Algeria 2019: From the Hirak Movement to Elections

# Introduction

At the close of 2018, Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s fourth term as President was coming to an end, without any indications that the *de facto* power governing Algeria had any intention or desire to change how it led the country through the political crisis brought on by the president's deteriorated health and the accumulation of economic problems engendered by the collapse of oil prices. It was widely suspected that the president was in not fact ruling, the prevailing opinion being that someone behind the scenes ruled in his name, a reality disguised by an exaggerated glorification of the person of the President. The country descended into a state of despair unprecedented since the so-called “Black Decade,” the outcome of a perfect storm of corruption among statesmen and businessmen.

To maintain public acquiescence, the regime warned of any change leading Algeria into a disastrous situation akin to what the world sees today in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. This intimidation was combined with state’s economic and social investment in winning the poorest social strata’s support, reinforcing its status as a rentier regime ensuring its own survival through “social peace buying.”

In 2018, Algeria underwent economic difficulties with rapidly eroding exchange reserves and a severe budget deficit. Nevertheless, the regime persisted with futile approaches that only exacerbated the situation, relying on simple cyclical rents and oil revenues. When oil prices collapsed the regime fell into acute economic crisis, leading it to resort to imposing or increasing taxes on essential commodities, practicing a strict policy of austerity, afflicting the most fragile social groups, freezing development projects and employment opportunities, and preventing imports. It resorted to unconventional financing, printing banknotes without a basis for returns in production, thereby worsening the suffocating crisis and pushing inflation into two figures in less than two years. The ruling power lost the ability to continue providing comprehensive social services, the purchasing power of citizens collapsed, and the stage was set in place for a massive protest movement.

Whereas it wore out its citizenry with taxation, authorities worked to protect the privileges of the *nouveau rich,* allied to the class of state senior officials. In this context, authorities worked to promote the general impression that they could not be held accountable for the large and unrecoverable loans they had benefited from for projects that never actually saw the light of day, or without meeting the required standards. This was an underlying reason for the summer 2017 sequestration – against a background of his statements declaring the need to separate money from politics to bring back state’s loans from businessmen and major project contractors – of Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune who subsequently was elected President of the Republic, in December 2019.

The economic crisis reduced the authorities’ ability to provide comprehensive social services, sharpening public antipathy towards the status quo. Under a severe crisis and without any ability to manoeuvre, the authorities had made the underlying power structure in Algeria unable to agree a way forward to handle the crisis. They thus played for time by trumpeting the importance of continuity, even if through a sick president. With the regime continuing with the same worn out approaches used since 1992 and considering difficult economic conditions, the Algerian “Hirak” movement was launched on 22 February 2019, without clear leadership. Its demands were initially limited to rejection of the outgoing president’s nomination for a fifth term, but rose after a few weeks to include the dismissal of all “regime figureheads” and making the election commission independent, neutral, and a reflection of the people’s will.

This report examines the popular Hirak movement in Algeria, which overthrew President Bouteflika after twenty years in power. It reviews Hirak’s causes and most prominent stages. It then forecasts the outcomes of this movement, especially after the presidential elections that brought Tebboune to power, in December 2019.

The report is divided into six sections. The first reviews the response of the ruling establishment in Algeria towards the popular protests of 2019, as reflected in the positions of the three critical governing institutions: Presidency, Military, and Intelligence. The second examines the Algerian political and social forces’ responses to the Hirak movement and its *modus operandi* as a forceful agent that could play an important role in bringing the *de facto* authority to change its approach to the crisis.

The third section considers the all-important economic context of the popular movement, with the harsh economic situation driving and accelerating the pace of popular protests. The fourth section discusses the Amazigh issue in the Hirak and how the ruling authorities dealt with the issue, seeking to co-opt it in order to overcome the overall crisis posed by the protest movement. The fifth section of the report examines reasons underlying foreign avoidance of interference in Algerian affairs, and generally favouring a cautious “wait and see” approach. Section six seeks to assess the presidential election and review the current internal and external challenges facing Algeria.

# I. The Ruling Establishment's Position on the Protests

The power structure in Algeria remains exceptionally horizontal, due to the distribution of power across three main pillars, with no real hierarchy among them: the Presidency, the Army Staff Command, and the Intelligence apparatus. Power relations between the three actors fluctuate depending on the contexts, relationships, and agents defining the dominance of one institution over another at any juncture.[[1]](#footnote-1) This horizontal power structure is problematic for each of the three pillars, since it is not possible for critical decisions to be made except through collective consent among them; any pillar trying to monopolize power finds itself needing to absorb or neutralize the other two.

It might be argued that the 22February Hirak managed to bring into the open what had been an undeclared conflict concerning the succession of the ailing president between the three pillars of the Algerian system, and offered each a reason to give up the struggle for hegemony and seek a balance of power in their favour. In fact, the institution of the Army was the most powerful and influential in this regard. This section of the report reviews the positions regarding the Algerian political crisis adopted by the Army, the Presidency, and the Security/Intelligence services, a crisis that has been intensified by the Hirak movement.

### 1. Presidency of the Republic

On the eve of the emergence of the Hirak, the Presidency of the Republic was witnessing the absence of President Bouteflika, due to his illness on the one hand, and to his brother and adviser Said Bouteflika’s control over the reins of government on the other – an indirect and undeclared control that had no constitutional basis. *Politically*, the President’s office turned to mobilize some parties and civil society elites to cover up its own non-constitutionality; *in terms of security*, it sought to exploit the intelligence apparatus that President Bouteflika had previously restructured and attached administratively to the Presidency, while at the same time Said Bouteflika tried to seek the help of ex-military and intelligence leading officers – retired officers who still enjoyed influence in the army and intelligence services, such as General Mohamed Mediène and General Khaled Nizar; and *economically*, to form a network of essentially corrupt businessmen and entrepreneurs.

Initially, the Presidency relied on repression as a basic means of stifling the Hirak, but the Army’s stance, while initially doubting the Hirak’s motives and warning of the potential turning into chaos,[[2]](#footnote-2) really constituted a decisive factor in the push against any plan for a fifth presidential term, and prevented any repressive counter-Hirak intervention. Moreover, it prevented members of the security apparatus (police) from intervening. Noting that since police belonged to the Ministry of the Interior Affairs and being influenced directly by the Presidency, it had undergone a ‘purification’ process during the summer of 2018, with the sequestration of its leader (Major General Abdelghani Hamel) and all the National Security officersthat had a direct relationship with him.[[3]](#footnote-3) Moreover, the Army Chief of Staff pledged on more than one occasion to protect the Hirak movement and help uphold its peacefulness . Hence, the institution of the Presidency, instead of being in confrontation with the people, engaged into a confrontation with both the people and the Army, and was forced to manage a tense relationship with both.

This situation cast the Presidency into tense relationship with the Hirak movement and the Army at the same time. It tried to shift the balance of power to its advantage by making major changes to the Army leadership, but the latter pre-empted such moves by demanding the Presidency respond to the Hirak’s demands (prior to the Army arresting its most prominent figures accusing them of violating national security).[[4]](#footnote-4)

In addition, the widespread, traditional and unconventional, media coverage of the non-violent Hirak completely exposed the Presidency and restricted its ability to manoeuvre: the non-violent nature of the Hirak and extensive media coverage, even in public state media, presented the Hirak to the local and international public opinion as a disciplined, organized, and peaceful social movement that was confronted by an “unconstitutional power,” as the Army Chief of Staff had described them.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the end, the Presidency had few options for action.

The Presidency attempted to procrastinate through some formal steps: the dismissal of Bouteflika's campaign chief, Abdelmalek Sellal, for a phone call leak with Ali Haddad, a businessman close to the state powers, threatening violent suppression of the demonstrators; the designation of Lakhdar Brahimi and Ramtane Lamamra, two international diplomats, to open a space for negotiations domestically with the popular Hirak, and internationally with engage foreign powers, on any possible way out from the crisis; for the latter two men, taking part in media platforms in some kind of media campaign to refine the image of the Presidency and spotlight its desire for dialogue and change according to the available constitutional mechanisms; and finally the dismissal of Ahmed Ouyahia’s government and the appointment of a caretaker government instead. But all these efforts were unsuccessful in face of the movement's insistence on its positions, with its demands escalating from one week to another.

Consistently with its moves to contain the Hirak, the Presidency attempted to create a qualitative change in the Army’s command structure, as its ability to overcome the crisis depended on regaining control of the Army leadership. It held a number of secret meetings (according to what the Chief of Staff revealed in several of his speeches[[6]](#footnote-6)) between the presidency represented by the President's adviser and brother, presidential intelligence chief General **Athmane Tartag (**also k**nown as General Bachir Tartag)** and the retired intelligence chief, General Mohamed Mediène (also known as General Tawfiq), and some leaders of political parties – which led the Army leadership to rally around the Army’s Chief of Staff and call immediately (in a Military Staff meeting on March 30, 2019) for the activation of articles 7, 8, and 102 of the constitution, effectively abolishing any nomination of President Bouteflika and removing him permanently from power for inability to perform his duties, then restoring authority for the people to choose a president according to the available constitutional mechanisms.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Presidency and its allies lost their already fragile constitutional cover: individual members of the President’s office were detained for investigation and trial, and those who fled the country were prosecuted through international warrants.

### 2. The Army

To examine the Army's stance on the Hirak movement requires a return to the summer of 2018, and the sequestration of the then National Security Commander, General Abdelghani Hamel, a close associate of the President, due to his and his close associates’ involvement in smuggling huge quantities of cocaine.[[8]](#footnote-8) In what was clearly a qualitative change, this process stripped the presidency of its central and local repressive arms, especially since the dismissal of General Hamel was followed by the broad purification of all the security cadres he installed to build a strong network of allegiance to the Presidency that could be relied upon during any political crisis in the country.

Immediately afterwards, the Army Command launched a broad and radical process of change in the leadership of the Armed Forces, the military regions, and Defence Ministry’s senior officials. *El Djeich* review, the mouthpiece of the People's National Army, qualified the change at the time as simply routine transfers, promotions, and job rotation;[[9]](#footnote-9) but politically, it was analysed as a step aimed at weakening the influence of the Presidency within the Army, since all of the dismissed high-ranking officers were “accused” of allegiance to President Bouteflika, with some of them also seen to still be loyal to retired army leaders who served during the “Black Decade,” such as General Khaled Nezzar and General Toufik.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This process achieved two strategic goals: stripping the presidency of any influence within the Army and National Security apparatus and pulling together senior Chiefs of Staff around Army Commander Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Ahmed Gaïd Saleh. In this way, the balance of power came to favour the Army and everything necessary to dismantle the President’s faction, which had attempted to infiltrate it and change its leadership, was a legal and political cover.

Early in Hirak’s ascension, the Army's position was cautious and hesitant. In his speech to army cadres on February 26, 2019, the Army Chief of Staff described the participants in the movement as “deceived adventurers led by suspect entities along unsafe paths with potentially catastrophic consequences.” However, he soon retracted this statement, acknowledging the legitimacy of the popular demands.[[11]](#footnote-11)

This shift in the Army's position marked a critical juncture for both the Presidency and the Hirak. For the presidency, it signalled its ultimate isolation before an announcement of the cessation of the electoral process that had been scheduled for April 18, 2019, and of declaration of the vacancy of the Presidency office as a preliminary preparation for the President’s dismissal. As for the Army stance towards the Hirak, despite the Army's protestations, made through speeches of the Chief of Staff and editorials of The *El Djeich* review that officers have no political ambitions – an analysis of their content clearly suggests an endeavour to absorb the Hirak to exit from the crisis and guarantee Army’s influence within the hierarchy of political power.

The military establishment's wish to contain the Hirak movement appear in its praise of the movement’s self-discipline and its focus on specific demands the Army considered legitimate and achievable, in contrast to other demands it considered impossible to meet (as they fall outside the constitutional path available to exit from the crisis post Bouteflika's resignation).[[12]](#footnote-12) To a large extent, the Army leadership succeeded in creating new polarizations within the Hirak, abandoning the traditional polarization between secularists and Islamists encouraged by political power in earlier stages. With the intensifying sharpness of tone in the Army leadership a new polarization emerged within the Hirak between on the one hand the supporters of the Army's position, later known as the “Novemberist-Badisist” (referring to the reformist Abdelhamid Ben Badis and the 1 November Revolution of Liberation manifesto), and, on the other, those characterized as “loyal to foreign actors” (to the former colonial France in particular), known as the “Zouave” in reference to local recruits in the French colonial military during the early occupation campaign in Algeria.

This polarization undermined the popular movement's insistence on sweeping change, the Army having rejected – as an existential threat to the state – any such thing. While the momentum of the Hirak persisted from one week to another in terms of the numberof its participants; its unity, coherence and insistence on its demands diminished as differences began to arise between the demonstrators. Some marches witnessed the expulsion of participants due to misgivings regarding the extent and/or veracity of their affiliation with the “patriotic” Novemberist-Badisist trend.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The “Issue of the Flags” surfaced later to re-ignite the dispute between the Army leadership and an important segment of the Hirak. Unexpectedly, after seventeen weeks of popular marches, the Chief of Staff announced in a public speech that he had instructed the security forces to prevent the raising of any flag or banner besides the official national flag. Amazigh activists had by that time become accustomed to raising a flag of their own asserting their identity and took this as an action hostile to them and their Amazigh identity.[[14]](#footnote-14) While this did not lead to a revival of Arab-Amazigh polarization, it re-opened the debate on identity issue of identity in Algeria.

In a renewed attempt to contain the Hirak, the Army leadership limited its demands to two main issues: politically, to disrupt the progress of the fifth term elections and dismiss President Bouteflika; and economically, to fight corruption. The Hirak’s core demand was comprehensive change, and it was led by new faces not traditional remnants of Bouteflika's regime. This point represented the essence of the tension between the Army and the Hirak. The Army wanted reforms to be done through existing constitutional institutions, within the framework of the active constitution which was amended three successive times by President Bouteflika; whereas the Hirak sought comprehensive change, with new mechanisms and institutions formed by the Hirak itself and representing a decisive break with the previous regime. However, the Hirak neither offered a future perspective nor a leadership alternative to govern the state in a period of transition. Historically there has never been a democratic transition in which all the elites of the existing system were eliminated.

### 3. The Intelligence Services

The Intelligence service is central to the calculations of power relations in Algeria. It is an agency that both spies *on* and combats espionage *within* the army. It additionally plays a role of “political police” which controls parties, trade unions, the media, and civil society organizations, and generally controls the state bureaucracies. It represents the system’s backbone, ceaselessly surveilling regime opponents to contain and neutralize them, frustrating any internal or external threats that could threaten the regime’s survival[[15]](#footnote-15) – this is what drives many to consider it the *de facto* power in Algeria.

President Bouteflika is a member of the “Oujda Group” and the historic fifth region of the national liberation revolution, before being transferred to the “Mali Front.”[[16]](#footnote-16) He was well aware of the importance of the Intelligence apparatus in the political power balances in Algeria, as he experienced the process of building up this apparatus under Abdelhafid Boussouf during the revolution, and the efforts of President Houari Boumediene to isolate Boussouf and take it over himself. He was thus keenly aware, from the moment he was brought to the Presidency, that if he wanted to continue ruling, he had to appease the Army; but if he wanted to be freed from any military dominance on the government, he would have to act to restructure the Intelligence apparatus and submit it to the will of the presidential institution.

President Bouteflika was unable to do this at the beginning of his rule, with circumstances being unconducive during the war on terror – a campaign led by the Army with the participation of the Intelligence services. Bouteflika avoided crossing swords with the Army throughout his first and second terms. At the end of his third term, however, he began restructuring the Intelligence service and placing it under the Presidency’s control instead of the National Defence Ministry.[[17]](#footnote-17)

For its part, the army leadership began to reconsider the growing strength of the Intelligence apparatus with its central role in the war on terror, and began to take limiting its role more seriously. The terrorist attack on the gas field in Ain Amenas at the beginning of January 2016, known as “Operation Teguentourine,” gave the Army’s leadership an advantageous opportunity to change the balance of power for its interest, as it jumped to hold the Intelligence service entirely responsible for the attack and the outcomes of its unprofessional management of the situation.

“The Army leadership used the attack to rebalance power relations between the Chief of Staff and the Information and Security Department (which had gained influence throughout all state institutions, including the Army, thanks to the severe war waged against terror in the 1990s). General Bachir Tartag and M’henna Djebbar were sent to retirement, and Colonel Fouzi, whose task was to control the media, was dismissed. The authority of the Judicial Police in the Information and Security Department was strictly limited. Such measures indicated that the Information and Security Department had lost the political authority it used to exercise against the other centres of power, with the advent of reduced terrorist violence.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Then came the presidency’s endeavours at the beginning of Bouteflika’s fourth term to shift the power balance against the Army in its favour, as the President sent Intelligence Chief, General Toufik, to ​​retirement, replacing him with retired General Toufik, at the same time terminating the Information and Security Department, and replacing it with a Security Department consisting of two directorates re-attached to the Presidency.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, these measures seemed to be taken too late, since they coincided with the President’s illness and inability to carry out his duties. Perhaps all that this new apparatus succeeded in doing, after being restructured by Bouteflika, was to continue deluding domestic and international public opinion that the President was still able to perform his presidential duties throughout the fourth term, despite his grave illness.

This decision had weakened the intelligence apparatus**.** As a military force, it was affiliated with the Army leadership; but as a presidential apparatus (directly under the command of the Presidency), it followed the orders of a retired General in a civilian suit owing allegiance to the President. Besides, most of its officials were still loyal to the retired General Toufik. Hence, this apparatus, after the outbreak of the Hirak, appeared incohesive, and its ability to influence declined – until the Army Chief of Staff reorganized it and linked it to the National Defence Ministry, while neutralizing the opposition and its perspective of the post-Bouteflika era. Said Bouteflika, General Tartag and General Toufik were arrested along with General Nezzar’s prosecution through international warrants. The Intelligence service thus returned to its origin as a component of the Army.

# II. The Attitudes and Conduct of Political and Social Forces in the Protests

The Hirak movement in Algeria surfaced after twenty years of President Bouteflika's rule, with his rise to power marking the end of an era following the revocation of the 1992 elections in the country. Despite the reservations expressed by the political elites on the way in which Bouteflika returned to power, he was accepted a something resembling an emergency escape from the crisis threatening the very existence of the state. However, Algerians took to the streets to demand the country get rid of the “unconstitutional” forces (as they had become called) that had plunged the country into a state of political, economic and social corruption during the twenty years of Bouteflika's rule.

### 1. The Political Map in Algeria before the Popular Movement

In the period 1962-1988, Algeria lived under a semi-totalitarian military regime, with the ruling party, *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), only providing a legitimizing façade. The political opposition, under the pressure of oppression, resorted to secret and exile-based activity, with consequentially minimal influence on political life, but it nevertheless succeeded in developing secret opposition networks divided along two main lines – leftist and Islamist.

After the October 1988 protests, Algeria experienced a true democratic political movement for a short period until the beginning of 1992 with the emergence of a pluralistic political map including nationalists, Islamist, liberals, and leftists – all figuring within numerous political parties. However, after the military coup of 1992 and violent repression of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS), Algeria returned to totalitarian authoritarianism, albeit shifting from a one-party system to one of a “formal pluralism” or “competitive authoritarianism,” as per comparative politics terminology. The ruling authority relied on a set of core mechanisms to form this official political map, namely:

#### a. Manufacturing Parties

The *Rassemblement National Démocratique* (RND) represents the most striking example of party manufacturing; created in a only a few months to exert pressure on the FLN after its failure in the 1991 elections, and to create an alternative political force, especially after signs of a shift in its thinking during the era of Abdelhamid Mehri, in opposition to the 1992 coup. It won an overwhelming majority in the 1997 legislative elections, prompting Abdallah Djaballah, the head of the *Mouvement de la Renaissance Islamique* (An-Nahḑa), to comment that RND “was born with moustaches.”

#### b. Security Surveillance

Due to the security situation in the country, the Intelligence service was granted authority to watch all party cadres. Nominations for elections were not approved until after rigorous security investigations brought about by the Intelligence service. The announced pretext for such investigations was to maintain security and prevent former FIS cadres from returning to political life from which they had been excluded since the coup and dissolution of the party in 1992.

#### c. Rentier Distribution

After 1992, the de facto power managed to create a presidential alliance that would make it recover its political legitimacy lost as a result of the coup, the alliance sometimes expanded to encompass all political spectra despite their contradictions, and at other times narrowed to just the two core parties, FLN and RND. The entanglement of some parties at the vanguard of the government system was meant to contain them by implicating them in the sharing of rents, for a practice that became part of structural corruption after Bouteflika came to power.

#### d. Penetration and Fragmentation

This is the mechanism that targeted parties that refused to comply with the de facto power’s agenda. Their organizational structures were penetrated and fragmented from the inside, through the creation of dissident sub-parties known as “correctives”; groups rebelling against the party’s existing leadership to correct the party’s path in a project usually aiming to displace the leadership. If unable to do so, the effort one to split and form new parties, increasing the fragmentation of the parties and the diminution of their power. The most prominent examples of penetration and fragmentation are the An-Nahda Movement founded by Djaballah, and the *Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix* after its founder, Mahfoud Nahnah, passed away. The two parties witnessed an almost cellular division, together generating at least seven new political formations in the process.

Most political formations, even existing trade unions and parties, maintained the same leadership established at their inception in the early 1990s. As for the parties that managed to change their leadership hierarchies, most of them were done through the “correctives,” with most parties known by their founders, and not their official designations.

At the end of Bouteflika's rule, the public opinion in Algeria had concluded that the political community could not be relied upon to achieve the desired change. Thus, at the eruption of the Hirak movement, the political community, with its varied forces, became the target of the main slogan of the demonstrators, “*yatnah’haw gaa*” (“they all must leave” in the Algerian dialect).

### 2. The Stands of Political Parties and Forces

#### a. Loyalty Parties

The Hirak movement not only demanded the loyalist parties leave, it further called for accountability and punishment, with some people insisting on their permanent sequestration from political life, so that the infection of corruption is not passed down to the post-Bouteflika era. Further weakening the position of most of the symbols of these parties, (who generally ceased to appear publicly) was their arrest and the pre-trial investigations that were undertaken. Initially, party leaders were abandoned once found to have been involved in corruption cases, as occurred with Djamal Ould Abbas (Secretary-General of FLN) and Ahmed Ouyahia (Secretary-General of RND), among others. Later, attempts were made to save these parties by choosing new leaders, but they remained nonetheless rejected by the Hirak, and were also excluded by the de facto power that had begun to call for founding a new Algeria.

#### b. Opposition Parties

The position of the opposition parties did not greatly differ from loyalist parties, as the weakness, penetration and fragmentation they experienced during Bouteflika’s era transformed them into some form of spiritless structures. The Hirak movement came as a total surprise to them, and quickly overtook them and their initiatives as well. These parties conducted many get-togethers ending up in forums and coalitions attempting to suggest solutions to the political crisis the President initially created by refusing to step down from power despite his inability to rule since 2013. The de facto power did not pay these initiatives the slightest attention, despite the fact that some parties went as far as to call upon the military to intervene directly, isolate the president, and assume the leadership of the country for a transitional period ending with presidential elections, as MSP did in 2018. On the other hand, the Hirak's insistence on rejecting the existing ideological dividing lines effectively deprived the opposition parties of the ability to contain the Hirak and proclaim their leadership. These parties had no choice but to bless the Hirak and praise its peacefulness, self-organization and the legitimacy of its demands as well; to invite their own militants to take part in the protests and to prepare for the stage ahead. The Hirak’s popular appeal across parties’ dividing lines and its refusal to be framed and represented was in fact the “secret” of its power at its first phase. However, it also allowed the movement to soon turn into some kind of populism that totally rejected political elites – a tendency non-democratic forces could easily exploit; for democracy cannot be built without political elites that represent distinct positions and interests.

#### C. Civil Society

Since its independence, civil society in Algeria has been always utilized in the favour of the ruling power. Social and professional groups and trade unions are allowed to function only within the regime’s orbit of power. As a result, most of these organizations remained loyal to the establishment and constituted the main actors within support committees that provided the political power with a popular base to strengthen its position against internal and external opponents. Nevertheless, some civil organizations did “swim against the tide” of the de facto power, and engaged in the Hirak movement, supporting it with independent marches organized on days of the week other than Fridays which were dedicated to the Hirak. Teachers' unions, lawyers, judges, and student organizations conducted limited marches and strikes in support of the Hirak and its demands.

# III- The Economic Context: Dynamics and Dilemmas

Talking about economic factors within the Algerian popular movement raises questions on the status of the economy and its various problems within the context of the demands and slogans of the Hirak on the one hand, and the Hirak’s consequences – positive and negative – on the economic conditions of the country on the other hand. It also raises questions concerning the economic approaches necessary to take advantage the Hirak’s momentum regarding the anticipated outcomes of its actions, and finally, regarding perspectives and responses among experts, observers and actors, according to their political positions and their stances towards the popular movement.

To begin with, it should be noted that the state controls the Algerian entire economy, and despite the tourism, agriculture and service sector capacities, the country’s economy is still largely dependent on oil and gas, which poses great challenges. The Algerian economy had started to deteriorate, with official statistics confirming that one of four citizens under the age of thirty is unemployed, constituting about 70 percent of the country's population.[[20]](#footnote-20) In spite of the available agricultural resources, Algeria still imports many essential consumables, such as wheat, and tourism in the country does not match the potentials and resources available. The oil sector has suffered from corruption-related problems, excessive bureaucracy, and the consequences of the Hirak itself on the economy.

Exacerbating the situation was the government's reckless economic policies with uncertain outcomes. Financial inflation took a toll on the economic and social conditions in the country with a high inflation ratio and the increasingly collapsing value of the national currency.[[21]](#footnote-21)

After Bouteflika’s resignation, investigations began into a number of corruption cases, resulting in arrests of influential officials in various sectors, a move that had economic repercussions; the imprisonment of a number of businessmen led to a paralysis in the performance of more than five major food, automobile, and public infrastructure industrial complexes (Isaad Rabrab’s *Cevital*; Mahieddine Tahkout’s *TMC*; Ali Haddad’s *ETRHB*; Kouninef Brothers’ *KouGC*; and Said Oulmi *SOVAC*). The owners of these complexes faced difficulties paying the wages of thousands of workers and processing orders to import raw materials, their bank accounts were frozen due to judicial follow-ups.[[22]](#footnote-22)

As the Hirak movement developed and attracted the support of different political, professional, social, and economic sectors, the list of demands grew beyond the mere rejection of Bouteflika's fifth term to incorporate various political, social and economic demands. Evoking a set of slogans and speeches that protesters created invoking the Algerian soil, it can be said that there were two basic economic demands that were vigorously advanced: fighting corruption[[23]](#footnote-23) and transition from the oil-rentier economy to a productive, developed, and open economy.

The demand to fight corruption was of great priority on the protesters’ list, reflecting widespread awareness throughout many institutions dedicated to the phenomenon and its negative consequences on economic development, along with the general conviction that holding those indicted in corruption cases to account and recovering looted funds can constitute a new beginning for building a strong and competitive economy, as a precondition for renewed prosperity and development.

Furthermore, many assert the need to liberate the economy from its dependency on oil, by strengthening the country's other neglected and unexploited economic sectors, whose contribution to gross domestic product remains minimal, if not completely non-existent. They consider that what has been known for decades as the oil economy has been the basis of the country’s political problems and that Algeria can best secure its economic future by developing industry, agriculture and tourism without depending so heavily on oil revenues.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The ongoing Hirak movement, despite its peacefulness, reflected the protesters’ acute dissatisfaction with the extent to which their demands had been met. Algerian and foreign investors believed this would negatively affect foreign investments looking for stable and safe spaces, and that the regular protests would negatively impact the economic growth of the country.[[25]](#footnote-25)

In the midst of the ever-growing political, social and economic demands, two viewpoints dominated: the first was pessimistic, arguing that the Algerian economy is heading towards a deep crisis in the absence of a specific strategic vision. The second, which was less pessimistic, asserted the state’s capability to overcome the various problems, providing that it adopted rational policies advanced by competent specialists;[[26]](#footnote-26) while others expressed serious concerns about the future, “given the economic and social legacy left by the existing authorities, such that the next economic decisions were to be wise and sober, otherwise the economy was doomed to collapse.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

The Algerian economy can no longer develop and diversify its sources of revenue without encouraging free enterprise with progressive tax policies, investment in agriculture, industry and tourism, and external economic openness, albeit keeping vital sectors such as oil and gas, education, and health in the hands of the state.

# IV- The Amazigh question

The Hirak gained its strength from its ability to transcend traditional alignments and neutralize traditional binaries (secular/Islamic, Arab/Amazigh, Arabic/Francophone), in favour of a strong unit adopting one ideology, that of the people facing a corrupt political and economic system. This unity baffled the actual *de facto* power, deprived of the traditional possibilities for manoeuvring and of pre-conceived justifications of oppression. The movement no longer stood, as before, in front of one group of people while antagonizing others – as occurred in the 1990s. Now the confrontation was simply the de facto power standing against the people united and, ultimately, it cannot repress the entire people.

The de facto power attempted to break this impasse by trying to dismantle the unity of the Hirak movement and revive traditional binaries. Among the most important of these were those based on the Amazigh-Amazigh/Arab polarization, and it popularized the existence of an alliance between a “Badisist”[[28]](#footnote-28) force claiming to be linked to the reformist movement and having Islamic roots, and another “Novemberist”[[29]](#footnote-29) one that claims to be linked to the nationalist trend resisting colonialism, with the two forming an alliance to confront “a hostile plot against the nation” led by a foreign force “historically hostile to Algeria” allied with a local “Zouavist”[[30]](#footnote-30) group claiming links with the Amazigh movement.

The dispute over the Amazigh flag was just a symbolic battle; it was prohibited during the Hirak by direct order from the Chief of Staff who gave strict instructions to the security forces on 19 June 2019 to confront anyone raising any flag other than the national flag during the marches.[[31]](#footnote-31)

### The Historical Roots of the Amazigh Question

The Amazigh issue in the Maghreb is historically rooted in the French colonial era, when the so-called *Dahir Berbère* law, issued in the year 1930, recognizing the right of the Amazighs of Morocco not to submit to French law and Islamic norms, and instead to rely on their local customs for the conduct of their lives, was approved by French colonial authorities. However, the law was strongly opposed by the Amazighs of Morocco themselves, as they rejected France as the protector of their traditions, and they considered this law to be an attempt to separate and isolate them from their immediate Arab/Islamic environment. This colonial law, through which the occupier sought to divide the Moroccan society, underpinned the rise of the Amazigh issue as existential and a subsequent point of contention in the national movement. In the 1940s, the Algerian People's Party (*Parti du Peuple Algérien – PPA*) witnessed an internal conflict, known as the “Berber crisis.” This conflict was the result of the rejection on the part of some of its members from the tribal region of the party and the position of its leader, Mesali El-Hadj who defined Algeria as part of the Arab and Islamic nation. Some iconic Amazigh party members protested the position taken by Mesali El-Hadj who has been always considered as the “father” of the Algerian national movement, in which the Amazigh dimension of the Algerian nation’s identity was ignored; they established themselves as an opposition force demanding inclusion of this dimension in the Algerian nation’s ideology. The party leadership rejected the demand, and expelled these Amazigh members, replacing them with new tribal figures whose views aligned with the party line and leadership.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Whatever one’s stand regarding this historical narrative, such historical theses reveals three constant levels of the Amazigh issue that have contributed to creating and feeding the Arab-Amazigh polarization in North Africa, used as needed in different ways:

1. Since initially setting foot in Algeria, the French colonizer adopted a divide and rule strategy, since confronting a fragmented nation divided among the Amazigh and the Arab would be easier than facing a united and homogenous one. French historiographers established what has become known as the “Amazigh myth”, which was the result of French political utilization of cultural and ethnic differences between the various components of the Algerian society – not to develop one side at the expense of the other, but to create such poles in the first place, then isolate both of them so as to facilitate their subsequent taming. Consequently, colonialism worked with all its might to sharply polarize two inseparable components of the Algerian nation and the peoples of North Africa in general. Subsequently such a dichotomy emerged and created conflict between the people of one homeland over both very real and/or imagined ethnic and cultural differences.
2. A great portion of the Amazigh were positive about this polarization given the conditions in which they lived under the Ottoman authority, with a group of activists taking up the issue with an extremism that transcended even that of the French colonizers themselves, which increased the polarization and mutual mistrust.
3. The reaction of the Arabist ideological groups was itself extremist. Until today, they did not oppose the colonial tactics to divide the one people of a one nation. Instead, they resisted any idea of a possibility to accept ethnic and cultural diversity within the nation, giving free justifications to reinforce the position and weight of extremists amongst Amazigh activists.

### 2. Between Politicization and Securitization

After independence, the Amazigh issue took on alarming dimensions, giving rise to an extremist call for secession and independence.[[33]](#footnote-33) The Amazigh issue became politicized, with its demands no longer confined to reviving cultural heritage and other linguistic and cultural demands. Rather, it addressed discrimination practiced against the Kabyle region’s people in terms of development and wealth distribution, even if the region was not alone in its under-development throughout the country. In fact, all regions of Algeria suffer to varying degrees from under-development, with southern Algeria perhaps the most seriously so.

Moreover, the Amazigh issue took on cross-border dimensions, after the *Congrès Mondial Amazigh* (CMA)was introduced, in France, with the claim to represent the Amazigh throughout North Africa and the Canary Islands. CMA adopted the flag of Great Tamzgha, as a unified cultural banner symbolizing the Amazigh of North Africa.[[34]](#footnote-34) This banner became a symbol of the Amazigh cultural and political identity, and raising it alongside or instead of the national flag evoked suspicions of foreign manipulation, which the de facto power in Algeria used to dismantle the unity of the Hirak movement.

Such utilization of the Amazigh flag transformed the Arab-Amazigh polarization into to an Amazigh–nationalist polarization, giving rise to suspicion and mistrust among the Hirak’s protestors, such that even if the de facto power did not succeed in completely fragmenting Hirak’s unity, it did succeed in neutralizing an important sector of its actors. The latter, even if they refrained from expressing outright opposition to the Hirak, adopted a position of negative anticipation that gave some precedence to the ruling power that took upon itself responsibility to accompany proposed solutions to this crisis, since its eruption.

Outside observers would not be mistaken to think that the most extreme rejection of dialogue and reforms proposed by the Army leadership might belong to extremist groups of Amazigh activists, with agendas that go beyond the democratization of Algeria.

# V- The Absence of Regional and International Intervention in the Algerian Protests

Since the beginning of the Hirak, most international and regional powers remained silent regarding events in Algeria, and were quick to declare their non-interference in the country’s internal affairs, particularly as statements and reports appeared to indicate a role being played by one country or another. This international and regional response to the Algerian crisis seems exceptional compared with other Arab countries that experienced protest movements in which external factors were a key variable in determining their trajectories, whether by political, military, or financial means.

Factors underlying the approach of international and regional powers to the political scene in Algeria include:

### 1. Non-Violence

How security forces dealt with protesters displayed clear flexibility, unlike the violent response of security forces witnessed in the Sudanese protests, where live ammunition was used to disperse demonstrators, leading to dozens of deaths. This approach provided the regime with a measure of immunity from external intervention in response to repression and violation of human rights, so that efforts to internationalize the Algerian issue failed. The Algerian regime won the battle for public opinion both locally and internationally, at least in terms of dealing with protesters.

### 2. Historical Experience and Collective Memory

Algerians are very sensitive to foreign intervention given their 132 year revolutionary struggle against the French colonizers: extreme sensitivity persists in the Algerian collective imagination and popular culture regarding everything foreign. Rejection of external interference by all Algerians can be seen in protester slogans affirming that what is taking place is an internal issue concerning Algerians alone: “No to foreign intervention,” “No Emirates in the land of the Martyrs,” “No to France, No to the UAE,” and so forth.

### 3. Proactive Steps and Diplomacy

Immediately after the Hirak movement got underway, the authorities in Algeria rushed to contain the responses of external players and send former Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra on a tour focused on reassuring international capitals that Algerian situation was under control, and that the political system could overcome the crisis. Given the after-effects of the intervention in Libya, countries needed no convincing, and France was keenly aware of the antipathy of Algerian public opinion against any statement it might make.

### 4. Adherence to Constitutional Legality

In demanding President Bouteflika’s resignation, the military establishment was in line with the protest movement’s call for the activation of Article 102 of the constitution, and so evaded international sanction; this was tantamount to a military coup on the part of the central government, which also insisted on maintaining the constitutional framework through the assumption of the Presidency by the Senate (Madjlis El Ummah) State’s President AbdelKader Bensalah, quietly ignoring popular demand for his departure along with the Prime Minister Noureddine Bedoui. Such pre-emptive steps closed the door permanently on possible foreign powers’ justifications at the United Nations for putting any pressure on the military establishment.

### 5. The Military Establishment’s Victory

Generally, foreign powers allied themselves with the military establishment as the actor most able to resolve differences effectively and in their interest, by virtue of its expansive experience in power, associated with the establishment of the Algerian national state in the Arab region. The Army, represented by the Chief of Staff, managed to contain the crisis, and thwarted plans of the presidency and the intelligence apparatus to overthrow the Chief of Staff, Lieutenant-General Gaïd Salah. After the President’s brother and former intelligence chiefs were jailed, along with businessmen, ministers, and former prime ministers, these factions and allied political forces became weakened and lost the initiative. Many acted quickly to update their loyalties, leaving external powers with few options to intervene in and influence the Algerian issue. The military establishment refrained from adopting a radical discourse, or entering into direct confrontation with international powers, including France that was accused of supporting the coup plot against the Chief of Staff through its intelligence apparatus. Sanctions and follow-ups were limited to Algerians, notably the military attaché of the Algerian embassy in Paris.

### 6. National Opposition

The Algerian opposition is distinguished by commitment and patriotism stemming from the Algerian history of anti-colonialist struggle. Reflected in the speeches of Islamic and secular parties alike, these also featured in the statement of the Algerian opposition on March 8, 2019, rejecting “foreign interference in any form,” after a meeting of 15 political parties, trade unions and national figures in support of the Hirak. In many countries, opposition often calls on assistance from external powers, as in Yemen, Syria and Libya. The Algerian opposition appears to have been fully aware that summoning foreign powers would deal a decisive blow to the country’s national security philosophy.

### 7. Algerian Foreign Policy Tradition

Political power in Algeria upholds the principle of sovereignty through emphasizing that it does not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, a basic principle of Algerian foreign policy, enabling it to play a diplomatic role in many international crises, as an acceptable, neutral and reliable mediator, both between and within countries. In the cases of Mali, Tunisia, and Libya, Algeria insisted on peaceful tools and dialogue as the sole option for a settlement, refraining from excluding any party, or siding with one against another other entirely, maintaining clear objectives limited to maintaining peace and stability, in a way that limited its own vulnerability to security risks. It rejects foreign military intervention as a leading important cause of instability. Such diplomatic traditions leads Algerian decision-makers to avoid soliciting external assistance to achieve internal goals, and given the previously mentioned sensitivity of the Algerian people, to do so would be political suicide for anyone attempting it, or even hinting at a desire to do so.

### 8. The Arab Spring Experience

Many failed to assess that the Arab protest movements launched in 2011, expected to be merely temporary demonstrations that could be put down by government regimes with years of experience within days or weeks. Many countries were quick to affirm their support for these regimes, especially in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt. But events proceeded in another direction completely and placed these countries’ diplomacy in stalemate, forcing them to reassess their positions and change their strategy to one characterized by caution and reservation, waiting for conditions to become more stable and proceeding gradually before making any final decisions. Several years since their first experience, foreign powers do not wish to make the same mistakes and have remained silent, while confirming their support for the Algerian people and their demands for change.

# VI- Presidential Elections and Future Challenges

The 12 December 2019 presidential elections took place amid sharp polarization in Algerian public opinion between supporters of the military establishment's call for elections as the best solution to the current political crisis, and opponents of elections on grounds that the conditions of their organization were not conducive to fairness and transparency. Particularly problematic was the continuation of the government of Prime Minister Noureddine Bedoui, appointed before President Bouteflika resigned, who stood accused of manipulating earlier elections and who continued with making arrests among the Hirak protesters for peaceful opposition to the elections – which amounted to arrests for political opinion. Rejectionists of the elections argued additionally that it is not feasible to organize elections given the regime’s systematic restrictions on independent media. On the other hand, supporters of the elections argued that holding them on time did not contradict the spirit of the Hirak movement. In addition to the achievements realized through the elections, foremost among which are the restoration of the public space and the ability to politically influence the choices of the authority and the establishment of a fair election commission, the Hirak is able to and expected to continue to exert pressure on the governing authority for deeper and more comprehensive reforms.

The Hirak’s failure, or unwillingness, to appoint representatives to negotiate with the de facto power on the conditions for true democratic transition, as well as candidates of popular consensus to run in the presidential elections against people considered to be remnants of the Bouteflika regime served to minimize its influence on the outcomes of the decisions the army insisted on implementing.

Rejection of the elections also manifested in the boycott of political parties presenting candidates to run for election. This concerns the two Islamic parties, MSP and FJD (*Front de la justice et du développement*), as well as UDS (*Union Démocratique et Sociale*) and RCD (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie*). In addition, many national political figures boycotted candidacy for these elections, such as former Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche, former Foreign Minister Taleb Ibrahimi, and former Prime Minister Ahmed Benbitour, all of the consensual figures expected to embody the demands of the Hirak and lead in dialogue with the actual power.

Regarding the military establishment’s stance, the Chief of Staff has always denied the existence of any political ambition among its commanders. Moreover, a law was passed on October 13, 2019, prohibiting military retirees from engaging in any political activity, including running for elections, for a period of five years after the cessation of army service. The military leadership also consistently affirmed the army’s commitment to its constitutional mission, claiming that during the current period it sought only to “accompany the Hirak” and provide necessary support to the judiciary in waging a campaign against the corruption that had come to prevail in the Bouteflika era.

Concern for international legitimacy was a critical factor for the army leadership, which preferred to return as much as possible to constitutional legitimacy, since prolonging work outside a constitutional framework was costly, politically (the army wary of international criticism), economically (wary of economic failure), and in terms of security (wary of losing control over the street). Ultimately, it was both internally and externally costly for the army – the nucleus of the *de facto* ruling authorities after President Bouteflika's resignation – to cancel or postpone the presidential elections for a third time in less than ten months.

In conclusion, a large segment of the Algerian population, having found the political crisis to have been overly prolonged, saw clearly that presidential elections could be a step towards a resolution. This gave rise to the ruling power’s claim that the country’s delicate internal and external situation could not tolerate a cancellation of the presidential elections for a third time since the resignation of President Bouteflika in April 2019, a claim that convinced large circles of Algerians to take part in them. It seems that the Hirak’s refusal to be represented or run candidates in the elections actually compelled other groups of Algerians to participate, believing that the Hirak lacked the vision to resolve the crisis, and seeing the emergence of a nihilistic trend instead. The growing consensus of moderate opinion transformed the convictions of some undecided voters: participation in the elections did not contradict the continued pressure for additional gains.

### 1. Election Results

Participation in the presidential elections *within* Algeria was 41.13% (9,747,804 voters), with a total participation rate of 39.83% after factoring in the 8.69% voter participation *outside* the country. Tebboune received 58.15% (4,945,116 votes)[[35]](#footnote-35); Abdelkader Bengrina 17.38% (1,477,735 votes); Ali Benflis 10.55% (896,934 votes); Azzeddine Mihoubi 7.26% (617,735 votes); Abdelazïz Belaid 6.66% (566,808 votes). Participation rates varied among Wilayas, between considerable and very low. The Wilayas of Béjaïa and Tizi Ouzou aside, with voter participation approaching 0 percent, the rest of the Algerian Wliayas recorded rates between 57 and 30 percent, with the capital Algiers, and Bouira, one of the Kabyle states, recording rates of 19 percent, and 17 percent respectively.

### 2. The Aftermath of the Presidential Elections

#### a. The New Government

A week after Abdelaziz Djerad was designated Prime Minister, the new government was formed with thirty-nine members. Most of the ministers who held sovereign portfolios in the previous government retained their positions (Sabri Boukadoum, Minister of Foreign Affairs; Kamel Beldjoud, Minister of Interior Affairs; Belkacem Zeghmati, Minister of Justice; and Mohamed Arkab, Minister of Energy). The President re-designated Youcef Belmahdi as Minister of Religious Affairs, Yayeb Zitouni as Minister of Moudjahidine, and Cherif Omari as Minister of Agriculture. In addition, the new government included four ministers from President Bouteflika’s era (Abderrahmane Raouya, Minister of Finance; Farouk Chiali, Minister of Transportation and Public Works, Sid Ahmed Ferroukhi, Minister of Fishing Resources; and Hacène Marmouri, Minister of Tourism). The ministries that underwent significant change were those related to economic affairs (Economist Ferhat Aït Ali Braham as Minister of Industry, Professor of Economy Kamal Rezig as Minister of Trade, and Nassira Benharrats, Director of the University of Oran, as Minister of Environment and Renewable Energies). Moreover, the new President of the Republic retained the Ministry of National Defence, but with the noteworthy absence of the post of Deputy Minister of Defence that had been created by President Bouteflika, a position held by the late Army Chief of Staff, Ahmed Gaïd Salah, from 2013 until his death on December 23, 2019.

Five women were appointed in the new government: Malika Bendouda, Minister of Culture; Hoyam Benfriha, Minister of Professional Education and Training; Nassira Benharrats, Minister of Environment and Renewable Energy; Kaoutar Krikou, Minister of National Solidarity, Family and Women’s Affairs; and Bessma Azouar, Minister of Parliament Relations. Seven deputy ministers were also appointed. Four state secretaries were appointed to cover Cinematography, Cultural Production, Elite Sports and Athletics, and Algerian Diaspora.

With a few exceptions, the new government was devoid of politically partisan ministers, giving it the appearance of a government of technocrats based upon merit, to a large degree. This also reflects the background of its 65 year old Prime Minister, Abdelaziz Djerad, who worked as a professor in the Political Science Department of the University of Algiers, in addition to holding the post of General Secretary of the Presidency during the Liamine Zéroual  presidency (1995-1999), and the General Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2000-2003) – although his opposition to the second term of President Bouteflika in 2004 and support for the opposition candidate Ali Benflis led to his political sidelining and return to academia until appointed by President Tebboune as Prime Minister.

This technocratic character of the new Algerian government poses the question of the ability of this assortment of ministers to formulate a clear working project, given their (on the whole) newness to government work. It also raises questions of time limits on this government and of the issues that will figure on its agenda, since the government agenda is meant to be linked to preparations for legislative elections geared to completion of the reform programs promised by President Tebboune, and which will give rise to a new government with sharply defined prerogatives (within the currently effective constitution inherited from the Bouteflika era) for framing a new constitution.

This leads to the observation that this government clearly reflects the president’s background in the bureaucracy with years of practice in the administration and the governing authority, with most of country’s sectors spotlighted for the government’s attention, despite the criticisms directed against a large number of the ministries created.

The new government faces a large number of urgent matters that call for decisions that cannot be postponed, within the president’s general orientation of breaking with the policies of the previous regime: organizational matters related to the amendment of the constitution and the election laws, and others of a more political nature such as establishing dialogue with the political class of the country, with an aim of exchanging expertise and reintegrating the national potentials and human competences that have been marginalized or deprived of making any contribution to government activities. These challenges of a political nature, which form a priority in the new president’s work program as set forth during the electoral campaign, will form a burden that constrains and frames the activity of the new government. In addition, the new government needs to recuperate pilfered monies and doing away with what President Tebboune termed “political money” – the basis of corruption in the Bouteflika era.

For example, in regard to amending the constitution, Tebboune had promised[[36]](#footnote-36) “radical constitutional change” that would limit the authorities of the President of the Republic and protect the country from falling anew into tyranny, and strip impunity from those involved in corruption so that they could be juridically pursued and provide for only one renewal of a presidential term of office. There were further demands on the part of some of candidates affiliated with the Hirak movement relating to the independence of the judiciary from the executive power, the formation of constitutional council and the selection of its members (by election not designation), in addition to establishing a state supreme court with the authority to indict the President of the Republic for acts of treason, the Prime Minister for felonies and misdemeanours committed carrying out his duties – a court that was stipulated for establishment by the 2016 constitution, although Boutaflika did not carry this out.

In addition to the above, the continuing Hirak movement for over a year has effectively challenged the legitimacy of the new government’s work and created a difficult environment that spotlights both the state of the dialogue between the Hirak and the central authorities and the consistency of the Hirak’s slogans and unity. In line with this, the regime took the step of releasing all political opinion detainees,[[37]](#footnote-37) with weeks 45 and 46 of the Hirak demonstrating continuity of demands for change. These two developments really conjoin in the possibility of negotiation that could bring together the Hirak and the Presidency over the demand for change.

It can be assumed that the death of Gaïd Salah and the arrival of Major General Saïd Chengriha as Chief of Staff as his successor is a factor that can reduce the polarization between the Hirak and the military establishment, as the new Chief of Staff is seen to be less inclined to intervene in political affairs and to appear in the media. There were reports also that there had been a disagreement between him and the late Gaïd Salah on the issue of political detentions, and his clear support for the arrests made of key figures in corruption cases of the Bouteflika era. Nevertheless, one must wait for the anticipated constitutional changes with regard to civilian-military relations in the coming period.

#### b. Internal Priorities

The reception that President Tebboune gave to prominent economist and former Head of Government Ahmed Benbitour [[38]](#footnote-38) signifies the importance that the new work plan accords to the economic domain and to the rejection of the economic approach pursued during the Bouteflika era. The Hirak rallied around Benbitour in its early weeks, and his being called upon by the Presidency is a symbolic message of reassurance to the protesters that matters are moving in the right direction. The same applies to the support given by the Ministry of Industry to another economist, Ferhat Aït Ali Braham, known for his opposition to the Bouteflika’s economic policy.

The most immediate challenge to the government lies in the economic domain, and it is the most present on its agenda. This can be seen in the creation of new ministries and delegate ministries in several sectors linked to vital sectors such as health and sustainable development.

The pharmaceutical industry, for example, will benefit from a completely new ministry that reflects Algeria’s ambitions to occupy a position in the pharmaceutical market which drains huge amounts of money on a yearly basis from the state’s budget. Other newly created ministries include Mountain and Desert Farming, a sector that has long suffered from marginalization despite its promise with exponential growth of reclaimed areas of arable land without comparable effort invested into making them productive through development of marketing and storage facilities, transport and price controls, or developing an export orientation in light of the continuing call to diversify non-oil sector exports.

Moreover, the introduction of a Delegate Ministry for Start-ups represents a qualitative leap in the forging of relations between bureaucratic and governmental sectors and the youth sector, a matter that President Tebboune announced as a priority. Start-ups represent the ideal framework for encouraging innovation in the economic domain, and particularly among the youth, with features combining the knowledge economy with e-commerce to alleviate the absence of procedural and legal frameworks in the public sector – facilitating statistical information services and reducing bureaucratic obstruction.

In the same vein, the foundation of another newly-mandated ministry for incubators[[39]](#footnote-39) reflects the importance accorded by the government team to business and entrepreneurships , and to providing enabling environments and workplaces, along with workshops, trainings, and lectures as needed, to empower innovation among the youth lacking the resources to develop their potential and launch promising start-ups. The new Mandate Ministries will find themselves facing many urgent challenges such as partnering with the European Union and the Arab Free Trade Area and assisting in Algeria's preparations to enter the African Free Trade Area (mid-2020), as well as in difficult negotiations over accession to the World Trade Organization.

#### c. External Challenges

Algerian diplomacy has lost its momentum in recent years with President Bouteflika falling ill in 2013, and throughout 2019 with the vacuum left by his resignation and the political crisis that Algeria experienced after the launch of the Hirak. One of the most prominent challenges facing the newly elected President and his government is the restoration of the role of Algeria in the Maghrebi, Arab and African contexts, particularly with the increasing complexity of its regional neighbourhood.

Hence the centrality of foreign policy issues in President Tebboune's inauguration speech, reaffirming the fundamental principles governing Algeria's foreign political conduct: the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of other countries, resolving disputes with peaceful instruments without the use of military force, supporting the peoples’ right to self-determination, and respect for the borders inherited from the colonial era. Below, we present a set of basic challenges that Algerian foreign policy must deal with in the coming period.

### • Neighbourhood Crises

This challenge relates to the crises in Algeria’s neighbourhood close to Algeria, demonstrating the interlocking and interrelated variables characterizing the current challenges, especially the security ones. The eastern and southern borders of Algeria have been crisis-ridden for years, threatening security and instability in the entire region, due to the Libyan crisis on the one hand, and the Sahel crisis on the other. There is much symmetry among the two crises, with the involvement of international, regional and local factors in both, and the combination of several factors such as the fragility of neighbouring countries in these regions; fluid and wide ungoverned border areas; and the spread of violence, organized crime, arms trafficking and terrorism. Moreover, both neighbouring zones are difficult to control due to the multiplicity of actors and agendas, interests and coalitions.

Algeria faces the challenge of transforming its military power in the region into an instrument of influence beyond its borders, without using direct military intervention maintaining its core principle of non-interference. The internationally recognized Algerian experience of counterterrorism can play an important role in this direction. But a focus on cross-border terrorism should not marginalize the importance of addressing other cross-border phenomena that impact Algeria’s internal and regional stability, such as human, arms and drugs trafficking. Algeria could play a more effective role through diplomatic initiative that combines an investment in its historical regional prestige with economic and cultural tools, not only to prevent the spread of insecurities crises within its borderlands, but also to address their causes and to alter the behaviour of those responsible for them outside borders.

#### • Algerian-Moroccan Relations and the Western Sahara Issue

One of the most important challenges facing Algeria's regional foreign policy remains the instability of Algerian-Moroccan relations and the intractability of the Western Sahara issue, along with the failure of the Arab Maghreb Union since the closing of the Moroccan-Algerian borders in 1994. Nevertheless, in his inauguration speech, President Tebboune maintained the line followed by Algerian foreign policymaker, namely to consider the Western Sahara a “matter of decolonization” that should be on the agenda of the United Nations. He stressed the need to separate the normalization of Moroccan-Algerian relations from the resolution of the Western Sahara issue. He also expressed his interest in building the “Greater Maghreb.”

President Tebboune's discourse in his inauguration speech appeared to be more rational than his rhetoric during the electoral campaign, in which he had stressed that opening the inter-border frontier and repairing relations between Algeria and Morocco had to be conditional on Morocco offering an official apology for “expelling Algerian nationals, imposing a visa requirement and accusing Algeria of involvement in the 1994 Marrakech bombings.” Algerian foreign policy will continue to face the challenge of reconciling adherence to the principle supporting the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination, something that Morocco absolutely rejects, on the one hand, and adhering to pursuit of the Arab Maghreb Union which is considered to be a priority for Algeria. Morocco for its part considers Algeria’s support of the separatist tendency of the Sahrawi people to be the direct cause of deteriorating Algerian-Moroccan relations, and their negative repercussions on the project of a greater Maghreb integration.

#### • The Challenge of Redefining Algeria's Relations with EmergingPowers

Today, Algeria finds itself faced with two options. It can retreat to its traditional relations and abide by their restrictions and pressures, especially as demanded by the primacy their political-historical roots. Relying on the historical legacy linking Algeria to France would render relations between the two countries more volatile, as seen through slogans raised among both sectors of the Hirak and the regime itself at a certain stage (especially during the electoral campaign). This feature tends towards an ideological employment of historical grievances with vengeful claims lacking any rational foundation amid the transformations the world is witnessing; and given the geographical proximity to the French neighbour, the intertwining of common issues between the two countries such as (il)legal immigration and the increasing number of Algerian diaspora in France. Rationalizing these relations by eliminating any hint of inherent dependency (be it linguistic, economic, social and/or cultural), and by redefining bilateral relations to reflect some degree of peerage, particularly given that the Hirak’s slogans regarding the relationship with France provide a strong social and political impetus for such re-definition.

The second option is that of diversifying Algeria's external relations, to ensure that they are based on partnership. The economic factor is critical in this regard, namely diversification of Algeria’s external commercial interactions on the one hand, and diversification of its domestic economy on the other, via a rigorous approach to development that takes up the internal and external components together.  given the transformations underway within the international system, It is not about replacing France with the United States of America for example (for that merely constitutes another dependency), but rather to construct effective partnerships with the emerging powers in the international system such as Russia (which represents a strategic more than just an economic power), China, and Turkey - besides Western Europe and the United States - which have already established a foothold in the Algerian economy for some years now.  Building on what already exists in the direction of strengthening Algeria's position in a multi-polarizing global economy is therefore the core of this second option.  The two options are not necessarily contradictory if the relationship with France can be redefined and rationalized.

#### • The Challenge of Reforming Algerian Foreign Policy’s Administrative and Diplomatic Apparatus

This challenge relates to the need to break with the pervasive corruption which characterized the Bouteflika era, whether regarding employing human resources or managing the foreign policy services and embassies/consulates budget, that were not believed to constitute any exception to the rest of governmental sectors.

Algeria's foreign policy also faces the challenge of making good use of university departments and research centres, whose activities during the Bouteflika era were split off and isolated from decision-making circles. Such potential think-tanks should be supported and encouraged to take part in rationalizing foreign policy decision-making, in line with the promises of President Tebboune, through engaging the young competences in the political arena.

# Conclusion

Algerians lived an exceptionally eventful year in 2019. It started by taking to the streets to reject the candidacy of their sick President for a fifth presidential term, and ended with the election of a new President, according to a trajectory imposed by the Army, during which the latter stressed the necessity of a constitutional solution rather than simply a political one.

This report analysed the position of the ruling power with its three pillars, the Presidency, the Army, and Intelligence services, as well as the positions of political and social forces and their behaviour towards the protest movement and the path the crisis took throughout the year. It examined the map of political forces in Algeria prior to the Hirak, which, while seemingly pluralistic due to reforms undertaken at the end of the 1980s, was in fact subject to the control of the ruling regime, which continued to operate according to the logic of political party-making, extensive control over political life, and complete domination over the economy through the distribution of rentier oil profits, the backbone of the Algerian economy.

The most prominent features of the economic context of the Hirak were the imposition of new taxes, adoption of austerity measures, and a policy of shifting from traditional financing to inflationary printing of money to cover the fiscal deficit, in the context of a national economy controlled by the government through an extensive network of businessmen allied with the state bureaucracy.

The social and cultural context of the protests has witnessed the vigorous rise of an inclusive national civil society on the one hand, and in the return of the Amazigh issue as a focal matter of public debate on the other. The report presented its historical roots, and the paths of politicization and securitization that the issue has been subjected to – up until its employment in the Hirak movement.

Regarding external factors, the report considered a number of reasons for the absence of regional and international interventions in the Algerian protests – including the non-use of violence, recent historical experience, pre-emptive diplomatic measures taken by the regime, the maintenance of constitutional legitimacy, the victory of the military establishment, and the patriotic nature of the political opposition. This was all in addition to the risks of political instability in Algeria for European security, and the recent experiences of the 1990s.

The report concluded with a review of the circumstances of the presidential elections wherein Abdeladjid Tebboune won a majority in the first round, the structure of the new government of a technocratic nature, as well as the internal and external priorities and challenges facing the new government.

Debate continues about the importance of what took place in 2019, and whether it constitutes a step towards democratic transition in Algeria; this depends on the ability of the newly-elected President to convince demonstrators of his reform and development plans and his commitment to their implementation, and to a serious dialogue with representatives of the Hirak and political opposition parties. It also depends on his ability to reach an understanding with the Military, which emerged victorious in its battle for its political neutrality with Bouteflika’s regime and managed to keep out of the political struggle, outside the sphere of competition for influence over the Presidency.

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23. Meaning fighting all manifestations of corruption, such as bribery, despotism, and infringement of the laws, such as the law of public procurement, and cleaning up/clearing away all bodies that infringe on the rights of citizens and manipulate their interests. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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27. This was implicit in a statement made by Ismail Lalmas, see: Saber Belaidi, "Complex economic challenges awaiting the authority of the post-Algerian movement", *Al-Arab*, 3/22/2019, accessed on 10/2/2020, at: <http://bit.ly/38ewbU9> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. "Badisists" are named as such after Abdelhamid Benbadis and his national reform project based on adhering to the Islamic religion.

30   "Novemberists" are named as such the revolution of November 1st,1954, which liberated Algeria from French colonialism.

31 The "Zouave" is an Arabization of the French ‘Zouaves’, which is itself a French rendition of an the Arabic *Zouaoui,* battalion of lightly-armed infantry,originally formed from people who joined the French army and contributed to the campaign of the occupation of Algeria. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For the full speech, see: “Algeria - Document: The speech of Gaïd Salah on the third day of his visit to Bechar,” *TSA Arabic*, 19/6/2019, last accessed 10/2/2020, at: <http://bit.ly/31MKhtF> [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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33. We may refer here to the MAK (*Mouvement pour l'Autonomie de la Kabylie*), founded by the Kabyle singer Ferhat Mehenni after what became known as the ‘Black Spring.’ The separatist movement emerged after the 2001 Black Spring events, when 127 people were killed. The causes of these events were social, economic, cultural, and political, evident through their original limited short-term demands, before which Mehenni was not a separatist, but rather an Amazigh cultural activist, although his father was imprisoned in the ‘Amazigh Spring’ events of 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. HacèneZahar, "The Amazigh Flag and the Debate over Identity in the Algerian Hirak (1 of 2)", Arabi 21, 28/6/2019, last accessed 10/2/2020, at: <http://bit.ly/2SfN37q> [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Tebboune was born in 1945 in the Wilaya of Naâma, northwestern Algeria (age 73); an independent candidate, having graduated from the National School of Management (Economics and Finance, 1965), he moved between many administrative, parliamentary, political and ministerial positions: Secretary-General of the Wilaya in several Wilayas, Wali (Governor), and Minister of Housing. President Bouteflika appointed him as Prime Minister on May 25, 2017, but soon dismissed him on August 15, 2017 (after less than three months), probably because of his statements about his intention to fight corruption and limit the political influence of (corrupt) businessmen close to the President’s brother, Said Bouteflika. He is considered to be close to the Army’s Chief of Staff, yet still an independent candidate who managed to collect the largest number of petitions forms, compared to his peers. At the beginning of the Hirak, he enjoyed a good popular reputation, thanks to his stance on corrupt businessmen and his call for the disengagement of money from politics. Nevertheless, he ended up falling victim to the Hirak campaign slogans “Go means go,” and “everyone must go.” [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See: “President of the Republic Abdelmadjid Tebboune’s Speech to the Nation,”

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 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. There remains the challenge of enabling free expression for the opposition through the official and private media. A further observation concerns the initiative to release Hirak detainees.  On January 1, 2020, businessman Issad Rebrab, arrested on charges of inflating import receipts, was released. Rebrab comes from the Kabyle region, whose Wilayas witnessed a low rate of participation in the presidential elections, and whose supporters participated in popular marches against what was then called “justice imposed from above.” See: Atef Kedadra, “The Algerian People's Hirak and the 'New Power' in Open-Ended Scenarios for 2020,” Independent Arabia, 1/1/2020, last accessed 10/2/2020, at: <http://bit.ly/38d9IHa> [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Tebboune also met on this occasion the former Communications Minister and opposition political activist Abdelaziz Rahabi, and former Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Incubators encourage emerging entrepreneurship and youth-initiated enterprises and provide spaces to accompany innovative entrepreneurs to place them within startups, i.e. institutions starting from scratch. This accompaniment includes the organization of training and mentoring workshops in the fields of contracting, management, traditional and electronic marketing. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)