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# Algeria's Hirak: Between Concerns of Division and Betting on Unity

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## Introduction

The Algerian Hirak has disproven all interpretations and predictions by analysts, who were quick to declare it dead after nearly a year-long absence due to COVID-19. From March 2020 to February 2021, the pandemic disrupted much of the country's social and political activities. However, the movement has resumed its activities with the same momentum and determination among those calling for a peaceful regime change. A few months after activities have resumed, two complex problems, nevertheless, forced the Hirak to undergo a critical test of its resilience, unity, and sustainability: more division and divergence, and worsening regime repression.

## The scourge of divisions

The Hirak's first serious problem is the internal cracks that have started to surface as ideological and intellectual differences spread among many blocs and groups of activists, bloggers, and social media commentators often over marginal and symbolic issues. They usually focus on spiritual beliefs, uses of symbols of identity (such as the Amazigh flag, which has become a highly contentious matter), and historical references (the controversies surrounding King Shoshenq,<sup>1</sup> Sheikh Ben Badis,<sup>2</sup> Abane Ramadan,<sup>3</sup> and Prince Abdelkader). Such divisions are, in some respects, reminiscent of the linguistic conflict between Francization and Arabization that has poisoned intellectual life in Algeria over the past decades. This incidental dispute over symbols of identity has quickly taken a more radical turn following the 2019 presidential election, due to a part of the Hirak (members of the Badissia - Novembria movement) seeking power. Since then, the grassroots have become more and more influenced by a social media rhetoric dominated by extremist discourse or exaggerations seeking to stir up controversies.

The government's role in fuelling division is well-established. It has employed elaborate schemes and activated its media cronies as well as so-called "online trolls." It resorted to using Salafi and Kabyle separatist presence to sow fear and intimidation. However, when some Hirak actors adopt radical positions (identity-



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based isolation, adoption of numerous conspiracy theories directed against a certain party, early signs of racial intolerance, etc.), they undoubtedly bear a share of responsibility as well.

The two groups traded accusations of reporting and being loyal to a certain side or country, leading to undermined trust and deeper cracks that had faded incidentally in the early months of the 22 February 2019 uprising. This uprising had portrayed Algerians then as a united people, open to cultural and ideological diversity, like the November 1954 generation, and ready to overcome all differences.

Nonetheless, the spread of hate speech has led to splintering ranks and dwindling attendance in marches week after week. Only the most committed and determined activists have continued to protest in most cities; their smaller numbers encouraged the government to arrest them and curtail their activities.

Politically, the situation was further complicated by the sudden and focused media coverage of the rise of the radical Islamist movement, represented by the Rachad movement, an offshoot of the dissolved Islamic Salvation Front (FIS).<sup>4</sup> Rachad was founded by former FIS members and activists who defected from the regime; some were former diplomats who held leadership positions in the movement and later wielded clear influence over the Hirak. Foremost among them was Mohamed Larbi Zitout, an asylum-seeker in the UK who not only posted zealous speeches on YouTube almost daily but also gave operational directions to protesters on the ground. Rachad's surge into prominence can be traced back to having raised bold slogans with taboo political content, namely "terrorist intelligence agency" and "Madaniya Machi Askaria,"<sup>5</sup> two slogans that remind Algerians of the long-standing conflict between the Islamists and the army in the 1990s, and the accusations traded between the two at the time. It is important to point out that the first slogan against the military, which was propagated relatively late in the Hirak, came out as a result of the recurrent interventions of former Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaid Salah in political decisions and his open opposition of the use of the Amazigh flag. Protesters had always strived to maintain peaceful marches, and so they avoided confrontations with security forces. However, the defamation of the military institution - specifically intelligence services - in such an unequivocal and unprecedented manner is new and bears the stamp of the



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Rachad movement.

The prominent presence of these slogans after the return of demonstrations has provoked the ire of both leftist and secular groups, especially in Kabylia,<sup>6</sup> a stronghold for which the two movements are competing. It is important to note that Kabylia was a region of focus and a target of authorities and political actors alike, given that, in light of favouring the stick to the carrot, this region has become the main stage of events for over a year and is the only area where the Hirak persists today. For this reason, all political and ideological polarizations intersect in Kabylia, which plays a pivotal role in the popular movement as a whole.

Amid this competition, a "Double Break" bloc was formed, in reference to breaking with both the regime and political Islam. The bloc includes supporters of Said Saadi, former leader of the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD),<sup>7</sup> who fanned the flames of this conflict with an open dispute with Mourad Dehina, leader of the Rachad Movement. The party's current leadership has retained its radical position towards the regime and its openness to the other political tendencies without exception. Although this political movement, a product of internal turmoil, has not been able to cross the borders of Kabylia and the capital given its human makeup, but it has gained a significant presence in mainstream media, which sought to warn of the threat of Islamists - namely Rachad - pose for the future of the Hirak.

These disputes have translated into clashes during demonstrations between supporters of the Islamic and secular movements, notably in the city of Béjaïa in Kabylia. For instance, on the 115th Friday of the Hirak, on 30 April 2021, supporters of these two movements clashed after raising the photo of writer and researcher Said Jab Al Khair, who is charged of "contempt of Islam." Tensions stayed high until the "Committee of the Wise" intervened. Double Break spokesperson, activist Mourad Bouzidi, then accused supporters of Rachad of attempting to assault them. All of this has negatively affected public participation, as evidenced by the decreasing and total disappearance of demonstrations in some regions, even before the 9 May 2021 Ministerial Decree that required demonstrations to secure advance administrative authorization.

The regime took advantage of the cracks in the Hirak and hurried to contain and nip it in the bud by operating the propaganda machine at full media and political



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capacity. It implemented a series of practical measures, the most important and dangerous of which was the High Council of Security's classifying of the Rachad movement and the Movement for the self-determination of Kabylia (MAK)<sup>8</sup> as terrorist organizations on 18 May 2021. Obviously, the regime's decision sought to provide a legitimate cause for suppressing demonstrations. It also enables authorities to deepen the ever-growing rift between Hirak supporters and activists, namely between Islamists - or people referred to as such - and secularists, on the one hand, and the popular masses on the other, with a view to curtail protests. This is exactly what happened a week later when the Ministry of Interior issued a decision requiring prior authorization to organize any march. This decision has entered into force in all cities, except in Kabylia, where weekly protests continued as usual. This region was not included in the decision due to government leniency, for fear of inciting confrontations that would be difficult to control due to the sheer size of protests and great popular support in this particular region compared to other cities. The leniency and sensitivity observed in dealing with Kabylia, has been interpreted as the government's implicit acknowledgement of its inability to terminate the Hirak in the region, considered to be the bastion of the movement. It also reflects the government's concern that attempts to suppress protests serve only to expand the rebellion and can engender dire consequences. They could also push the population into the arms of the separatist movement, which so far only represents a minority in Kabylia, despite the aura it projects, as proven by the anaemic demonstrations initiated in its name by MAK. Moreover, the region's boycott of the legislative elections of 12 June, 99% compared to 70% at the national level, asserts that the revolutionary tide is retreating and is restricted to a limited geographical area. However, some political party leaders are afraid of the area transforming into the epicentre of insurgency. From another standpoint, this electoral defiance also reflects the failure of traditional political parties to mobilize Algerians to participate in the election process, most notably in this region.

However, supporters of the Rachad movement have tried to address the negative repercussions resulting from the growing mistrust of their intentions. They sought to mend fences broken by differences among all parties, including traditional Islamists. They promoted a discourse of unity and tried to build closer ties with liberal and secularists, especially among Kabylia communities – the most organized and prepared to collectively stand against any political project



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stemming from the ruling regime. They, therefore, tried to prove openness to cultural and linguistic pluralism – in contrast to what was known about Islamists in the past decades. The words of praise they repeat, “free tribes,” in their speeches and the adoption of the Amazigh flag are true examples of these efforts. Such approaches have strengthened the relationship between the movement's orators and part of the tribal communities and have created a sense of unity of determination.

It is important to note the Rachad movement has no monopoly on Islamic discourse in Algeria. Its approach is characterized by the fact that it does not openly call for the implementation of the principles of Islamic Shariah and is not allied with any other Islamic organization.

As a result, the attempt to infiltrate protesters increased tensions in the Hirak and raised suspicions as to the intentions of this opposition Islamic organization. That was the case in Béjaïa, a city they managed to turn into one of their strongholds due to the retreating role of traditional parties, especially the Socialist Forces Front,<sup>9</sup> which used to win the majority of seats in local elected councils.

The Rachad movement continued operating secretly, even though its supporters initially revealed their identity, especially through social media. The approach, however, changed after the decision to classify the movement as a terrorist organization. Many of the supporters were arrested, especially in the capital and in some cities of eastern Algeria, on charges of “inciting violence” and receiving funds from “hostile foreign actors.” In general, Rachad activities stand out through distinctive slogans and political directives issued by well-known representatives.

## Will betting on unity yield results?

The Hirak has remained subject to all kinds of disruptions and polarizations, despite maintaining unifying demands. Activists have called for the release of those detained for exercising free speech, advocacy for freedoms and human rights, ceasing acts of repression, prosecutions, targeted campaigns accusing Hirak supporters of treason, and a continued peaceful struggle for a regime change. However, it was caught in a vicious circle in the absence of a clearly defined strategy and objectives. Some tend to assert that the “peaceful



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revolutionary” character of the Hirak has reached its limits, while others consider that the movement can no longer produce a new reality as it has achieved its initial goals: quashing the mandate extension scenario of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and fending off the financial oligarchy that ran rampant in the regime. The discussion about the viability of the Hirak’s methods so far has yet to be resolved in its ranks, especially as no alternatives are debated. They could discuss leaning towards more radicalism vis-à-vis the government (suggested at one time by declaring civil disobedience, as demanded by Rachad supporters); accepting the principle of dialogue with the regime to preserve the peacefulness of the revolution; and coming to an understanding on a transitional phase and the required steps for the future. The establishment of a Sovereign Constituent Assembly and a consensus government may be needed as advocated by most Hirak actors, such as the “Contract for the Democratic Alternative,” which includes liberal and leftist parties.

Faced with this existential challenge, elite groups participating in the Hirak are seeking to produce a unifying discourse. They are calling to renounce division and transcend narrow or partisan slogans to focus instead on one specific goal: forcing the regime to accept change, or rather to leave. Several methods were proposed to achieve this end such as the structuring or reorganization of the Hirak. Numerous initiatives were calling for reflection on the matter, namely the “Nida 22” initiative. In the first statement by the people behind the initiative, which was signed in October 2020 by well-known academics such as sociologists Uday Al-Hawari and Nasser Djabi (whom we interviewed in this article - see below), their analysis did not differ from the opinions of many others: “More than two years after the 22 February uprising, Hirak actors have yet to succeed in uniting around one political project that reflects the democratic aspirations of the Algerian people. At the same time, the Hirak suffered from the brunt of official propaganda aimed at breaking ranks based on ideological or political grounds to keep the Hirak from achieving its goals.” To start preparing for the transition, “it seems essential to gather the largest number of actors around a national conference and impose a condition on the stakeholders to participate, signing the Charter of Values. The purpose is to reassure and build trust among actors by committing to shared values as part of preparing for the democratic transition.” However, since its launch in the fall of 2020, the “Nida 22” initiative has not developed any strategy that reflects its goals.



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It has only organized virtual meetings and issued statements, most of which denounced the government's repressive measures and arrests targeting Hirak activists. Moreover, quarantine conditions in the country have undoubtedly discouraged the leaders of this initiative from meeting with the masses.

In addition to this initiative, the so-called "Hirak National Conference" was established around the same time as a "forum to discuss the future of the peaceful revolution." However, it was soon accused of being affiliated to the Rachad movement, based on the type of slogans it raised ("Madaniya Machi Askaria"). This initiative is also criticized for adopting the discourse of civil disobedience. A statement, [posted to its official website](#) on 16 February 2012, noted that "this project suggests preparing for a general conference involving all local and international Hirak actors that believe in the above vision, without excluding anyone based on ideological differences or minor inner conflicts. An invitation for this "conference" will be sent at a date to be determined, along with the commitment characteristics and standards for invitees." The idea, however, is still in its early stages.

Apart from these two initiatives, some actors called for a general meeting held in the historic city of Kherrata<sup>10</sup> on 8 May 2021. Although the meeting fostered a frank and open discussion, participants failed to produce any specific agenda or regulations. This unauthorized meeting - as is the case of all political gatherings and activities in this state - was attended by many well-known figures in the local and national arenas, including Khaled Tzgart, former MP in the Socialist Forces Front, Abdel-Wahab Farsawy, head of the dissolved "RAJ" association, Zubeida Assoul, head of the Union for Change and Progress Party, and prominent lawyer Mustapha Bouchachi. The participants unanimously agreed that "organization and unity have become necessary for the success of the revolution."

## Is structuring the Hirak the solution?

We asked a sample of activists committed to unifying action two questions on this issue in order to discern the impact of ideological discourses on the Hirak cohesion and the opportunities available to regain its power. We chose four people who share ground participation in the movement and enough critical thinking to





objectively consider the issue at hand.

- **Question 1:** Do you think that the Hirak is a minefield of ideological divisions undermining its unity?
- **Question 2:** What do you think about structuring the Hirak? What do you propose to ensure the resilience of the revolution in face of increased repression?

To answer the first question, Nasser Djabi, professor at the University of Algiers and signatory of “Nida 22,” said: “I do not think that “minefield” is the best word to describe an ideological and intellectual diversity that you can see in any ordinary society with class and intellect stratification. Perhaps, it would be better to talk about diversity as a strength if used well, and a weakness if used poorly, i.e., focusing on analyzing the situation from cultural and identity perspectives just like the regime has always intended, or on the role of tribesmen and cultural issues that exist in every society.” Nasser Djabi also believes that the Hirak as a significant social movement will “remain diverse.”

Regarding the viability of structuring the Hirak at the current stage, Djabi affirms that the idea is positive in principle, “if we know how to address it, because it strengthens and empowers the Hirak to achieve some of its goals.” It could be a melting pot for many associations and parties. He also states that “the regime has rejected organization and spared no effort to distort the idea and disparage all figures that could help organize and add political value to the Hirak.” The arrests of many recent rising figures are proof of that. “The idea of organization was also rejected because it embodies a clash of elites. The very issue of elites emerging from the movement was rejected due to our deep-rooted populist culture which does not recognize a role for elites who sometimes lack considerable legitimacy.” This is due to linguistic and cultural barriers that “have negatively affected their role in all political battles,” as he puts it.

On the same issue, political activist Samir bin al-Arabi believes that “the Hirak is a movement of a people and that contains all ideologies,” noting that “the secular movement dominates the media but has a weak presence on the ground.” The activist admits that “at the beginning, people looked beyond ideologies, but with



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time, significant differences started surfacing.”

Bin al-Arabi, who was arrested twice between 2019 and 2020, defends the structuring proposal: “Since the start, we talked about the need to structure and organize the Hirak, not its representation.” According to him, it is impossible for one framework to bring together all actors. He shares Djabi's opinion of possibly creating several collective or party frameworks. He asserts that this idea “is widely shared, but there are concerns due to the quick accusations of treason,” spearheaded by the so-called “live mercenaries,” in reference to bloggers who are active abroad.

Sociology professor Uday El-Hawari says that “the Hirak is a social movement that reflects the diverse ideological schools in society: Islamists, secularists, populists, conservatives, progressives, etc. Therefore, it lacks the ideological homogeneity that characterizes political parties, but holds the seeds of several potential parties. However, it is united by a common demand: changing the regime by amending the process of appointing presidents by generals and abolishing political police control over civil society.” Al-Hawari confirms that “new generations want a new regime, because the one that has ruled since 1962 has become politically and ideologically bankrupt.”

As for the idea of structuring, Al-Hawari says that it is impossible because the regime laws do not allow it. “No party or association can operate without a license from the Ministry of the Interior, whereas the Hirak is championing the amendment of the law on parties. [...] The regime will not tolerate parties that come to challenge its legitimacy and the Hirak is fighting the very principle on which the same regime is built, i.e., the army being the only source of power.”

Regarding the halt of weekly marches in the capital and the rest of the states, except for Kabylia, Al-Hawari believes that protestors acted wisely to avoid inevitable confrontations and perhaps also deaths. Otherwise, as he put it, the situation would have descended into what he likens to the “Syrian scenario.” Nevertheless, he is optimistic about the Hirak’s ability to find other means of activism.

Lawyer and leftist activist Awisha Bakhti refuses to describe the Hirak as a



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“minefield” because, “like society, it comprises different, contradictory, and conflicting schools of thought and ideas.” However, she admits that “even though the explicit common goal is regime change, the implicit goal is quite different. Some want to build a modern and progressive state, and others are planning to change the regime so they can stand in its place. Then, you have the most dangerous scenario of wanting to topple the nation state and exploit the people’s legitimate anger.” By “topple the nation state,” she means all attempts to dismantle the pillars of the State and sew chaos, similarly to what happened in the Arab Spring.

As for the structuring matter, Bakhti, who defended arrestees from the Hirak on several occasions, points out that “the grassroots movement was an opportunity to organize and present a solid and compelling alternative to building a democratic, social, and modern State.” She concluded by saying that “the Hirak’s best bet is maintaining peaceful and organized activities.”

The bet for peaceful action and unity of ranks has come to be more seriously considered following the early legislative elections of 12 June. They demanded consistency from the Hirak to safeguard its legitimacy before those who are supposedly the official representatives of the people in Parliament. However, the poor credibility of this election - like its predecessors - and the marring suspicions of fraud gave the Hirak activists a new opportunity to bolster their position and rearrange their priorities to face the new reality. Will structuring and organizing the Hirak come at the top of their list? Only time will tell.



## Endnotes

1. **Shoshenq or Shashank:** A pharaoh of Amazigh origin who lived in the tenth century BC. Kabylia's celebration of Shoshenq this year sparked much controversy on social media.
2. **Shaykh 'Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis** (1889-1940): The pioneer of the Islamic renaissance in Algeria. In the context of popular activism, he became the symbol of a rising political movement called the "Badissia- Novembria" movement.
3. **Abane Ramadan** (1920-1957): One of the leaders of the Liberation Revolution; he was assassinated in 1957 by his fellow activists. He is considered a reference for the supporters of the secular Berber movement. During popular demonstrations, his photo was raised by many.
4. **Radical Islamist movement:** The party was established in 1989 and won the majority in the first multiparty parliamentary elections in 1991. The cancellation of the election results and the dissolution of the party led to eight years of bloody clashes with the security forces.
5. **Madaniya Machi Askaria:** lit: Civil and Non-Military State
6. **Kabylia:** Located east of the capital city of Alger, it comprises mainly the States of Béjaïa, Tizi Ouzou, and parts of the states of Bouira, Bordj Bou Arreridj, and Sétif. It is characterized by high population density and vigorous economic activity.
7. **Rally for Culture and Democracy :**A secular party, created in 1989, based in the Kabylia region. It is currently led by former member of parliament Mohsen Bilabbas.
8. **Movement for the self-determination of Kabylie** (MAK): founded in 2003 after the 2001 disturbances in the Kabylie region, it is led by Ferhat Mehenni, one of the founders of the Rally for Culture and Democracy party, who has been living in exile since 2004.
9. **Socialist Forces Front:** leftist party with a strong presence in Kabylia, founded by the historical leader Hussein Ait Ahmed and a group of opponents of the Ahmed Ben Bella regime in 1963. The party led an armed rebellion that ended with the imprisonment of Ait Ahmed and the surrender of its military leader, Colonel Mohand Oulhaj.
10. A small city, about 40 km away from the capital of the Béjaïa State. It witnessed the massacres of 8 May 1945, when Algerians took to the streets in a number of eastern cities demanding independence and were met with brutal oppression. It is also one of the cities that saw the first marches against the regime in February 2019.



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Moussa Acherchour is an Algerian researcher, journalist and translator.

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