019. ([French](#))

A more comprehensive presentation of this short essay by former diplomat and specialist of the Middle East Jean-Pierre Filiu is available [here](#). Written in reaction to the uprising, this book aims to understand the resurgence of a revolutionary political tradition that had been systematically undermined in Algeria, even before 1962. Filiu looks at the historical roots of the regime, the “supremacy of the political over the military,” the generational gap between younger Algerians and the sclerotic political elites, and at the regime efforts to instrumentalize potential tensions between progressists and Islamists. While all these themes are certainly familiar to those with a solid grasp of Algerian politics, the strength of this essay are in its pedagogical tone and Filiu’s genuine commitment to explain the desire of the Algerian people for autonomy and emancipation.

Omar Bendorra, François Gèze, Rafik Lebджаoui and Salima Mellah (eds), *Hirak en Algérie. L’invention d’un soulèvement*, Paris: La Fabrique, 2020. ([French](#))

This edited volume is another essential set of analyses on the Hirak, edited by a group of scholars and human-rights activists notably linked to the website [Algeria Watch](#) and the publishing house [La Découverte](#), both of which are notoriously hostile to the Algerian regime. The first part of the book focuses on the origins of the movement and insists on the necessity to adopt an historical perspective and to look at the impact of the civil war of the 1990s. The second part of the edited volume studies the Hirak itself, and is especially welcome in its attempts to decenter the Hirak by gathering testimonies from the cities of Constantine and Oran. The final chapters look at the strategies of the military to undermine the movement and reorganize its civil façade.

Collectif, *En défense du Hirak. Déconstruction du complotisme contre-révolutionnaire*, Genève: éditions du Hoggar, 2020. ([French](#))

This edited volume available for free online is a collective response to recent efforts to cast the Hirak as a neoliberal and neo-imperialist conspiracy. This work (like the previous one listed) was published by organizations that have denounced the violence and lies of the Algerian regime since the 1990s. Some of its contributors have been accused of presenting a pro-Islamist version of the country’s recent history. Undoubtedly, this volume sheds a benevolent light on the contribution of the Islamist-friendly movement Rachad to the current revolutionary movement (chapter 13). At the same time, the voices represented in this volume are quite diverse and often secular. It includes a preface from former Tunisian president Moncef Marzouki, chapters that are effective in debunking the conspiracy theories proposed by anti-Hirak figureheads, as well as convincing analyses of the support of Western states for the Algerian regime.

Ghania Moufok, “La fraternité mélancolique du Hirak,” *Mondafrique*, April 2020. ([French](#))

For more than two decades, journalist Ghania Mouffok has been one of the most acute observers of Algerian political life and social movements. In this piece published by Mondafrique, she describes the multiple languages of the Hirak, its most striking images and its contradictions. Between multiplicity and unanimity, spontaneity and predictability, she shows a movement where political and intellectual elites are unable to find their place as intermediaries between the regime and the masses. She analyzes the uprising of a society that had been deeply wounded by the transition from state-organized economy to rentier liberalism. Eventually, she sees in the Hirak a moment of unraveling, where all the groups and subjectivities that had been silenced under Bouteflika find a way to express themselves in the public space, and where new social and political projects might be able to flourish. Yet the condition for this blossoming is that commentators, politicians and activists

abandon the obsession with unity inherited from the war of independence.

Omar Benderra, “2020-2019 الجزائر بين الديمقراطية والفساد” / “Le pouvoir algérien face au Hirak: 2019-2020,” *Assafir al-arabi*, October 2020. ([Arabic](#) and [French](#))

Economist and former governor of the Bank of Algeria Omar Benderra explains that the only way out of the economic crisis faced by the country is to end a mode of governance based on military and bureaucratic control. Denouncing the superficial discourses that followed the election of Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Benderra argues that there is no “new Algeria,” but only a continuing state of corruption and incompetence, enabled by suffocating repressive apparatuses. Thus, he foresees an inevitable collapse of a system that will not be able to respond efficiently to the various socio-economic emergencies faced by the country (budget deficit, currency shortage, administrative disorganization, unemployment, harka). He concludes that the solution to this multi-faceted crisis cannot come from technical fixes implemented in an authoritarian fashion, but rather from the liberation of the people and its systematic involvement in the conceptualization of reforms that will aim to reorganize the state, the economy and the legal system.

Madjid Serrah, “الوجوه التي تميزت بها وجوه الحراك في تيزي وزو : الوجوه الخمسة” / “Tizi Ouzou: The Faces of the Hirak”, *Twala*, October 2020. ([Arabic](#))

This article describes the features and individuals involved in the Hirak in the city of Tizi Ouzou, one of the largest cities in the Berber region of Kabylia. This city saw large protest during the “Black Spring” of 2001, but these were led by political parties (the FFS or RCD) or Berberist movements (such as the citizen movement -or ‘arush- or the MAK). The Hirak, by contrast, has seen coalitions of civil society groups – including the Orange Jackets that work to ensure logistics and organization – but no political parties have directed the protests. The piece focuses on two individuals who use different tools – sports and art – to contribute to the Hirak. Rachid Awjoudi participated in a “Freedom Marathon,” which went from Tizi Ouzou to Algiers (110 kilometers), over four days. Mohamed Atallah has used art to energize the movement, creating a Facebook page known as “Hirak ad-Dar” where individuals could share art during the quarantine.

Nouri Driss, “الطبقة البورجوازية الجزائرية تحتاج الديمقراطية” / “Why does the Algerian Bourgeoisie Need Democracy,” *Twala*, October 2020. ([Arabic](#) or [French](#))

This article looks at the relationship between private capital and political power in Algeria. Noting that businessmen became a central and visible part of the Algerian regime in the last years of Bouteflika’s rule, Driss argues that Algerian capitalists are opposing democracy from structural reasons. He shows that, rather than seeking out competitive markets, Algerian capitalists have always seen the political field as key to their accumulation strategies. From the state led economy under Boumediene to the 1982 investment law, relationships with the “political power” remained key to any accumulation of wealth. In more recent decades, the country has invested hundreds of billions of dollars into recovery programs and infrastructures, which have opened new avenues for corruption. Thus, the practices of Algerian entrepreneurs have been conditioned by the structures of state capitalism: they aim to obtain privilege from the state, exemptions, or to serve political power. Driss claims that the alliance between private capital and political power has thus fought the market to preserve its benefits rather than to defend the country’s interests (fighting imperialism, protecting vulnerable classes, or combatting corruption). While Driss’ call to liberate the economy as a way to promote democracy is perhaps simplistic, this piece is nonetheless useful to think about the contradictions between state capitalism and liberal democracy.

Conclusion:

At the time of writing this article (13 December 2020), a frail President Abdelmajid Tebboune released a video from Germany on Twitter claiming that he is recovering from Covid and will be returning to Algeria within weeks. Yet this raises a number of fundamental questions: will the desire for stability, especially in light of the pandemic and looming economic crisis, encourage a normalization of Tebboune's Presidency? Will the Hirak be able to mount a unified – and organized – response to the regime's attempt to usurp the movement and to channel it into more acceptable reforms that effectively leave the status-quo intact? Will it be possible to effectively resist structural violence at a time of crisis when emotional – as well as material – resources are wearing thin? Undoubtedly, Algeria is a specific case of social mobilization with its own history and dynamics. Yet it is not the only country where we are witnessing a struggle between a genuinely new form of mass mobilization and the temptation to introduce a neoliberal restructuring using authoritarian methods. In this sense, the Hirak's continued mobilization for social justice and freedom of expression speaks to our current political moment, both in the MENA region and globally.

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