



# Al-Qaeda's Algerian Strategy: Attempts to Co-opt the Hirak and Rehabilitate the Salafi-Jihadi Image

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## Abstract

The Algerian Hirak is a popular non-violent protest movement pursuing systemic change in Algeria that has pressured the Algerian government for political transition since 16 February 2019. While the Hirak repudiates violent actors, al-Qaeda, a Salafi-jihadist organisation, attempted to engage the movement through propaganda by utilising a unique tailored approach to its commentary on the Hirak. Drawing from Algeria's historical memory of French colonialism and the Algerian Civil War, al-Qaeda sought to gain support from Hirak protestors, foster violent government overthrow, and entrench themselves in the local social structure. This research paper examines al-Qaeda commentary on the Hirak through qualitative content analysis and identifies shifts in propaganda messaging. The research also seeks to contribute towards a gap in the literature by addressing a not commonly discussed subject matter within terrorism studies and providing grounding for future case studies exploring similar themes.

**Keywords:** al-Qaeda, Algeria, Salafism, Hirak, Maghreb, propaganda

## Executive Summary

This research paper examines al-Qaeda (AQ) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) commentary on the Algerian Hirak protests through a qualitative analysis review of eight primary source documents. The following are some primary findings from the study:

- AQ's and AQIM's attempts to align their narratives with the Hirak constitute a major theme found throughout the commentaries.
- AQ and AQIM messaging draw heavily on anti-government sentiments by emphasising the corrupt nature of the Algerian government, while simultaneously offering praise for protesters' spirit of resistance to oppression and tyranny – all the texts described the Algerian government as being tyrannical.
- AQ and AQIM are aware of the lack of support for political violence among Algerians and, instead of calling for a violent uprising, they imply that violence will need to be used in the future. The commentaries use ambiguity to balance a call for future violence with an immediate call for patience wrapped in a condemnation of the Algerian State. They make appeals to the wider Algerian people that situate AQ, AQIM, and the Hirak within the same in-group confronted by a common adversary: the Algerian government.
- A majority of the releases additionally contained accompanying elements of religious advice and attempts to frame the Hirak itself through a religious lens. In particular, the wording incorporated AQ's and AQIM's view that Algerian and Muslim identity are synonymous, and that the Hirak should work towards Sharia-oriented goals.
- Some of the messaging also contained a transnational emphasis by addressing audiences in other countries including Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Libya, in addition to Algerians.
- The dual presence of anti-State/military messaging and positive appeals to military personnel once again highlight AQIM's efforts to strike a balance – in this case, a balance that taps into protesters' anti-government sentiments while also opting for a strategic approach of encouraging general defection from the military.
- In the case of AQ and AQIM propaganda, paying homage to the fight against French colonial oppression is an important narrative to incorporate into wider messaging for several reasons. It draws from a shared colonial trauma, celebrates Algerian triumphs over the oppression of an occupying force, and adds a uniquely Algerian-centred historical focus.
- AQ's and AQIM's lack of acknowledgement towards Algerian women is not surprising, but nonetheless, examining what is not said is equally important to include in this comprehensive analysis of the primary source documents.

# Introduction

The Algerian Hirak is a popular non-violent protest movement pursuing democratic and systemic change in Algeria since 16 February 2019, six days after then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his candidacy for a fifth presidential term.<sup>1</sup> The mass movement, which held protests on consecutive Fridays throughout the country, pressured the Algerian government for political transition from an entrenched system of military rule. The Hirak advocates for government transparency, decreased corruption and cronyism, fair elections, and economic freedom. The nonviolent nature of the movement has remained intact even though notable activists have been jailed and placed under government supervision.<sup>2</sup> Although nonviolence persisted, al-Qaeda (AQ) and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) watched the popular movement's rise with interest as demonstrated by their commentaries on the Hirak in their official propaganda. This qualitative analysis examines how AQ and AQIM attempt to engage with this movement and ultimately attempt to co-opt it.

This paper first describes the research methodology. It then provides an historical overview of the Algerian Hirak followed by a history of AQ's engagement with Algerian Salafi-jihadist organisations and AQIM's roots in Algeria starting from the 1990s. The origin of al-Qaeda's engagement in Algeria and the history of AQIM is proceeded by an examination of seven commentaries distributed by AQ and AQIM presented through the lens of four distinct categories: unity, system rejection, governance, and continuity of resistance. The authors identify and analyse narratives including AQ and AQIM's attempts to appeal to Hirak protestors, efforts to proscribe governance strategies, and AQ and AQIM shifts in rhetoric which often relied on incorporating historical grievances against colonialism and the Algerian government in efforts to find common ground with the movement. The analysis of the seven commentaries is followed by a case study comparing and contrasting One Ummah: Issue Two's articles "A Word of Advice for Our Defiant Algerian People" directed towards an Algerian audience, and "America Burns" alternatively directed towards an American audience. Realising the degree of tailored messaging that appears in AQ's and AQIM's Algeria-focused propaganda without juxtaposition may be initially difficult to assess. However, juxtaposing their Algeria-focussed messaging versus messaging focussed on a series of protests in another country highlights the highly tailored nature of the two groups' commentaries concerning the Hirak. Finally, the conclusion discusses the wider implications of AQ and AQIM messaging efforts to co-opt the Hirak and exploit anti-government momentum.

Previous scholarship has provided in-depth analysis of Salafi-jihadist organisations in the Maghreb and Algerians' participation in Salafi-jihadist groups, but not much research has focused on AQ and AQIM narratives about the Hirak. By offering a thorough examination of primary source documents and the rhetoric concerning an important historical moment for Algerians, this paper interrogates al-Qaeda's attempt to co-opt the Hirak movement. The usage of "co-opt" references Markus Holdo's definition, which characterises it as "...the elite strategy of using apparently cooperative practices to absorb those who seek change – to make them work with elites without giving them any new advantages".<sup>3</sup>

1 Madjid Zerrouky, "A Kherrata, Aux Sources Du Soulèvement Algérien." Le Monde.fr, Le Monde, June 8, 2019, [www.lemonde.fr/afrrique/article/2019/06/08/a-kherrata-aux-sources-du-soulevement-algerien\\_5473351\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrrique/article/2019/06/08/a-kherrata-aux-sources-du-soulevement-algerien_5473351_3212.html).

2 Ilhem Rachidi, "Repression in Algeria: Could It End the Hirak Movement?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 29, 2021, [carnegieendowment.org/sada/85060](https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85060).

3 Markus Holdo, "Cooptation and Non-Cooptation: Elite Strategies in Response to Social Protest." Social Movement Studies 18, no. 4 (February 18, 2019): 444–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1577133>.

Instead of examining how elites seek to absorb social movements' actors without making concessions, this paper examines how violent extremist groups attempt to use this strategy and subsume non-violent movements in the pursuit of gaining new adherents, entrenching themselves in local social structures, and fostering violent government overthrow. By re-focusing the co-optation framework on violent extremist groups through an examination of AQ and AQIM propaganda narratives, the authors hope to contribute towards continuing scholarly work on violent extremist co-optation strategies and AQ and AQIM aspirations in an Algerian context.

## Methodological Framework

We located a total of eight primary source documents created and circulated by AQ and AQIM that met the criteria of content discussing the Hirak. We conducted a search for AQ and AQIM-authored documents dated within a two-year period (since the start of the Hirak in 2019) that met the inclusion criteria of providing commentary on the protests. We obtained the primary sources from platforms such as Telegram, Rocket.Chat, and from Aaron Zelin's Jihadology archive.<sup>4</sup> Three of the commentaries were audio-visual (recorded speeches) and two of these transcripts were translated by Zelin. The other five commentaries consisted of written communications disseminated as online magazines and texts. Although this study does not use the complete population of commentaries that met the inclusion criteria, the primary narratives reached a point of saturation where no new narratives were identified.<sup>5</sup>

As we examined the texts and corresponding imagery, we posed several guiding questions: How do AQ and AQIM seek to engage with the Hirak movement through propaganda? What narratives and framing techniques are used? What is unique about this approach and how tailored is the messaging? In order to answer these questions, we applied inductive thematic qualitative content analysis as outlined by Philipp Mayring and Andreas Armborst.<sup>6</sup> This method of analysis was used to capture textual and visual observational data, which assisted us in identifying strategies, narratives, framing techniques, and the intended audience. These variables (narratives, themes, framing, and audience) are observed over a two-year period (from 2019 to 2021) in a longitudinal study. After identifying repeated themes, we organised them into larger heterogeneous categories. By narrowing these down, we were able to establish a taxonomy consisting of four distinct categories: unity, system rejection, governance, and continuity of resistance.

The selected eight commentaries were released by Al Andalus Foundation for Media Productions, Al Kifah Media, and As-Sahab Media Foundation.<sup>7</sup> Four of the commentaries originated from Al Andalus, AQIM's official media wing. The other four selected commentaries originated from Al Kifah, a pro-AQ media outlet dedicated to translating al-Qaeda communications into French, and As-Sahab, the official media arm of al-Qaeda Central.

<sup>4</sup> Telegram and Rocket.Chat are spaces where Salafi jihadists frequently distribute their propaganda.

<sup>5</sup> The inclusion criteria was AQ or AQIM-authored commentary focused on the Algerian Hirak movement. AQ and AQIM commentary that referenced the Algerian Hirak in communications focused on other issues were not included because the authors determined that one and two sentences references to Hirak did not provide as rich as the data source for analysis as pieces focused solely on the Algerian Hirak.

<sup>6</sup> Philipp Mayring, "Qualitative Content Analysis." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 2000. Armborst, Andreas. "Thematic Proximity in Content Analysis." *SAGE Open*, April, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017707797>.

<sup>7</sup> Al Andalus Foundation for Media Productions and As-Sahab Media Foundation are official media platforms for al-Qaeda and its affiliates. Al Andalus is the official media platform for AQIM. As-Sahab is the official media wing of Al-Qaeda's core leadership based in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Al Kifah is a pro-al-Qaeda media group that translates and shares al-Qaeda propaganda.

<sup>8</sup> Europol (2021), *Online Jihadist Propaganda - 2020 in Review*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.



## Contextualising the Hirak: Current Political Situation

In early 2019, hundreds of thousands of protestors filled the streets in cities across Algeria as citizens demanded that former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had been in power since 1999, step down and withdraw his candidacy for a fifth term.<sup>9</sup> More generally, they also voiced support for wider civil liberties, democracy, and an end to corruption within military and political circles. In response, Bouteflika resigned, and Abdelmajid Tebboune eventually became the newly elected President in 2019 with support from an already-powerful military with a history of gate-keeping power.<sup>10</sup> This peaceful movement, called the Hirak, continued to gain wider traction and demonstrators gathered weekly to maintain momentum until the COVID-19 pandemic led to restrictions on public gatherings. Despite the setbacks caused by the pandemic, protestors continue their anti-authoritarian calls for government reform,<sup>11</sup> and insist that President Tebboune must be held accountable for his verbal assurances of enacting reforms.

Despite the united front of the Hirak, there have been internal points of divisions among protesters between Islamist participants<sup>12</sup> and non-Islamists who fear possible future threats that Islamists could pose.<sup>13</sup> In response to these internal tensions and other differing viewpoints beyond matters of religion, others have called for an overall unity regardless of ideological divides where a diversity in political and religious thought is celebrated in recognition of the shared pursuit of forcing the regime to accept change or leave.<sup>14</sup> – a sentiment exemplified by one protest banner that read “Neither Islamist nor secular, but Hirakist.”<sup>15</sup> In short, the Algerian Hirak has sought to promote unity amid contemporary political division and in the shadow of the historical memory of the country’s civil war.

During the 1990s, after a failed attempt to transform the country to a multiparty democracy, Algeria experienced a decade of civil war known as *Décennie Noire* or the “Black Decade.” The war claimed the lives of an estimated 200,000 civilians and it remains a traumatic memory in Algerian history, which has contributed to the existence of some present-day ideological tensions between religious and secular elements in the Hirak concerning ideal forms of governance and the degree of presence that religion should or should not have in daily life, for example.<sup>16</sup> The memory of the Black Decade has affected other instances of public demonstration.

9 Amara Tarek, and Hamid Ould Ahmed, “Hundreds of Thousands March against Algeria’s Bouteflika.” Reuters, Thomson Reuters, March 29, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-protests/hundreds-of-thousands-march-against-algerias-bouteflika-idUSKCN1RA0VV>.

10 M. Tahir Kilavuz and Sharan Grewal, “Algerians have been protesting for a year. Here’s what you need to know.” Brookings. February 26, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/02/26/algerians-have-been-protesting-for-a-year-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>; Filiu, J.-P. (2015). From deep state to Islamic State: the Arab counter-revolution and its Jihadi legacy. Hurst & Company, p. 95.

11 Algeria: University teachers & students decry use of judiciary as repression tool. (2021, November 16). The North Africa Post. <https://northafricapost.com/53863-algeria-university-teachers-students-decry-use-of-judiciary-as-repression-tool.html>.

12 The term Islamist does not imply that individuals want to establish an Islamic government through violence, such as in the case of Ennahda in Tunisia. Salafi-jihadi will be used to refer to those who use violence to achieve these aims.

13 Thomas Serres, “Is Algeria’s Hirak Dead?” Al Jazeera, February 22, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/2/22/is-algerias-hirak-dead>.

14 Moussa Acherchour, “Algeria’s Hirak: Between Concerns of Division and Betting on Unity.” Arab Reform Initiative, Arab Reform Initiative, August 19, 2021, <https://www.arab-reform.net/publication/algerias-hirak-between-concerns-of-division-and-betting-on-unity/>.

15 AFP, “Algeria anti-government Hirak Protests Hit Streets After Year-long Hiatus,” Alarabiya News, February 26, 2021. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/north-africa/2021/02/26/Protests-Algeria-anti-government-Hirak-protesters-hit-streets-after-year-long-hiatus>.

16 Eleanor Beardsley, “Algeria’s ‘Black Decade’ Still Weighs Heavily,” NPR, April 25, 2011. <https://www.npr.org/2011/04/25/135376589/algerias-black-decade-still-weighs-heavily>.

In 2011, a wave of protests also focused on government corruption (mirroring grievances expressed during the Hirak) were largely peaceful as well. Faouzia Zeraoulia's qualitative interview study reveals, traumatic memories from the Black Decade have contributed to protest behavior in Algeria, but as Zeraoulia highlights, this also goes *beyond* the emotion of fear,

...memory of the civil war is not limited to a fear emotion or a trauma effect, rather a variety of emotions, values, lessons, and ideas play an important role in studying and measuring the protest behavior in Algeria. These emotions, which had been developed during the first political opening at the end of the 1980s and the civil war, define the perception of citizens toward not only the protest behavior but also the agency of a political change (opposition parties or movements).<sup>17</sup>

It is important to highlight the fact that the Hirak has been peaceful and violent extremist elements have been unable to influence protestors. This inability of the part of violent extremists is observed despite efforts by AQ and AQIM to tailor propaganda messaging focussed on the Hirak to influence the movement.

## Origins of AQIM and the History of al-Qaeda's Maghreb Expansion

Although this paper focuses on AQIM in the present, providing an historical overview contextualises the organisation's deep Algerian roots, its ties to earlier fundamentalist groups, and the development of varying degrees of tensions between AQIM leadership on whether to centre their efforts on Algeria or orient their focus abroad as part of al-Qaeda.

AQIM traces its origins to the Algerian Civil War – a period often referred to as *la Décennie Noire* (the Black Decade), which lasted from 1992-2002. In January 1992, an Islamist party called the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) was predicted to win the second round of Algerian parliamentary elections against the ruling *Front de Libération National* (FLN), the party that has led the country since Algeria gained independence in 1962. Upon the realisation that the FLN would lose power which would allow Islamists to then institute a new government, the military cancelled the election, banned the FIS, and imprisoned FIS leaders.<sup>18</sup> Although the FIS had gained wide popular support, this did not automatically entail mass support for the FIS's goals of establishing an Islamic republic governed by a *Sharia*, but instead indicated the ever-growing discontent with the FLN.<sup>19</sup> In the eyes of many, the FLN had become a party of corruption that strayed from the original FLN of the Algerian Revolution for Independence from French colonial rule where, by the 1980s, the party “became synonymous with corruption, authoritarianism...”.<sup>20</sup>

In response to the banning of the FIS, Islamist groups, including FIS members who had once supported pathways to power through the process of democratic election, “gravitated towards armed struggle.”<sup>21</sup>

17 Faouzia Zeraoulia, “The Memory of the Civil War in Algeria: Lessons from the Past with Reference to the Algerian Hirak,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2020, pp. 25–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798919889781>.

18 Vidar Skretting, “Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara: New Insights from Primary Sources,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, September 24, 2020, 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1580419>; James McDougall, *A History of Algeria*, (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press), 304-305.

19 McDougall, *A History of Algeria*, 287.

20 Jacob Mundy, “Bouteflika's Triumph and Algeria's Tragedy,” *MERIP*, 3 July 2016, <https://merip.org/2009/04/bouteflikas-triumph-and-algerias-tragedy/>.

21 McDougall, *A History of Algeria*, 287.

Unlike the FIS, a more militant “emerging” group called the Groupe Islamique Armé (GIA) rejected elections and saw violent jihad as the way to establish an Islamic state.<sup>22</sup> Some GIA members were returnee fighters from the war in Afghanistan and while the group promoted the end goal of establishing an Islamic state, it remained centred on Algeria while also conducting some attacks in France throughout the 1990s.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the FIS maintained a strong presence and by 1994, when violence during the Black Decade had drastically escalated, its armed wing, *l'Armée Islamique du Salut* (AIS), became a primary rival to the GIA. GIA and AIS rivalries, the GIA's targeting of civilians, the Algerian state's efforts to defeat the GIA, and state police as well as paramilitary oppression of Algerian civilians created an environment of endless violence as the war spun more and more out of control. Stathis Kalyvas suggests that such violence “can be understood instead as part of a rational strategy initiated by the Islamist rebels aiming to maximize civilian support under a particular set of constraints.”<sup>24</sup> However, in the midst of the chaos, speculations circulated at who was behind the various atrocities. McDougall succinctly frames this atmosphere of uncertainty:

Whatever the truth, whether intended by elements of the regime to demonstrate that Islamism was beyond the pale...or by Islamists to demonstrate the lengths to which they would go if pushed, or both...the massacres were clearly intended as an obscenely exemplary spectacle, a theatre of cruelty that horrified ordinary Algerians...<sup>25</sup>

Support for the GIA continued to dwindle due to its indiscriminate violence, including from some of its own members and other Islamist supporters. The Algerian government began dismantling GIA forces. The GIA's miscalculations and the cost derived from them facilitated its downfall and resulted in fracturing.

Hassan Hattab, a former GIA member who rejected the GIA's attacks on civilians, formed the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (GSPC) in 1998 and was joined by other former GIA members who felt similarly.<sup>26</sup> However, the GSPC was not free from internal disputes amongst its own ranks, and unlike other Islamist factions, it rejected negotiating with the Algerian government. A major issue of contention was whether the group should maintain a focus on Algeria or expand its aims to align with global Salafi-jihadist goals. Hattab preferred to remain Algeria-focused while Nabil Sahraoui and Abdel Droukdel, who led a GSPC faction, supported al-Qaeda's global ambitions.<sup>27</sup> Although all three men supported al-Qaeda, Sahraoui replaced Hattab and his locally focused goals. Then, in 2004, Droukdel inherited the leadership position after Sahraoui was killed in a fight with the Algerian army.<sup>28</sup>

22 Skretting, “Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib's Expansion in the Sahara”, 5; Barak Mendelsohn, “The Battle for Algeria: Explaining Fratricide among Armed Nonstate Actors,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, March 27, 2019, 11. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2019.1580419>; Thurston, Alexander. “Algeria's GIA,” *Islamic Law and Society*, 2017, 421. [https://www-jstor-org.proxyau.wrlc.org/stable/pdf/26571284.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A7ad3cc22affa5fe761b69cb2e1af3b05&ab\\_segments=&origin=](https://www-jstor-org.proxyau.wrlc.org/stable/pdf/26571284.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A7ad3cc22affa5fe761b69cb2e1af3b05&ab_segments=&origin=).

23 Mendelsohn, “The Battle for Algeria,” 11.

24 Stathis N. Kalyvas, “Wanton and Senseless?: The Logic of Massacres in Algeria,” *Rationality and Society*, August 1, 1991. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/104346399011003001>.

25 McDougall, *A History of Algeria*, 312.

26 Djallil Lounnas, “Confronting Al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghrib Sahel: Algeria and the Malian Crisis,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, 812. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2014.974033>.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

In celebration of the anniversary of September 11, 2001 attacks, Ayman Zawahiri announced the integration of the GSPC into its ranks<sup>29</sup> and shortly following, the GSPC announced its new name, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) completing “the affiliation process”.<sup>30</sup> The formal inclusion of this group within the wider AQ network is significant in that several other organisations in other regions were not accepted, but the GSPC was for several strategic and operational reasons. In his book exploring al-Qaeda’s expansion, “The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and its Consequences,” Barak Mendelsohn writes that AQ viewed the GSPC as “compatible with its efforts to present itself as a protector of oppressed Muslims”.<sup>32</sup> Mendelsohn further argues that AQ saw benefits to accessing smuggling routes in North Africa and the Sahel, maintained interest in spreading its influence in those regions, and viewed the GSPC’s infrastructure in France as beneficial to mobilising French Muslims (many of whom are of Algerian descent) to unite and act against anti-Muslim French policies such as the headscarf ban.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the GSPC’s inclusion into AQ is instructive in that it not only displays AQ’s interest in subsuming the GSPC but also displays its historical strategic interest in the geographical region as a jumping off point for further expansion.

Although much of AQIM’s operational focus remains in the region (North Africa and the Sahel), its propaganda efforts shifted to accommodate a more global focus recognised by and consistent with AQ’s messaging. Furthermore, the group has historically served as one of AQ’s franchise managers in the Sahel by providing technical assistance to various AQ-affiliated groups, dispelling the notion that AQ and AQIM are separate entities though the relationship is complex.<sup>34</sup> Al-Qaeda’s history in the Maghreb through its affiliate, AQIM, demonstrates the deep and interconnected relationship between the two. Consequently, it is worth emphasising that despite certain divergences over direction along with shifts in the relationship, AQ and AQIM should not be viewed as separate entities.<sup>35</sup> Despite considerable argument over what degree local affiliates of AQ are part of an umbrella organisation, this paper does not view these two entities as wholly separate. Therefore, when discussing AQ and AQIM, we reference media outlets specific to the AQIM affiliate and the larger AQ organisation.<sup>36</sup> Given these circumstances, an examination including *both* AQ and AQIM authored commentaries allows for comprehensive analysis of the commentaries on the Algerian Hirak and the groups’ attempts at co-optation.

In general, AQ has a rather limited presence in Algeria, with in-fighting and internal rivalries in AQIM having additionally contributed to its weakened presence.<sup>37</sup>

29 Zawahiri’s announcement, made on the fifth anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks, came three years after Sahraoui first pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda in 2003.

30 Richard Chelin, “From the Islamic State of Algeria to the Economic Caliphate of the Sahel: The Transformation of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (June 7, 2018): 1192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1454316>; Mendelsohn, B. (2016). *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*. Oxford University Press. p. 128, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190205607.001.000>.

31 A number of these individuals moved southward towards Northern Mali and the surrounding desert areas with what some consider the unspoken understanding that this would be permitted by the Algerian government as long as these Salafi-jihadist groups did not act in aggression against Algeria. Jean-Pierre Filiu, (June 14, 2020.) “Les zones d’ombre en Algérie de la mort du chef d’AQMI,” *Le Monde*. <https://www.lemonde.fr/blog/filiu/2020/06/14/les-zones-dombre-en-algerie-de-la-mort-du-chef-daqmi/>.

32 Barak Mendelsohn, “Chapter 7/ Spreading: Al-Qaeda’s Branches in Algeria, Yemen, and Somalia.” Essay. In *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*, 130–30. Oxford University Press, 2016.

33 Ibid.

34 Jean-Pierre Filiu, “Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and the Dilemmas of Jihadi Loyalty,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 11, no. 6 (2017): 166-72.

35 Barak Mendelsohn, *The al-Qaeda Franchise: The Expansion of al-Qaeda and Its Consequences*. Oxford University Press. (2016). p. 128, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190205607.001.000>.

36 Barak Mendelsohn, “Spreading: Al-Qaeda’s Branches in Algeria, Yemen, and Somalia,” in *The Al-Qaeda Franchise: the Expansion of Al-Qaeda and Its Consequences* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 131–32

37 *ibid.* Sammie Wicks, and Caleb Weiss. “Evolution of Algerian Influence in African Jihadist Movements.” *African Security Review*, 2022, pp. 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10246029.2021.2009889>.



Nonetheless, examining AQ and AQIM's attempts to appeal to Hirak protesters provides an informative case study in how Salafi-jihadist organisations and their local branches may seek to co-opt mass protest movements against authoritarian regimes by ingratiating themselves with protestors, drawing in wider public support, gaining recruits, and attempting to foster violent government overthrow. As will further be discussed, AQ and AQIM's messaging shifts which further provides a window into how the groups attempt to adjust to the changing social landscape and appeal to historical memory in a search for establishing common ground with the Hirak.

## AQ and AQIM Commentaries

Although Algeria has experienced a significant history of violence culminating during the Black Decade, acts of terrorist violence in contemporary Algeria are infrequent, subsiding since the early 2000s.<sup>38</sup> The low levels of terrorist activity on Algerian soil and Algerians' Black Decade-influenced aversion to Salafi-jihadists has not prevented AQ and AQIM from endeavouring to become relevant by attempting to co-opt the Hirak and ingratiate itself to the Algerian people using carefully crafted rhetoric.<sup>39</sup> In seeking to connect itself to the Hirak, AQ and AQIM have made explicit calls for partnership in attempts to present both its fighters and Hirak protesters as members of the same in-group with a shared common adversary: the Algerian government. Their desire to influence the Hirak is reflected in the selected eight commentaries released by Al Andalus Foundation for Media Productions, Al Kifah Media, and As-Sahab Media Foundation about the Hirak which will be analysed in this study. For reference, Al Andalus is AQIM's official media wing, Al Kifah is a pro-AQ media outlet dedicated to translating al Qaeda communications into French, and As-Sahab is the official media arm of Al Qaeda central.<sup>40</sup> The following documents were selected for their inclusion of AQ and AQIM commentary about the Hirak over a two-year period from February 2019 – January 2021:

1. The War on Islam in Tunisia and Algeria...How Long the Silence – 12 February 2019
2. Algeria...Getting Out of the Dark Tunnel - Audio Speech by Yusef al-Annabi, Al Andalus, 10 March 2019
3. Statement of Rejection and Warning! - Al Andalus release, 30 March 2019
4. We Advise You with God Not to Retreat – Audio Speech by Yusuf al-Annabi, Al Andalus, 4 April 2019
5. Soutien Et Conseil Pour Les Nôtres en Algérie... - Al Kifah release, 12 April 2019
6. And the Battle to Liberate Algeria Continues – Audio Speech by Yusuf al-Annabi, Al Andalus, 22 February 2020
7. A Word of Advice for Our Defiant Algerian People - One Ummah Issue 2, As-Sahab, June 8, 2020
8. Communiqué au Sujet des Affaires Djihadistes et Politiques en Algérie - Al Kifah Media, 17 January 2021

38 Jonathan Pinckney, et al., *Motives, Benefits, and Sacred Values: Examining the Psychology of Nonviolent Action and Violent Extremism*, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2021, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/11/motives-benefits-and-sacred-values-examining-psychology-nonviolent-action-and>.

39 Dalia Ghanem, "Why Algeria Isn't Exporting Jihadists." Carnegie Middle East Center, August 11, 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/08/11/why-algeria-isn-t-exporting-jihadists-pub-60954>.

40 Manuel Torres-Soriano, "The Caliphate is not a Tweet Away: the Social Media Experience of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, (March 1, 2016).

Most of the primary resources are best described as recorded speeches: “Algeria Getting out of the Dark Tunnel”, “We Advise you with God not to Retreat”, and “And the Battle to liberate Algeria Continues.” These speeches were delivered by the Algerian veteran jihadi, Abu Ubaidah Yusuf al-Annabi, a then-AQIM shura council member who now acts as the group’s Emir.<sup>41</sup> In 2018, before replacing Abdul Malek Droukdel as AQIM Emir, he began delivering speeches and signing AQIM press releases.<sup>42</sup> Before his increased media responsibility, al-Annabi participated in coordinated messaging campaigns with other al-Qaeda branches, such as supporting al-Qaeda operatives inside Syria in 2012.<sup>43</sup> The other commentary, “A Word of Advice for our Defiant People” is from One Ummah Issue 2. “Statement of Rejection and Warning!” was released by Al Andalus while “*Soutien et Conseil Pour Les Nôtres en Algérie...*” and “*Communiqué au Sujet des Affaires Djihadistes et Politiques en Algérie*” are Al Kifah French translations of communiqués. The time period during which these various primary resources were released, and the subject matters addressed in their content reveal AQ and AQIM’s focus on responding to the Hirak and events on the ground. The documents were selected for multiple reasons: they held several pages of content (including transcribed speeches) that allowed for thorough content analysis, the content was focused on the Algerian Hirak, and they were released over a two-year period allowing for a prospective longitudinal study. Their content encompasses a set of key themes that AQ and AQIM have emphasised concerning the Hirak. The themes in the commentaries are better understood when organised under four distinct categories: system rejection, unity, governance, and continuity of resistance. The next section will examine these key themes and the distinctive categories used to organise them.

## Aligning Narratives

AQ’s and AQIM’s attempts to align their narratives with the Hirak constitute a major theme found throughout the commentaries. Before delving into these dynamics, it is first essential to examine the demands of demonstrators themselves: members of the Hirak have consistently called for a complete overhaul of the authoritarian system, legal reform, transparency, an end to corruption, freedom of expression and the press, social justice, and democratic change (a sacred value) that represents the people.<sup>44</sup> Although Hirak activists liken their struggle to that of the previous generations, they do not couch this connection in the language of violence, as they strongly disavow its usage and fear the possibility of a second civil war – it is important to note that massive protests preceded the 1990s Civil War.<sup>45</sup>

41 Thomas Joscelyn, “AQIM names veteran jihadist as new emir,” FDD’s Long War Journal, November 21, 2020.

<https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/11/aqim-names-veteran-jihadist-as-new-emir.php>.

42 Akram Kharief. “Qui Est Le Nouveau Chef D’Aqmi, Abou Obeida Yousouf Al-Annabi ? – Jeune Afrique.”

JeuneAfrique.com. Jeune Afrique, November 24, 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1079608/politique/qui-est-le-nouveau-chef-daqmi-abou-obeida-yousouf-al-annabi/>.

43 Abu Ubaidah Yusuf al-Annabi, “A Message to our People in Syria: With the Edge of the Sword, Syria Will Be Liberated.” Al-Andalus Media, April 4, 2012, <https://jihadology.net/2012/04/04/al-andalus-media-presents-a-new-video-message-from-al-qaidah-in-the-islamic-maghribs-shaykh-abu-ubaydah-yusuf-al-anabi-a-message-to-our-people-in-syria-with-a-sword-you-liberate-ash/>.

44 Stellah Kwasi, et al. “Algeria to Hong Kong: Protests, Crackdowns and Concessions.” ISS Africa, 17 Dec. 2019, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/algeria-to-hong-kong-protests-crackdowns-and-concessions>. Rachidi, Ilhem. “Helpless Hirak? Democratic Disappointments in Algeria.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 10 June 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/84739>; Pinckney, Jonathan, et al. United States Institute of Peace Press, 2021, Motives, Benefits, and Sacred Values: Examining the Psychology of Nonviolent Action and Violent Extremism, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/11/motives-benefits-and-sacred-values-examining-psychology-nonviolent-action-and>.

45 Rachid Tlemçani, “Algeria under Bouteflika: Civil Strife and National Reconciliation.” Carnegie Middle East Center, 10 Mar. 2008, [carnegie-mec.org/2008/03/10/algeria-under-bouteflika-civil-strife-and-national-reconciliation-pub-19976](https://carnegie-mec.org/2008/03/10/algeria-under-bouteflika-civil-strife-and-national-reconciliation-pub-19976).

Instead, the connection between current generations and generations of the past lies in the sense of a shared struggle against oppression from abusive powers, whether governmental or colonialist, and, as Faouzia Zeraoulia states, “a variety of emotions, values, lessons, and ideas [that] play an important role in studying and measuring the protest behavior in Algeria.”<sup>46</sup>

## Systems Rejection

AQ and AQIM messaging draw heavily on these sentiments by emphasising the corrupt nature of the Algerian government while simultaneously offering praise for protesters’ spirit of resistance to oppression and tyranny. The repeated themes of government corruption, tyranny, and praise for resistance to authoritarianism all exist within a larger category of an overall rejection of systems. In short, these narratives argue that the current Algerian government, its institutions, and the system (Le Pouvoir) that they support lack credibility and legitimacy, and therefore should be rejected.<sup>47</sup> All the texts described the Algerian government as being tyrannical. Seven of the eight texts celebrated the Hirak:

Your decisive uprising has pleased us. Moreover, we were very pleased while following the events, with your alertness and deep awareness...<sup>48</sup>

...the people persist in achieving their dream in an environment full of love, mercy, solidarity, and brotherhood...we salute the rising people a salute of love and pride. And we renew our solidarity with the people and their struggle...<sup>49</sup>

The brave Algerian people are celebrating the first anniversary of their blessed revolution. We send our utmost greetings and support.<sup>50</sup>

As shown by the example textual quotations, AQIM made clear efforts to espouse their approval and support by using positive language to describe the protestors and declare solidarity.

## Governance

A majority of the releases additionally contained accompanying elements of religious advice and attempts to frame the Hirak itself through a religious lens. In particular, the wording incorporated AQ’s and AQIM’s view that Algerian and Muslim identity are synonymous and that the Hirak should work towards *Sharia*-oriented goals. The intentional push for Hirak activists to pursue system change through Islam and to foster the rise of an Islamic government constitutes themes in the second category, “governance”:

So that we do not deviate from the path...we urge you to apply the following...  
Have Islamic morals and Shari’ah ethics in your marches and demonstrations.<sup>51</sup>

46 Faouzia Zeraoulia, “The Memory of the Civil War in Algeria: Lessons from the Past with Reference to the Algerian Hirak.” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 7, no. 1 (2020): 25–53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798919889781>.

47 Algerians refer to the Algerian regime as ‘Le Pouvoir’ (the Power), which constitutes an opaque network of military, political and economic elites who rule the country without interruption since independence. El Kadi, Tin Hinane. “Algeria’s Uprising: The Beginning of the End of ‘Le Pouvoir’?” *ROAPE*, 20 Oct. 2020, <https://roape.net/2019/03/21/algerias-uprising-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-le-pouvoir/>.

48 Al Andalus Foundation for Media Productions. (March 2019). “Statement of Rejection and Warning.” Telegram archives, author’s.

49 Al-Annabi, Y. (April 4, 2019). “We Advise You with God Not to Retreat.” From *Jihadology* and translated by Aaron Zelin.

50 Al-Annabi, Y. (February 22, 2020). “And the Battle to Liberate Algeria Continues.” From *Jihadology* and translated by Aaron Zelin.

51 Al-Annabi, Y. (March 10, 2019). “Algeria...Getting Out from the Dark Tunnel.” Telegram archives, author’s.

That's the reason why we should be thankful to God who blessed us with this holy uprising, which will guarantee that Islam will remain...don't accept anything but Islam as your ruling constitution.<sup>52</sup>

O' to you, brothers of Muslim Algeria...remember that your mujahidin brothers in the Islamic Maghreb are, after Allah, your strong shield and your dyke resistant to any attack or aggression against you or the achievements of your revolution.<sup>53</sup>

Our honourable people in Algeria: The proud Islamic Shari'ah to which you must turn in all your affairs, because Islam is your faith, creed and way of life...<sup>54</sup>

This religious framing drastically departs from the narratives of the protestors who advocate for a free Algeria regardless of ethnicity, religion, or language. Conversely, some of the sources *simultaneously* emphasise the same sense of Algerian unity that protesters have continuously called for, such as al-Annabi's 14 April 2019 speech, "Algeria is a country of people who strive for the same goal regardless of their ethnicities, backgrounds, or language." This single statement appears to align with the sentiments of the Hirak regarding a united Algeria. However, only one paragraph earlier, he stated, "Don't accept anything but Islam as your ruling constitution" which clearly excludes Algerians from non-Muslim backgrounds and the many Algerian Muslims who do not support the establishment of a theocracy. This example of shifting rhetoric within the same speech demonstrates AQ/AQIM attempts to balance the desires of the protestors with their own set of goals and craft their language in a manner that shows their awareness of the Hirak protestors' sentiments. The statement also reflects the presence of several repeated themes that can be situated with the broader narrative category of "unity".

## Unity

This category, unity, demonstrates AQ and AQIM efforts to present themselves as part of the same in-group as Algerian Hirak protestors and display the Hirak's struggle as a shared struggle with AQ and AQIM.

In addition to emphasising the need for Algerians to hold a united front with one another, AQ/AQIM also expressed a shared unity with protestors and the wider Algerian population through the usage of words such as "we," "our," "brothers," and "us" in all eight texts. Two commentaries went further by *directly* stating that protestors should unite with AQ:

Our dear people: Your battle that you are waging now...is the same battle your Mujahideen brothers...let us together continue jihad, the fight and resistance.<sup>55</sup>

Extend a hand of friendship and cooperation to your Mujahid brothers...they are one of you. They are your real source of strength and honour.<sup>56</sup>

Most of the rhetoric in the eight texts noticeably tiptoes around the idea that protestors should join AQIM's ranks but the fact that these desires are made clear even a couple of times highlights the group's recruitment strategy and continuing focus on Algeria.

52 Al-Annabi, Y. (April 4, 2019). "We Advise You with God Not to Retreat."

53 Al Kifah Media. (April 12, 2019). "Soutien et Conseil Pour les Nôtres en Algérie, au Soudan, en Tunisie, en Libye, en Égypte et au Grand Maroc." RocketChat archives, author's.

54 Al-Annabi, Y. (March 10, 2019). "Algeria...Getting Out from the Dark Tunnel."

55 Al-Annabi, Y. (March 10, 2019). "Algeria...Getting Out from the Dark Tunnel."

56 Al-Maghribi, A. (June 2020). "A Word of Advice for Our Defiant Algerian People." One Ummah: Issue 2. Telegram archives, author's.



Nonetheless some of the messaging also contained a transnational emphasis by addressing audiences in other countries including Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Libya in addition to Algerians. Regarding organisational structure, AQIM is clearly not restricted to Algeria and, as its name suggests, it has a presence in the wider Maghreb and Sahel.<sup>57</sup>

Along with appeals to Algerian citizens, al-Annabi called on military personnel to distance themselves from the government in two speeches. Notably, he does not ask for these individuals to join AQIM but instead encourages them to side with the Hirak protestors:

And the most important thing is our message to all members of the military and security apparatus (army, republican guards, police, border police, and prison guards) to stand with your people in their blessed revolution.<sup>58</sup>

And to those in the military: join the people....<sup>59</sup>

Regardless of such attempts to address the military, all eight texts criticised the Algerian government - some of which included accusations that the State orchestrated terrorist attacks with the intention of placing blame on AQIM and criticisms of State claims about AQIM posing a threat to stability and security. “Statement of Rejection and Warning!” serves as a prime example:

We in the Organization of Qaedat al-Jihad in the Islamic Magrheb categorically deny that our soldiers target the peaceful uprising of the nation...senior criminals in the army promote such lies...conducting criminal operations and then pin them on the Mujahideen...<sup>60</sup>

The dual presence of anti-state/military messaging and positive appeals to military personnel once again highlight AQIM’s efforts to strike a balance. In this case, a balance that taps into protestors’ anti-government sentiments while also opting for a strategic approach of encouraging general defection from the military by citing corruption in senior military ranks. Profiteering on the part of senior military officers is often one of the grievances expressed by Algerians who argue that military leaders benefit from the system.<sup>61</sup>

## Continuity of Resistance

The previously examined narratives focused on current events pertaining to the Hirak but another significant theme in the selected texts incorporated historical grievances concerning French colonial rule. More specifically, it demonstrates the incorporation of historical grievance narratives to bolster propaganda and ideally gain sympathy by referencing the well-known history of colonialism. This thematic approach also captures framing techniques that are situated within the final category in our taxonomy, “continuity of resistance”. Continuity of resistance can be defined as the categorisation of propaganda statements that draw direction relation between the current Hirak protests and the Algerian anti-colonial struggle in a manner that insists that the current government is simply the continuation of colonial systems, methods, interests, and influence.

57 Djallil Lounnas, “La Stratégie Algérienne Face à AQMI.” Institut français des relations internationales. (March 2013): 154. <https://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2013-3-page-147.htm>.

58 Al-Annabi, Y. (April 4, 2019). “We Advise You with God Not to Retreat.”

59 Al-Annabi, Y. (February 22, 2020). “And the Battle to Liberate Algeria Continues.”

60 Al Andalus Foundation for Media Productions. (March 2019). “Statement of Rejection and Warning.”

61 El Kadi, Tin Hinane. “Algeria’s Uprising: The Beginning of the End of ‘Le Pouvoir’?” ROAPE, October 20, 2020, <https://roape.net/2019/03/21/algerias-uprising-the-beginning-of-the-end-of-le-pouvoir/>.

Unlike the relationship between other colonial powers and their colonies, France considered Algeria as an integral part of the metropole (as opposed to the status of a colony) from 1846 until 1962 - the year Algeria gained its independence.<sup>62</sup> By the mid-1950's population of *pied noirs*<sup>63</sup> had grown to one million and the French were on the verge of losing Indochina - two factors that would further solidify French resolve to maintain control of Algeria.<sup>64</sup> Following World War II, where many soldiers from France's colonies served in the war against Nazi occupation, calls for self-determination and a pathway towards independence from France grew increasingly louder. In Algeria, after over a century of political disenfranchisement and assimilationist colonialist policies directed particularly towards Muslims, tensions arrived at a boiling point. The nationalist party, the FLN, claimed responsibility for a series of coordinated attacks that occurred across the country on the night of 01 November 1954; thereby marking the start of the eight-year long Algerian Revolution for Independence.<sup>65</sup>

It is the legacy and historical memory of this struggle for independence that politicians, activists, and violent extremists have continued to reference for their respective purposes.<sup>66</sup> In the case of AQ and AQIM propaganda, paying homage to the fight against French colonial oppression is an important narrative to incorporate into wider messaging for several reasons. It draws from a shared colonial trauma, celebrates Algerian triumphs over the oppression of an occupying force, and adds a uniquely Algerian-centred historical focus. Five of the eight texts referenced French colonialism and/or the Algerian War for Independence:

French imperialism was the primary force that fought Islam...the revolution of your forefathers articulated a most beautiful facet of Islam: resistance to oppression. Their revolution represented an act of defiance against French attempts to wipe out all traces of Islamic identity...<sup>67</sup>

This one-year-old uprising is for Algerian people to reclaim freedom, dignity, and independence. All of which our fathers and grandfathers have fought for with their blood.<sup>68</sup>

...the Westernizing project that aims, among other things, to destroy Islamic identity of the Algerian nation, that the French Crusaders sought for a long time during the colonial era. When they failed at time to pass their projects, they assigned this dirty mission to their agents who are from us.<sup>69</sup>

Some interesting points emerge from commentaries on the colonial past and independence: AQ and AQIM are applying a religious lens to the anti-colonial struggle and even though the FLN and other nationalist groups were largely secular, there is a strong emphasis on French erasure of Algerian identity (again through a religiously centred lens). Some of the texts discuss the continuation of neo-colonialist dynamics.

62 Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France*. New York: Cornell University Press. (2006). 20; For historical perspective, the French conquest of Algeria began in 1830.

63 The term "pied noir" refers to European, namely French, settlers and their descendants who remained in Algeria

64 Horne, Alistair. "Why We Must Win." *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962*, New York Review Books, 2006, pp. 174-175.

65 Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 43.

66 Laurence Bindner, *Jihadists' Grievance Narratives against France*. February 2018, <https://icct.nl/publication/jihadists-grievance-narratives-against-france/>.

67 Al-Maghribi, A. (June 2020). "A Word of Advice for Our Defiant Algerian People."

68 Al-Annabi, Y. (February 22, 2020). "And the Battle to Liberate Algeria Continues."

69 Al-Annabi, Y. (March 10, 2019). "Algeria...Getting Out from the Dark Tunnel."

Perhaps more unusually, there is also rhetoric that borders on promoting the concept of Algerian nationhood, which is seemingly at odds with concepts of a united Ummah where any kind of nationalism must be rejected in favour of valuing Muslim identity above all else.

The issue pertaining to nationalism<sup>70</sup> reveals AQIM's continuing internal struggle on how to prioritise its goals: should they focus on Algeria first and foremost, or should they centre the global jihad? As previously discussed, divergence in opinions has led to leadership changes within AQIM and AQ Central's preference for those who prioritise global jihad. Although Salafi-jihadist ideologies do not view local and global as mutually exclusive, individual activists and leaders have, in practice, argued about where to maintain a primary focus, as demonstrated by the disagreement between Hassan Hattab and Nabil Sahraoui. Regardless, the language of secular nationalist revolution and post-colonial thought have still crept into commentaries from an organisation that is ideally expected to reject such concepts.

## A Case of Failed Co-optation

This paper uses an adapted version of Markus Holdo's definition of co-optation: „...the elite strategy of using apparently cooperative practices to absorb those who seek change ...”<sup>71</sup> and applies it to violent extremists' strategy of using apparently cooperative practices to absorb those who seek change (non-violent social movements). The specificity in Holdo's definition allows us to evaluate the efficacy of AQ and AQIM's Algerian Hirak-focused propaganda. The previously identified themes and their larger categories also assist in evaluating the efficacy of the commentaries.

AQ and AQIM express solidarity with Algerian protesters and endorse a shared Muslim identity in hopes of recruiting protestors into their ranks - even explicitly calling for them to join the *mujahidin*. Despite such efforts, protestors explicitly state that AQ and AQIM are not welcome. There are no reported increases in successful or thwarted terrorist attacks in the country since the dissemination of these commentaries meaning that the 2017 statement by the previous emir of AQIM, Abdelmalek Droukdel, remains true: “The Algerian front suffers from a rarity — and at times almost complete absence — of those willing to support and assist [the mujahidin], whether internally or externally.”<sup>72</sup> AQ and AQIM appear to have completely failed to establish unity with the Algerian populace and even among themselves.

Although Islamists have participated in the Hirak protests, there are no widespread calls among protesters to replace the current governance system with one grounded in *Sharia* and it should also be noted that these Islamist elements are not adherents of Salafi-jihadist ideologies. AQ and AQIM's urgings to violently establish *Sharia* appear to have fallen on deaf ears. While Hirak protestors do reject the current system of governance, they do not view violence as a valid method to create systemic change. Although the AQ and AQIM commentaries fail to open Algerian society to these groups, garner recruits, and foster violent government overthrow, there remains a possibility that the conditions for AQ and AQIM co-optation may change if Algerian governance continues to fail to meet the Hirak's demands and if the Hirak's efforts prove unsuccessful. Dalia Ghanem captures this risk in the following excerpt written following the emergence of the Islamic State amid questions of why Algeria was not exporting jihadists.

<sup>70</sup> The term ‘nationalism’ refers to pro-independence nationhood from colonial rule and post-colonial thought as opposed to ethnic nationalism.

<sup>71</sup> Markus Holdo, “Cooptation and Non-Cooptation: Elite Strategies in Response to Social Protest.” *Social Movement Studies* 18, no. 4 (February 18, 2019): 444–62, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1577133>.

<sup>72</sup> Inspire Magazine. “Inspire Interview: Sheikh Abu Mus’ab Abdul Wadood.” *Al-Malahem Media*. Is. 17. Summer 2017. p. 36.

At a certain point, the memory of the civil war will gradually fade, borders will become even more difficult to control, and Dawa Salafiya may no longer be able to respond to the anger and frustration of its followers. At that time, unaddressed sociopolitical and economic grievances, as well as the frustrations of the youth and their sense of hogra (injustice), will increase.<sup>73</sup>

While the spectre of future risk highlights the need for continued exploration of attempted violent movement co-optation of non-violent movements, it is not the only value presented by this study. A 2021 US Institute for Peace (USIP) study investigated the underlying similarities and differences between violent extremism and nonviolent action in Algeria, with a view to better characterising the motivations and psychological and social benefits of participation for members of nonviolent action movements in high-cost contexts.<sup>74</sup> The study observed sharp differences between violent extremism and nonviolent action.

Lack of agency, a sense of victimhood, and perceived low social status all appear not to be particularly distinctive characteristics of Hirak members. Trust in government is extremely low among Hirak members, but trust in the military is not; it is thus difficult to argue that members have systematically low trust in institutions. ... Hirak members identify strongly with the Hirak, perceive it as efficacious, and have a high level of trust in other members.<sup>75</sup>

Although Hirak members had low trust in the government, which AQ and AQIM attempted to exploit in their commentaries, the USIP study found that they did not completely distrust the military as a whole. Significant instances of widespread abuse on the part of the military could change this, and therefore changing dynamics in the country should be monitored in relation to the risk of a rerun to widespread political violence and civil unrest. Conversely, the research findings also appear to support the idea that although AQ and AQIM played upon popular grievances such as government distrust, democracy remained a sacred value for Hirak protestors that rendered AQ and AQIM's attempts to promote an Islamic theocracy, a failure.

The major points of expected difference between violent extremism and nonviolent action—namely, the strength with which sacred values are held and perceptions of homogeneity—were a mixed bag. Contrary to expectations, Hirak members did seem to view their movement's goal of democracy as a sacred value and expressed a high degree of opposition to compromising on it. In line with expectations, though, they appeared to see their movement as a complex entity, not a single homogeneous whole.<sup>76</sup>

This excerpt displays Algerian Hirak activists' high levels of trust in each other, their unwillingness to compromise on a democratic form of governance, and a shared identity with an acknowledgement of complex identities within the group. These findings appear to be antithetical to AQ and AQIM propaganda exemplified by the themes captured in the study categories unity, governance, and system rejection.

73 Dalia Ghanem, "Why Algeria Isn't Exporting Jihadists." Carnegie Middle East Center, August 11, 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/08/11/why-algeria-isn-t-exporting-jihadists-pub-60954>.

74 Jonathan Pinckney, et al. United States Institute of Peace Press, 2021, Motives, Benefits, and Sacred Values: Examining the Psychology of Nonviolent Action and Violent Extremism, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/11/motives-benefits-and-sacred-values-examining-psychology-nonviolent-action-and>.

75 Jonathan Pinckney, et al. United States Institute of Peace Press, 2021, Motives, Benefits, and Sacred Values: Examining the Psychology of Nonviolent Action and Violent Extremism, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/11/motives-benefits-and-sacred-values-examining-psychology-nonviolent-action-and>.

76 Jonathan Pinckney, et al. United States Institute of Peace Press, 2021, Motives, Benefits, and Sacred Values: Examining the Psychology of Nonviolent Action and Violent Extremism, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2021/11/motives-benefits-and-sacred-values-examining-psychology-nonviolent-action-and>.



Movement members did reject the current government system, hold a shared identity, and promote a new form of Algerian governance. However, the Hirak does not ignore the identity and political complexities of the coalition building observed within the movement.

Nor does the movement promote a shared identity of which Islam is the single motivator for coalescence. Furthermore, the Hirak does not accept AQ and AQIM's proposed form of rule. The survey data also indicates that the Hirak certainly has not expressed a desire for unity with actors whose goals run contrary to the goal of democratic reform. These findings are important as we seek to understand the dynamics that drive individuals to participate in violent and non-violent movement in high-cost contexts. They are also important to our understanding of how violent and non-violent movements may interact and under what circumstances a violent movement may co-opt and subsume a non-violent one. This study placed within the contexts of other parallel works such as the USIP report highlights a need for further research. This need for further research is more clearly observed when commentaries on the Hirak are juxtaposed with commentaries on an unrelated non-violent social movement.

## Case Study: Algeria vs. the United States

The following case study examining the difference in AQ messaging towards an Algerian vs and American audience highlights the strategic prominence of tailored propagandizing about two separate protest movements: one in Algeria (the Hirak) and one in the United States (the series of protests in response to police violence and racial injustices). Notably, the cited texts appear in the same AQ issue, "One Ummah Issue 2," which offers an ideal opportunity to juxtapose the difference in framing and rhetoric towards these two protest movements. It supports the wider argument that AQ does not apply generalised broad messaging but instead, carefully crafts their messaging and narratives according to localized contexts. It is important to state that although AQ does not seek to co-opt American protests, the desire to encourage violent actors to take direct actions remains the same and in both the American and Algerian protest cases,

The following compares "A word of Advice for Our Defiant Algerian People" and "America Burns." A two-page release entitled "America Burns" focuses on the pandemic, the socio-political climate, and protests:

Corona, internal divisions, racism, an economy in shambles, and attacks by the Mujahdeen...armed protests rage across America and a civil war appears to be in the offing. The last civil war marked the birth of the United States of America: this one, God Willing, should mark its end.<sup>77</sup>

As within the US, coronavirus cases were also rising in Algeria at the time of One Ummah: Issue Two's release, but messaging about the pandemic does not appear in "A Word of Advice". The emphasis on a multi-pronged approach highlighting the five elements of what the text refers to as "corners of America's pentagonal coffin"<sup>78</sup> attempts to show a United States in decline and on the brink of a civil war. Such adversarial rhetoric is expected but perhaps the more interesting element is the ways in which the piece discusses the social climate and racial injustices while making efforts to align with marginalised individuals – much in the same way that the issue tries to endear itself to Algerian protestors. The nature of this appeal demonstrates a familiarity with the US socio-political landscape:

<sup>77</sup> "America Burns" One Ummah: Issue 2. June 2020. Telegram archives, author's.

<sup>78</sup> "America Burns" One Ummah: Issue 2.

As for the oppressed in America and elsewhere, we wish to remind them of clause fifteen of the document ‘General Guidelines for Jihadi Work’ issued by al-Qa’eda: ‘Helping the oppressed and subjugated, Muslims or non-Muslims, who are victims of any kind of oppression. Supporting and encouraging anyone who helps their cause, even if those who step forth to help them are non-Muslims.’ Don’t be deceived by the Democrats’ exploitation of your grievances. They are no different than Republicans...the only way forward for you to liberate yourself from this misery is to follow the advice of the martyr, Malcom X, by embracing Islam and living up to [his] brilliant words...<sup>79</sup>

There are two primary target audiences of this article: al-Qaeda supporters and non-Muslim racial minorities, specifically Black Americans. In contrast, “A Word Of Advice” speaks to Algerians as a whole while this section of the text speaks to a sub-set of a country’s population. Another notable difference is *how* the target audiences are addressed. Whereas Algerians and their ancestors are “honourable brothers”<sup>80</sup> and “free people of Algeria...who refuse to bow down to oppression”<sup>81</sup> being constantly undermined by a tyrannical government, “Blacks in America”<sup>82</sup> are admonished and robbed of agency:

If your ancestors had taken this advice [‘the price of freedom is death’] seriously, you would have been free today. So do not do injustice to your grandchildren by choosing slavery over freedom.<sup>83</sup>

The most obvious reason for the contrast in tone is that Algeria is a Muslim-majority country where the author is addressing a Muslim audience while “America Burns” is directed towards non-Muslims who are viewed as pawns in a potential opportunity to bring about “a civil war in the offing”<sup>84</sup> if given encouragement. As with Algeria, the realities on the ground do not align with AQ’s simplified visions on how their objectives could be accomplished both in Algeria and in the United States.

The fact that both “A Word of Advice” and “America Burns” appear in the same One Ummah magazine provides an interesting opportunity for juxtaposition concerning rhetoric, propaganda strategising, narrative themes, and degrees of familiarity on the part of AQ with a set of separate socio-political atmospheres. It also emphasises the carefully crafted efforts that have been applied to tailored messaging tactics, as well as AQ’s own understanding of historical pasts and how they can best be exploited for the purpose of incitement to either immediate or eventual violence.

The comparison with One Ummah highlights AQ’s strategy to tailor messaging at a regional level. Although the various themes, such as anti-military and religious rhetoric, found in the commentaries concerning the Hirak could initially seem rather general, juxtaposing the difference in messaging strategies about protests in Algeria versus the United States demonstrates the level to which AQ tailors its targeted propaganda.

79 “America Burns” One Ummah: Issue 2.

80 Al-Maghribi, A. (June 2020). “A Word of Advice for Our Defiant Algerian People.”

81 Ibid.

82 “America Burns” One Ummah: Issue 2.

83 Ibid.

84 “America Burns” One Ummah: Issue 2.

## Conclusion

Al Qaeda and al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's commentary on the Hirak may initially appear conflicting given that there is both the rejection of, and encouragement for, violence. When analysed together, the texts reflect AQ and AQIM's strategic approach towards this matter. They are aware of the lack of support for political violence among Algerians and, instead of calling for a violent uprising, they imply that violence will need to be used in the future.<sup>85</sup> The commentaries use ambiguity to balance a call for future violence with an immediate call for patience wrapped in a condemnation of the Algerian State while simultaneously making appeals to the wider Algerian people. Furthermore, the sources situate AQ, AQIM, and the Hirak within the same in-group confronted by a common adversary - the Algerian government which they (AQ and AQIM) insist must be overthrown, "Our honourable people in Algeria...silence to those rulers who oppress you...how long will you be silent to those criminal scum who have no business other than fighting Islam..."<sup>86</sup> Thus, AQIM's attentiveness to the local socio-political context of Algeria shows that organisations within al Qaeda's network remain adept at instrumentalising local grievances much in part to AQIM's own Algerian roots - even if not always successful in subverting local social movements.

A majority of the primary sources highlight AQIM's efforts to portray themselves and Algerians as belonging to the same in-group despite Hirak protestors' obvious rejection of violent extremists and their attempts to hijack the movement in the manner previously described. Although revolutionary movements and extremist groups have used violence as a tactic to initiate a counter-crackdown by the government on wider populations, AQ claims, "Your (Algerian people) blood is dear to us...too precious to be split in exchange for nothing...spare it for the day when the revolution decides to resolve matters by the Book and by blood."<sup>87</sup> Terrorist organisations should not be automatically taken for their word, however, this statement appears to reflect a certain *optics-based* strategic approach that sends three distinct messages: 1) now is not the right time for a violent resistance 2) AQ would not jeopardize Algerian protestors' lives and 3) the day for a violent overthrow will arrive when the time is right.

It may be tempting to view AQIM's interest in the Hirak as a result of the group's Algerian roots. Although successive Algerian veterans of the Soviet-Afghanistan war and the Algerian Civil War have led the group, its membership is diverse, as reflected by the array of recruits from countries in the Maghreb and, increasingly, the Sahel.<sup>88</sup> The simultaneous lack of diversity within its most senior ranks would appear to explain the seemingly conflicting interest in a return to a focus on Algeria versus its current operational focus outside of the country. Although there is little space to operate in Algeria due to the capable security forces and lack of support from within the country, Algeria is believed to still be home to AQIM's most senior leaders. The organisation appears extremely invested in returning to Algeria and does not take attempts to delegitimise its support of the Hirak movement lightly.

On a final note, AQIM's efforts to manage their public image demonstrates the group's understanding of the importance in fostering a façade that the wider population would perceive as positive or more palatable.

85 Alternatively, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) has been more successful in recruitment attempts after implementing Kashmir-centred narratives. Prasad, H. (n.d.). The Salafi-Jihadist Reaction to Hindu Nationalism, <http://www.hudson.org/research/15137-the-salafi-jihadist-reaction-to-hindu-nationalism>.

86 Al-Annabi, Y. (February 12, 2019). "The War on Islam in Tunisia and Algeria...How Long the Silence." Telegram archives, author's.; Al-Annabi, Y. (March 10, 2019). "Algeria...Getting Out from the Dark Tunnel."

87 Al-Maghribi, A. (June 2020). "A Word of Advice for Our Defiant Algerian People."

88 Dalia Ghanem, "Jihadism In The Sahel: Aqim's Strategic Maneuvers for Long-Term Regional Dominance." Carnegie Middle East Center, June 23, 2017, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2017/06/23/jihadism-in-sahel-aqim-s-strategic-maneuvers-for-long-term-regional-dominance-pub-71413>.

It also reveals the organisation's awareness of current events and its ability to swiftly respond with their own counter messaging. Establishing a greater understanding of how terrorist groups make efforts to ingratiate themselves to wider populations, co-opt social movements, and tailor their rhetoric for a variety of target audiences will aid in building resilience to violent extremists. In addition to military policies and strategies focused on mitigating AQ's threat, analysing strategic propaganda efforts and observing how the group shifts its rhetoric according to developing wider circumstances of the local political climate offers the opportunity to enact better counter-narrative-focused policy efforts. It also serves as a case study of a terrorist branch attempting to adopt multiple angles that it hopes will resonate with the wider population more effectively and its efforts to balance its own local goals versus those of the wider parent organisation.

Case studies such as this also highlight violent actors' efforts to co-opt peaceful movements and stoke violence that may delegitimise these peaceful protests in the eyes of international governments, which in turn has the potential to benefit autocratic regimes who may see an opportunity to repress in the name of counter-terrorism operations. Lastly, examining the failed attempt co-optation of the non-violent social movement (the Algerian Hirak) by a violent group (al Qaeda) challenges grossly inaccurate perceptions that Muslims exist as a suspect community to be viewed with suspicion, a significant reality and fear for many Muslims.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, it is not simply the traumatic history of French colonialism and the Black Decade that explain current social conditions in Algeria and prevents violent extremists from taking hold in Algeria.<sup>90</sup>

Algerians' rejection of Salafi-Jihadists and organised political violence in general is due to numerous factors related to legitimacy, peaceful but radical change, and respect for human rights as evidenced by this research.

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