

The Jihadist Movement and Hirak in Algeria

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ABSTRACT

On May 31, 2019, Abu Obeida Youssef al-Annabi, spokesman for Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the only jihadist organization still active in Algeria, spoke in a rare public interview about the popular protest in Algeria called Hirak (the movement in Arabic). In this interview, AQIM clearly gave his support to this movement, which is democratic and peaceful, explaining that “Jihad can take many forms.” Against the grain, Al Qaeda’s rival, the Islamic State (IS), through its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had welcomed the Hirak, while regretting that the people did not choose the path of jihad and that the tyrant (editor’s note: Bouteflika) had been replaced by another tyrant.

We therefore argue that this Hirak does not constitute, at least in the short and medium term for AQIM, an organization that has been virtually eradicated in Algeria, or any other terrorist organization, an opportunity for resurgence.

Keywords: AQIM, Hirak, Algeria, Terrorism, Al-Qaida, ISIS

El movimiento yihadista e hirak en Argelia

RESUMEN

El 31 de mayo de 2019, Abu Obeida Youssef al-Annabi, portavoz de Al-Qaida en el Magreb Islámico (AQMI), la única organización yihadista aún activa en Argelia, habló en una rara entrevista pública sobre la protesta popular en Argelia llamada Hirak (el movimiento en árabe). En esta entrevista, AQMI claramente dio su apoyo a este movimiento, que es democrático y pacífico, explicando que “la yihad puede tomar muchas formas”. Contra la corriente, el rival de Al Qaeda, el Estado Islámico (EI), a través de su líder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, había dado la bienvenida al Hirak, aunque lamentaba que el pueblo no eligiera el camino de la yihad y que el tirano (nota del editor: Bouteflika) había sido reemplazado por otro tirano.

Por tanto, sostenemos que este Hirak no constituye, al menos a corto y medio plazo para AQMI, una organización prácticamente erradicada en Argelia, o cualquier otra organización terrorista, una oportunidad de resurgimiento.

Palabras clave: AQIM, Hirak, Argelia, Terrorismo, Al Qaida, ISIS

阿尔及利亚的圣战运动和Hirak运动

摘要

2019年5月31日，伊斯兰马格里布基地组织（AQIM，阿尔及利亚唯一活跃的圣战组织）发言人Abu Obeida Youssef al-Annabi在一次罕见的公共访谈中提及了被称为Hirak（阿拉伯语，意为运动）的阿尔及利亚民众抗议。访谈中，AQIM明显对该民主且和平的运动表示支持，并解释道“圣战形式可以是多样的”。与以往相反的是，基地组织对手——伊斯兰国（IS）——通过其领导人Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi对Hirak表示欢迎，同时对人民未选择圣战之路，以及暴君（编者注：Bouteflika）被另一暴君所代替的情形表示遗憾。

因此我们主张，至少在短期和中期看来，Hirak并不会为AQIM（在阿尔及利亚基本被消灭的组织）或任何其他恐怖组织提供卷土重来的机会。

关键词：伊斯兰马格里布基地组织（AQIM），运动（Hirak），阿尔及利亚，恐怖主义，基地组织，伊斯兰国（ISIS）

On May 31, 2019, Abu Obeida Youssef al-Annabi, spokesman for Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the only jihadist organization still active in Algeria, spoke in a rare public interview about the popular protest in Algeria called Hirak (the movement in Arabic). In fact, this powerful peaceful popular movement in place since February 22, an unprecedented fact, led to the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on April 2. In this interview, Al-Annabi clearly gave his support to this movement, which is democratic and peaceful, explaining that “Jihad can take many forms.”¹ Against the grain, Al Qaeda’s rival,

1 In: “Un chef jihadiste d’Aqmi répond aux questions de France 24.” <https://www.france24.com/fr/20190530-abou-obeida-youssef-al-annabi-chef-jihadiste-aqmi-ei-terrorisme-france-petronin-algerie>.

the Islamic State (IS), through its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, had welcomed the Hirak, while regretting that the people did not choose the path of jihad and that the tyrant [editor's note: Bouteflika] had been replaced by another tyrant.

However, this unprecedented political protest in Algeria had raised fears about the possibility of a resurgence of Islamist terrorism, until then considered, particularly by the regime in place, as almost eradicated after a series of major military operations implemented from 2014 to 2018, during which several hundred terrorists had been killed or captured. Moreover, a US report noted that in 2018 and the first half of 2019, Algeria had not suffered any bomb attacks for the first time since 1992 (Porter, 2019), and that AQIM had not conducted any major attacks in the country for several years. However, the redeployment of security services in the wake of Hirak raised fears of a resurgence of AQIM, given the examples of other terrorist organizations from a number of other countries during their Arab Spring between 2011 and 2012, but after more than six months of existence, this was not the case.

We therefore argue that this Hirak does not constitute, at least in the short and medium term for AQIM, an organization that has been virtually eradicated in Algeria, or any other terrorist organization, an opportunity for resurgence in a context where, on the one hand, radical Islamism is neither a demand nor an alternative considered by the demonstrators and that, contrary to the events that occurred in Libya and Syria in 2011 and then in Egypt in 2013, the choice of the Algerian authorities not to repress these demonstrations with violence avoids a radicalization of the movement.

Revolution and Jihadism: The Case of the Arab Spring

After being defeated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the radical jihadist movement had since taken advantage of Arab revolt movements during the Arab Spring of 2011 to establish or reestablish itself, as was the case in Egypt with the *Al Gamaa al-Islamiya* group in 1997 and in Libya with the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (GICL) in 1999. In Syria, the radical Islamist movement only manifested itself between 1977 and 1982, during an attempted revolt of the Muslim Brotherhood against the regime of Hafez al-Assad, a revolt that was repressed in blood, notably during the massacre of Hamah in February 1982. In Tunisia, although a radical Islamist movement already existed, it was never able to challenge the regime.

However, after the Arab Spring of 2011, these countries were directly affected by radical Islamism with the establishment and deployment of organizations linked to Al-Qaeda and/or EI. Moreover, in the 1980s and 1990s, radical Islamist movements justified their attacks and attacks by the fact that Arab regimes were authoritarian regimes. A former Tunisian jihadist explained his involvement in

the Islamist movement of those years by the fact that his country, Tunisia, was “a dictatorship, in which political Islam was excluded and the Arab regimes as well as the West were oppressors.”² In this regard, Brown³ explains that at the time, young North Africans, especially Algerians, who joined the jihad in Afghanistan were motivated by combat and by the belief that it would provide them with experience and support that they would use once they returned to their countries of origin to overthrow the regimes in place, which were perceived as repressive. Democracy, as a political regime, was then considered *kufri*, that is, unholy, and jihad was claimed as the only way to overthrow the regimes in place. However, during the Arab Spring, Al-Qaeda reassessed its dogmas and strategies, and in 2011, through its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, supported the Arab uprisings, stating that “*The Arab uprisings were earthquakes that completely overturned the calculations of the United States [whose allies these regimes were]; the masses want culture and education that express their Arab and Muslim identity.*”⁴ Also, rather than calling for the overthrow of the regimes that emerged from these revolts, al-Zawahiri called for reforms, the most important of which was the establishment of regimes applying *sharia*, implying that armed jihad was not the only way to establish Islamic regimes. This position had led to sharp criticism of his organization from his rival, the EI. It is thus in strict conformity with this line that al-Annabi’s message is inscribed, recalled here at the very beginning of this paper.

According to Bruce Hoffman,⁵ the jihadist movement, especially Al-Qaeda, appeared to be the main beneficiary of the Arab Spring by crossing itself across the world and taking advantage of the means of communication and new technologies “liberated” after the revolts, while avoiding attacks against the popular masses and leaving the EI, after its emergence, “exposed to the blows” of repression. Exploring the link between terrorism and political instability during the Arab Spring, Michael J. Schumacher and Peter Schraeder⁶ believe that the persistence of instability and the difficulty of implementing reforms in a context of riots favored terrorist violence. This is also the analysis of Donald Holbrook,⁷ who thinks that Al-Qaeda had been taken over by the Arab Spring and by popular revolts that contradicted its discourse and methods. However, the organization was able to take advantage

2 Interview by a Jihadist with the author

3 V. Brown, “Classical and Global Djihad: Al Qaida franchising frustrations,” in A. Mghadem and B. Fishman, *Faultlines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic and ideological fissures*, London and New York, 2013 Routledge, pp. 92-93.

4 Ayman al-Zawahiri, “Dawn of the Imminent Victory: ten years after the Blessed Tuesday battles,” Flashpoint Partners, September 11, 2011. https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2011/09/al-qc481_idah-the-dawn-of-imminent-victory-ten-years-since-the-blessed-tuesday-raids-en.pdf.

5 B. Hoffman, “Al-Qaeda’s Resurrection”, Expert Brief for Council On Foreign Relations (2018). <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/al-qaedas-resurrection>

6 M. J. Schumacher et P. Schraeder, 2019, “Does Domestic Political Instability Foster Terrorism? Global Evidence from the Arab Spring Era (2011–14)”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019).

7 D. Holbrook “Al-Qaeda’s Response to the Arab Spring”, *Perspective on Terrorism*, Vol.6, No.6 (2019)

of the chaos and disappointments that followed to establish itself in several countries affected by these movements, including Syria.

In this respect, this is the object of Beverley Milton-Edwards⁸ warning against jihadist efforts to recuperate popular movements, especially where authoritarian regimes had resorted to repression, but also to the stigmatization of all alternative forms of Islam (moderate Islam). Thus, Charles Lister⁹ explains that these movements, such as al-Nosra linked to Al Qaeda or the EI, benefited on the one hand from the fallout of the repression exerted by the Syrian regime on the population, which in the absence of any other alternative joined the hardest movements, and on the other hand, from the withdrawal of the Syrian state from several localities that have become safe havens for armed groups. In the Tunisian case, Michaël Ayari and Jean-François Daguzan¹⁰ explain that it is the security vacuum, resulting from the fall of the Ben Ali regime in a context of the return of Tunisian jihadists from abroad and the release of several thousand radical Islamist prisoners, that has allowed the emergence of the jihadist movement in this country. For his part, Rasmus Bosserup¹¹ believes that in Egypt, the jihadist movement is the result of the terrible repression exercised by the regime of Al-Sissi, after its coup d'état in early July 2013 against the peaceful protests of the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly after the death of one thousand of them in Heliopolis and the generalization of the ban on any type of protest against the Egyptian regime in a context where jihadist groups, although weakened, still had an effective presence. The repression of Al-Sissi had, once again, left no other choice to his opponents, especially Islamists, than to join the armed movement and to contribute, by reinforcing it, to the rise after 2013 of terrorist acts in Egypt. Thus, in all these cases, the national contexts constituted, thanks to all these repercussions of government action, contingent opportunities for reactivating jihadism.

In this context, the protest movement in Algeria could only generate fear, especially since the country remained traumatized by the appalling terrorist violence of radical Islamism in the dark decade of the 1990s. For all that, the protest movement itself, the reaction of the authorities, and the state of AQIM in Algeria do not allow for the same analysis.

8 B. Milton-Edwards, "Revolt and revolution: the place of Islamism," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol. 5, No. 2.(2012)

9 C. Lister Charles, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

10 J-F Daguzan, "Pourquoi la Tunisie produit elle autant de terroristes," Euromesco Policy Brief (2017). <https://www.euromesco.net/publication/pourquoi-la-tunisie-produit-elle-autant-de-jihadistes/>.

11 R. Bosserup et V. Collombier, 2018, "Militarization and Militi-ization," *MENARA Working Papers* (2018), No. 17.

AQIM and Hirak

Armed Groups in Algeria: The Collapse of Armed Groups

Since 2006, the jihadist movement in Algeria has been dominated by AQIM, under the leadership of its leader Abdelmalek Droukdel, alias Abou Moussab Abdelwadoud. This organization managed to extend its presence as far as the Sahel and Tunisia. However, and this would be its specificity, while its subsidiaries elsewhere have been strengthened over the years, notably by the emergence of one of its most powerful affiliated groups in the world, the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM) operating in the Sahel, AQIM in Algeria is virtually eradicated. Thus, as Salima Tlemçani reports: “the armed groups have been disbanded ... and the number of terrorists has collapsed in parallel. “In fact, during the years 1998-2013, a period dominated by politics, put in place by President Bouteflika, known as “national reconciliation,” which gave terrorists the possibility of surrendering to the authorities, more than seven thousand of them renounced their armed jihad and placed themselves under the control of the security services, while several hundred others were killed in combat. This dual strategy, which was followed for nearly fifteen years, considerably weakened the terrorist groups that were still active and made it possible to restore security throughout the territory with the exception of a few regions, in Kabylia and in the west of the country.”¹²

However, starting in 2014, after the brutal appearance of groups linked to the EI, notably that of Jund al-Khilafa fi Ard al-Jazair (the Soldiers of the Caliph in Algeria), the Algerian security services decided to launch major operations throughout the country in order to counter its establishment and at the same time to get rid of AQIM. In this regard, an official close to security issues confirmed that from now on it was necessary “at all costs” to eliminate these two organizations. Also, from 2014 to 2018, several hundred terrorists were killed, while dozens of others were captured or surrendered to the authorities. As Akram Kherief explains, the result of this enormous pressure exerted on them during this period led the armed groups, or at least what was left of them, to evacuate Kabylia and withdraw eastwards to Tébessa and Skikda, or toward the Tunisian border, while some remained confined to Boumerdès and Bouira. In this regard, according to a former member of the Algerian Special Forces, these terrorist groups were now only “small groups with small arms and constantly on the move. They have lost the societal environment that was once their strength. The means of listening and interception deployed throughout the country make the use of cell phones almost impossible. Attacks are becoming increasingly rare. As soon as terrorists go into action, they are very quickly detected and eliminated.”¹³

12 Lounnas, 2017, “The impact of ISIS on Algeria’s security doctrine,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (2017), p.120.

13 F. Alilat, 2016, “Algérie: la traque des jihadistes touche-t-elle vraiment à sa fin?,” *Jeune Afrique*

Also, when Hirak broke out on February 22, 2019, terrorist groups were, at best, in a survival situation and incapable of influencing this movement or even benefiting from it. Indeed, as Salima Tlemçani notes, “Until a few years ago, one could count between 15 and 20 incidents per month linked to terrorist activities. Today, that number has dropped to almost zero.” At present, the armed groups are considered to have been practically wiped out and those that remain are almost inactive. Moreover, these groups are essentially made up of two distinct generations of “population,” the first of which consists of a hard core of combatants who are seasoned and often elderly veterans. The second generation is composed of young Algerian volunteers who, between 2012 and 2013, wanted, through AQIM and other local armed groups, to join the jihadist groups active in the Middle East, but who were blocked in Algeria and forced to fight in the ranks of AQIM. Worse, according to Salima Tlemçani, some of these young people felt trapped not only by the authorities for joining the terrorist maquis, but also by these armed groups who prevented them from leaving for Syria/Iraq. Also, many of them often preferred to surrender to the security services.

All of this took place in a context where the recruitment of young jihadists had almost come to a halt. Indeed, it was becoming increasingly difficult if not impossible to find young candidates for jihad. Rather than sending these young people to join their organizations in the Middle East, the leaders of the armed groups kept them in Algeria in order to better resist the almost total absence of new recruits from their ranks. Indeed, as one Algerian official pointed out, “the armed groups had lost their legitimacy among the local population, which practically no longer supported them. And, increasingly, these armed groups have not been able to compensate for the losses suffered between 2014 and 2019. On the other hand, it should be noted that the number of Algerian combatants abroad was very low and that losses in their ranks were also heavy. According to estimates, between 2011 and 2015 about five hundred young Algerian jihadists went to fight in Syria/Iraq and half of them died there, while a hundred others have either returned to Algeria and are currently imprisoned or are under surveillance. About two hundred thus remained there. Finally, a strong security network at the country’s borders, supported by constant surveillance by the security services, has greatly limited the phenomenon of re-infiltration into the country. As a result, the armed groups still active in Algeria cannot expect any substantial influx of Algerian jihadist fighters back home.

In this context, no attacks have been reported during the first months of 2019, while several arrests linked to terrorist groups have taken place in the regions of Khenchela and Batna. This also tends to confirm a withdrawal of jihadists toward the Algerian east, near the Tunisian border.

(18 Juillet 2016). <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/340322/politique/algerie-traque-jihadistes-touche-t-vraiment-a-fin>

AQIM's Reaction to the Hirak: The Attempt to Recuperate

Thus, initially, the armed groups, themselves weakened, reacted little or not at all to the appearance of the popular protest movement, Hirak, on February 22. It was not until the following March 10 that al-Annabi, the spokesman for AQIM, gave a form of support to the movement, considering it to be a step “towards the exit of a dark tunnel.” In this speech, al-Annabi referred to former President Bouteflika as a mummy and stated that the country had been ruled by a gang of corrupt and tyrants. He gave his opinion and advocated the way forward for Algeria to become an Islamic emirate ruled by sharia law,¹⁴ thus bringing his organization's support to Hirak, al-Annabi placed AQIM in the same line as that adopted by al-Qaida in 2011 during the Arab Spring, a line also confirmed by al-Zawahiri from the end of April 2019. The General Command of al-Qaeda issued a statement in April 2019 welcoming the fall of Bouteflika, described as a *taghut* (miscreant), as divine vengeance, and in Hirak, al-Qaeda welcomed “the militancy and jihad of the people,” which should continue until the complete fall of the regime. Thus, it can be said that these alignments, unsurprisingly, of Al-Qaeda and AQIM with Hirak, are ideologically in the continuity of those of 2011–2012, and, a fortiori, within their strict limits, in that of a de facto cyclical alliance with Hirak, based on the common objective of overthrowing the regime. The establishment of an Islamic emirate, by means of a jihad, of one form or another, remains, beyond that, ideologically the final objective and is always envisaged. AQIM could also hope for a security vacuum or repression that would allow it to redeploy.

In this regard, the communiqué issued at the end of March 2019 is a good example. Indeed, it not only categorically denied information from the Algerian Ministry of National Defense (DND) that a terrorist cell planning attacks against Hirak demonstrators had been dismantled, but also reiterated its support for this movement. And it is with the same conformism that al-Annabi renewed, in an interview given in May 2019 to Wissam Nasr, a journalist from *France 24*, his organization's declarations of support for Hirak and its insistence on its non-violent nature, affirming that “jihad could take many forms.”

Moreover, no attacks had taken place during this same period, with the exception of a skirmish in Boumerdès during which two soldiers were killed. In fact, for Salima Tlemçani, this absence of attacks by AQIM reflected its extreme weakness more than anything else. According to Akram Kherief, “the armed groups are now in retreat, if not inactive. And many of their members are trying to return to civilian life under false identities following the collapse of the organisation in

14 T. Joscelyn, 2019, “AQIM official calls for sharia governance in Algeria,” *FDD The Long War Journal* (2019). <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2019/03/aqim-official-calls-for-sharia-governance-in-algeria.php>

recent years.”¹⁵ Since then, in contradiction to al-Annabi’s assertions, the Algerian security services have twice announced, notably in July 2019, the arrest in the city of Batna of individuals linked to terrorism who were preparing attacks against demonstrators. It should be noted that, this time, no denial was issued. In this regard, Kherief considers that “Khenchla and Batna are transit areas where an endemic presence of armed groups still persists.” Consequently, one can still expect such actions here and there, but AQIM no longer has the critical mass to carry out spectacular actions. Thus, armed groups, such as the one arrested in July 2019 in Batna, were cut off from their command and operated without directives, attacking targets such as the Hirak in order to signal their presence.

Thus, because of its weakening on the ground, AQIM cannot aspire to a recuperation of the popular movement and simply announced its support for it without further ado.

Absence of a Request for a Revolutionary Theocratic Project

Among the principal slogans of Hirak, that of *dawla madaniya*, *machi askariya* (one civil state, not military) figures prominently with that of *Djazaier dimoucratiya* (democratic Algeria), both of which are taken up by the different components of the movement, including those of the Islamist currents, the latter including, in full light, Ulemas and members of the former Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). These demonstrators of the “Islamist squares” repeated, in a loop, these slogans carried by the whole of Hirak, while affirming, at the same time, their non-contradictory attachment to Islamic principles and freedom. These same demonstrators bore the portrait of Abdelkader Hachani, former leader of the FIS, assassinated in November 1999 for having, in particular, supported the process of negotiations aimed at ending the civil war and initiated by the Algerian authorities. They also bore the portrait of Taleb Ibrahim, chanting in unison, *al-Chaab youteleb Taleb* (the people demand Taleb). This former Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs, reputed to be “Islamic-conservative,” claims to be for democracy and against violence. There is no trace of him in the slogans of *Dawla Islamiya*, i.e., Islamic state, or even sharia. More generally, Hirak was made to bring about the emergence of a second republic, against authoritarianism and corruption. This movement was formed against the monopolization of political power by a group since, in the majority of slogans, the word *issaba* (band) is the leitmotif. From then on and clearly, there is a rejection of any political project that contradicts these aspirations and that would automatically be assimilated to “a counter-revolutionary project,” the Hirak conceiving of itself as a revolution.

Worse, the Islamist movements themselves claim democracy. In this respect, a member of a (non-Islamist) political party active in the Hirak, and in contact with this Islamist fringe of the movement, confirms that “the Islamists

15 Conversation with the Author, July 2019.

of the former FIS are present. No one knows what their weight is in society. But it is probably real and consequent,” he recalls, “during the first demonstrations, the Islamists were suspicious and discreet; it was only relatively later that they showed up. It is clear that the ex-members of the FIS, like many, were surprised by the movement. But they matured and learned from their mistakes.” Thus, one no longer hears in their squares the songs and slogans that they used to proclaim in their demonstrations in the early 90s, such as *Dawla islamiya wa law Kariha el mounafiqoun* (an Islamic state, even if the impious don’t want it) or their war cries *Alyah nahya or alayah namout* (for him I live and for him I die). These behaviors, which do not belong to the majority “moderate Islamism,” have been attributed to provocations by radical militants. For moderate Islamists, the hour is for appeasement and Hirak. They therefore want to reassure themselves, especially with regards to women. There were some isolated groups of young people dressed in Afghan clothes chanting *Dawla Isamiya* and even attacking some Hirak demonstrators, but they were massively rejected by the other demonstrators and quickly dispersed. For many witnesses, it was “Baltaguia” who were responsible for this and their behavior in no way reflects that of Islamists, even among the most radical, including the use of coarse language against women.

For Salima Tlemçani, even if the Islamo-conservative ideology has resurfaced, as one can see here and there among the Hirak demonstrators and hear in rare slogans, for all that, this does not mean that there is a demand for a theocratic state or for an Islamist revolution. In fact, the images of violence of the Civil War of the 1990s are still in all memories and now serve to repel any attempt at recuperation by armed jihadist groups. Abdelmalek Droukdel, the Supreme Emir of AQIM, acknowledged this in 2017 in his interview with the jihadist magazine *Inspire*, when he explained that “this very dark and painful phase [of the 1990s] left a negative imprint on the innocent victims of the crimes committed by the extremist deviants of the GIA.” The ex-FIS thus perfectly integrated the rejection of any totalitarian ideology and had positioned itself in a non-violent political-religious conservatism, accepting the democratic choice and aligning itself with moderate Islamist currents. There was thus no longer a credible demand in Algeria for a revolutionary theocratic project.

A Strengthened Security Apparatus

A major fear was that jihadist groups would take advantage of a security vacuum created by Hirak to redeploy and re-emerge in the country, while Algeria’s neighbors, particularly in the Sahel, were worried about the possible collapse of the state. For the latter, the Libyan chaos is in all memories and its consequences continue to be felt in the region. For Dahane Ahmed Mahmoud of the Mauritanian Institute of Strategic Studies, “the evolution of our big brother in the North is a concern for everyone and we hope that there will be no slippage

or overflow. The destabilization of Libya has caused disorder in Mali, and with Algeria, it could be worse because it is the central state of the Maghreb.” But this was not the case.

Indeed, as Farid Allial explains, the Hirak did not lead to a security vacuum as was the case elsewhere in 2011 and, on the contrary, there was a strengthening of police presence everywhere, especially in the cities. At the level of the Algerian Army, it has not changed its deployment inside Algeria or at the borders. Also, the operations carried out by the Algerian Army against armed groups, some mediated, while others are not, have continued and even intensified, as Salima Tlemcan points out. Many have also hypothesized that the Army and the authorities would try to weaken the Hirak by putting forward the risk of a return of violence linked to armed groups and conversely to assert themselves as protectors against these funds. In reality, since the beginning of the movement, the official authorities have made little reference to a possible return of armed groups as such. In terms of media strategy, they have rather put forward “technological advances,” notably the mastery of drone technology shown during operations against terrorist groups, the Army’s maneuvers during which its latest acquisitions are shown, and here and there some media operations involving the arrest of members of armed groups. As Khrief explains, “there may be a bit of marketing here and there,” but the fact is that the Army’s message is a warning about the overall political destabilization that could result from the pursuit of Hirak and the absence of a way out of the crisis, rather than a threat from armed groups.

Indeed, let us recall here that the authorities and this for several years have built a discourse based on the fact that terrorism was defeated and the stability of Algeria was regained. They could therefore hardly use “the terrorist threat” as a strategy to counter Hirak. It should also be noted that the authorities never tried to repress the movement except by carrying out arrests here and there, thus avoiding radicalization and mass violence as was the case elsewhere, and which had led the population to join the armed groups. On the contrary, the Army has, on several occasions, announced that it supports and accompanies the movement and its various demands, including a relentless fight against corruption. In all cases, as Farid Allilat explains, “terrorism has been virtually eradicated, particularly through a professionalization of the fight against terrorism and an extremely dense and reinforced security network. The authorities are rather in the preservation of this situation,” hence the discourse on the overall stability of the country.

The last element that raised fears of a security vacuum was the “restructuring” of the intelligence services following the resignation of President Bouteflika in April 2019. Indeed, since 2015, the intelligence services had changed their name from Department of Research and Security (DRS) to Department of Security Services (DSS) and were placed directly under the authority of the President rather than the Ministry of Defense. At the time, its powerful chief, General Mediène,

was dismissed and replaced by one of Bouteflika's close associates, General Bashir Tartag. However, from February 2019, the date of the beginning of Hirak, a crisis broke out within the DSS against a backdrop of rivalry and tensions with the Army. Eventually, the fall of Bouteflika led to the fall of General Tartag, who was dismissed by General Gaid Salah, Chief of Staff, a few hours before Bouteflika's resignation, and arrested with General Mediene in May while the DSS returned to the bosom of the Army under whose authority it was once again placed. This procrastination and dismissal within the intelligence services led to fears of a destabilization of the anti-terrorist system in Algeria. It was in fact the opposite. The separation between the two organizations at the level of the fight against terrorism had generated problems of coordination which, according to Akram Khrief, would be resolved at this level, since this new change allows at least at the level of the fight against terrorism to reunify the command and place it under a single authority rather than two distinct entities.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of Hirak, there have been many concerns here about the possibility that this instability could lead to a return of armed violence in Algeria, as was the case elsewhere in the Arab world in 2011. But this was not the case. Armed groups in Algeria have been virtually decimated and in a context where the demands of the Hirak protest movement are for the establishment of a democratic, not theocratic, regime. Consequently, there was no demand "for the supply of these organizations," organizations that were virtually eliminated. The fact that there was no collapse or weakening of the security apparatus also played a primordial role; on the other hand, Hirak highlighted the different components of Algerian society, especially at the political level. If there is indeed a rejection of the political system and the former political elites, notably a weakening of the Islamist political parties some of which are accused of having been close to the regime of Bouteflika—there is on the other hand a resurgence of conservatism and political Islam.