

Algeria: Between Popular Protests, Political Uncertainty and Regional Turmoil

by Andrea Dessì and Flavia Fusco

ABSTRACT

On 28 January 2020, the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) organised an expert briefing on Algeria with the participation of two international scholars to discuss recent developments in the country, the impact on neighbouring states and relevance for Italian foreign policy towards Algeria and the broader North African region. The briefing is part of an ongoing cooperation between IAI and the Policy Planning Unit (UAP) of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI). Entitled "Algeria: Between Popular Protests, Political Uncertainty and Regional Turmoil", the two-hour briefing was held under the Chatham House Rule. Participants included IAI researchers and Italian officials, allowing for a stimulating exchange of views on recent developments in Algeria in a restricted format, assessing potential implications for the future. Experts discussed the development of the Hirak protest movement, ongoing socio-economic and political challenges facing the Algerian authorities, the impact of the conflicts in Libya and the Sahel region and future challenges facing the country.

Algeria | Domestic policy | Political movements | Opposition | Foreign policy | Libya



keywords

Algeria: Between Popular Protests, Political Uncertainty and Regional Turmoil

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Part of an ongoing cooperation between IAI and the Policy Planning Unit (UAP) of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), the briefing marked the first in a series of four thematic appointments addressing specific countries of relevance to Italian national interests. Entitled "Algeria: Between Popular Protests, Political Uncertainty and Regional Turmoil", the two-hour briefing was held under the Chatham House Rule. Participants included IAI researchers and Italian officials, allowing for a stimulating exchange of views on recent developments in Algeria in a restricted format, assessing potential implications for the future.

Rocked by ongoing popular protests, Algeria is experiencing overlapping challenges of a political, socio-economic and institutional nature.¹ Meanwhile, mounting instability in Algeria's neighbourhood, to the south across the Sahel region and the east in Libya, pose further threats to the country's stability. The 12 December 2019 Presidential elections, won by Abdelmadjid Tebboune with

¹ For an overview of the protest movement and demands see, M. Tahir Kilavuz and Sharan Grewal, "Algerians Have Been Protesting for a Year. Here's What You Need to Know", in *Monkey Cage*, 22 February 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/02/22/algerians-have-been-protesting-year-heres-what-you-need-know>.

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58 per cent of the votes but with an extremely low turnout, have not satisfied popular demands. The leaderless protest movement – Hirak – is distrustful of the President’s plea for dialogue, continuing to denounce corruption, the lack of socio-economic opportunities and the military-dominated political system. Friday demonstrations continue in various locations, while the recent announcement by President Tebboune of a new national holiday on 22 February to honour the beginnings of the “smile revolution” is unlikely to mollify the street.

The briefing began by addressing the implications of the present political crisis, the demands and organisation of the protest movement and possible future trajectories. Parallels with other popular mobilisations in Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq were also discussed, with participants underscoring the similarities but also the differences between contexts. The declining use of religion and Islamism was underscored as one commonality between these protest movements, but other parallels relate to increased risks of regional interferences, given the broader geopolitical competition taking place between regional and international actors with different interests in these states. Further parallels were also drawn between the slogans and their use of political satire in Algeria and the experiences of other protest movements in Europe, particularly related to the colour revolutions and specifically the “Otpor” (resistance) protest organisation active in Serbia in the late 1990s and early 2000, which has indeed become a source of inspiration for multiple activists across the Middle East and North Africa and further afield.²

Domestically, participants agreed on the key strength and relevance of the Hirak protest movement which, after more than 52 consecutive weeks of demonstrations, succeeded in forcing the authorities to implement a political transition.³ Yet, the strength of the movement, its wide representation and lack of formal leadership, was also described as its primary weakness, given the complexity in keeping the movement united and agreeing on realistic demands for reform. Hirak is increasingly divided between “moderates” and “radicals”, with the latter insisting on a complete overhaul of the political and economic system in the country, a demand that is unlikely to be heeded by the authorities, and the former more open to dialogue and compromise with the government.

Such divisions have also played out at the international level, among Algerian diasporas in Europe and particularly in France, where Algerian communities tend to lean more towards the “moderate” camp of the Hirak. Indeed, tensions between

² For more on the influences of Otpor in the Middle East see, Jon Henley, “Meet Srdja Popovic, the Secret Architect of Global Revolution”, in *The Guardian*, 8 March 2015, <https://gu.com/p/46d6h>; Courtney Brooks, “Exporting Nonviolent Revolution, From Eastern Europe to the Middle East”, in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 February 2011, https://www.rferl.org/a/exporting_nonviolent_revolution_europe_europe_mideast/2316231.html.

³ For more on the Algerian Hirak see, Amel Boubekeur, “Demonstration Effects: How the Hirak Protest Movement Is Reshaping Algerian Politics”, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, 27 February 2020, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/demonstration_effects_how_hirak_movement_is_reshaping_algerian_politics.

and within various Algerian diasporas in Europe and aboard, were registered, particularly in France, during the run up to the December presidential elections, with instances of scuffles and tension between those pushing for a boycott of the vote and those who wished to cast their ballot.

Originally born in opposition to former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika candidacy for a fifth presidential term, the Hirak movement has proven to be highly resilient and adaptive. Most notably, it has been able to maintain high levels of order and non-violence during street protests, a dynamic that has led some to speculate whether an agreement or “deal” has been reached with the authorities to minimise clashes and street violence or vandalism. Overall, four phases of the Algerian protests were identified during the briefing.

A first phase centred on the then imminent presidential elections and targeted Bouteflika’s renewed candidacy as president; a second phase, following the withdrawal of Bouteflika’s candidacy and the delaying of elections, centred on opposition to the army and security services domination of politics in the country. The protest movement thus turned to tackle the so-called “pouvoir”, or real wielders of power in the country, an elite of army and intelligence officers who have long dominated behind the scenes decision making in the country. In this context, particular opposition was directed at Ahmed Gaid Salah, Algeria’s Chief of Staff of the Army, who subsequently died of a heart attack in late December 2019, following Tebboune’s election. A third phase of the protest movement moved to address the risk of foreign interference in the country, with protesters chanting opposition slogans against the US, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and France, actors which the protesters feared could intervene in the country to support the authorities against the demands for reform.

The fourth and most recent phase of the protest movement is instead moving into more sectorial issues – such as shale gas exploration and the opening of the economy to foreign investments, particularly in the hydrocarbons sector – which protesters fear will cause environmental damage to the country and increase foreign ownership of key natural resources. In parallel with this fourth phase, fragmentation among “moderates”, who consider the need for compromise with the authorities, and “radicals”, who instead continue to insist on the protesters’ maximalist demands, has increased within the movement.

Political Islam, while active or represented in the protest movement, adds a further dimension of complexity to the Algerian scenario and requires careful consideration. While radical elements have not been prominent in the Algerian Hirak, and indeed the legacy of Algeria’s “lost decade” of civil war during the 1990s continues to play a role in limiting the appeal of Islamist politics, other, more quietist movements are active in the country. The Zawiyah, for instance, a congregation of Sufis present in Algeria, deserves particular attention, as do other quietist Salafi groups which are closer to Wahhabi Islam. President Tebboune originates from regions with high concentration of Zawiyah congregations. The Zawiyah were also supported by former President Bouteflika and the army as counter-radicalisation

partners in the country, contributing to their increased relevance in Algeria.⁴

Having addressed internal political developments, discussion turned to the regional layer, with participants highlighting Algerian efforts to revive its diplomatic action on North African issues, as well as in the broader African context. Following the election of Tebboune, the government has increased diplomatic efforts, partially to respond to worsening security conditions in its neighbourhood and partially to refocus attention on Algeria's regional role and away from the domestic political troubles affecting the country. In this context, Algerian authorities are unlikely to deviate from the principles of neutrality and non-intervention that have defined Algerian foreign policy since independence. Indeed, these are variably described as the country's "iron principle" in foreign affairs. These approaches informed Algerian response to the 2011 intervention in Libya, the subsequent crisis in Mali, the stabilisation of post-2011 Tunisia and most importantly the recent escalations and civil war in Libya since April 2019.

The Libyan dossier clearly demonstrates Algerian efforts to restore its diplomatic leverage in the region presenting itself as a more credible regional mediator in the conflict. This stems from Algeria's traditional mediation efforts and seeks to build on Algeria's reputation for neutrality. Moreover, given Algeria's participation in the Libya Berlin Conference in January 2020, the government is seeking to maximise on its international relevance by advancing diplomatic initiatives on the conflict, focussing on the regional and intra-Libyan tracks.⁵

Since 2020, Algeria has sought to promote a resumption of inter-Libyan dialogue initiatives, inviting multiple Libyan stakeholders to Algeria for talks, while also engaging regional and international actors. Against this backdrop, Algerian authorities have recently hosted visits by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, followed one day later by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Both Turkey and the UAE are deeply involved in supporting opposing sides in Libya and the visits indicate both Algeria's renewed activism on the Libyan dossier and the increased efforts by multiple actors to accrue favour with the newly established Algerian government, seeking support for their respective positions on Libya and the broader North African region.

With Algeria having recently marked the one-year anniversary since the start of popular protests on 22 February 2019, the country is still struggling with multiple internal and external crises. Uncertainty prevails on the future trajectory of the

⁴ For more on political Islam in Algeria see, Dalia Ghanem, "The Shifting Foundations of Political Islam in Algeria", in *Carnegie Middle East Center Papers-Series on Political Islam*, April 2019, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2019/05/03/shifting-foundations-of-political-islam-in-algeria-pub-79047>.

⁵ For more on Algeria's approach to the Libya conflict see, Giorgio Cafiero, "Algeria's View of Libya's Crisis", in *Consortium News*, 30 January 2020, <https://consortiumnews.com/?p=43336>. Also see, Alia Brahimi and Akram Kharief, "Why Algeria Is Suddenly More Interested in Libya", in *MENASource*, 6 March 2020, <https://atlanticcouncil.org/?p=228228>.

Algerian government, its promised reform process and neighbouring instability and conflict. Key priorities remain a diversification of the economy away from the hydrocarbons sector and increased efforts to strengthen and legitimise the social contract between state and society.⁶

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⁶ For an older assessment of socio-economic criticalities and challenges in Algeria tied to the 2011 Arab uprisings see, Andrea Dessì, "Algeria at the Crossroads, Between Continuity and Change", in *IAI Working Papers*, No.11|28 (September 2011), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/3379>.

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