

Closed Session

North Africa's Political Unrest: The Cases of Algeria and Libya

Tarek Megerisi



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TAREK MEGERISI

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Tarek Megerisi

Tarek Megerisi is a policy fellow with the North Africa and Middle East programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. He is a political analyst and researcher who specialises in Libyan affairs and more generally politics, governance and development in the Arab world.

Megerisi started his career in Tripoli, Libya with the Sadeq Institute and various INGOs providing diverse research and democratisation assistance to Libya's post-revolutionary authorities between 2012-2014.

Megerisi returned to London in 2014 and has since been working freelance as an analyst and researcher, advising on Libya policy to a range of international missions to Libya, commentating on Libyan developments for publications like Foreign Policy, and co-authoring policy briefs or assisting with the Libya programming of a variety of think-tanks. He has also authored commissioned papers for organisations such as WPF and the Legatum Institute and contributed to wider publications for journals like ISPI. In 2017 he was part of the UN OHCHR team to update the Pinheiro Principles on Home, Land & Property Rights for the Middle East.

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Introduction

The year 2019 has been turbulent in North Africa, with events in Libya and Algeria emblematic of the wider dynamics at play in the region. The attempts of Libya and Algeria toward political transitions display two distinct representations of a wider revolutionary spirit which has characterised North African politics during this decade. (Laremont, 2013) Although the 2011 Arab Spring surprised the world, the revolts which took place were long in the making. The rentier state model in place was decreasingly able to satisfy growing populations and evolving popular demands. (Altu-nisik, 2014) Decades of state repression and a lack of social justice compounded these grievances, eventually causing the inevitable sparks that led nationwide demands for change. (Idris, 2016) The revolutions which took place and the transitions which followed were distinguished by each nation's local context. In addition, the machinations of counter-revolutionary regional states who felt existentially threatened by these developments were also significant. (Kamrava, 2012) Eight years on from the shock of the Arab Spring, the region has largely quieted down, and local politics has recovered some predictability, with the exceptions of Libya and Algeria.

Libya, now in the eight year of a transition sparked by a violent uprising against Muammar Qaddafi, remains torn between the examples of its neighbours. While the country has sought to emulate Tunisia's more suc-

cessful Arab Spring revolution and democratic transition, legacy issues and a powerful counter-revolutionary force is leading it closer to a replication of Egypt's backward slide from revolution to repression. Just ten days before a UN national conference was due to take place which would have re-started political transitions, the rogue former military leader Khalifa Haftar assaulted Tripoli, Libya's capital. (Wintour, Beaumont, 2019) This attack has pushed the country to the precipice, and it remains uncertain which way it will fall.

Algeria, which witnessed its own potential civil war beginning to boil at the ballot box some twenty years before the Arab Spring,

Eight years on from the shock of the Arab Spring, the region has largely quieted down, and local politics has recovered some predictability, with the exceptions of Libya and Algeria

watched the throes of its North African neighbours with concern that destabilisation could spread. Almost eight years to the day after Libya's protests began, a popular Algerian protest movement dubbed the 'Hirak' began. (Algeriepatiotique, 2020) Despite the memories of Algeria's 1991-2002 Civil War encouraging the population to be cautious, this widespread protest movement has been a popular response to octogenarian and increasingly ill Bouteflika's decision to run for another term in upcoming elections. (Zeraoulia, 2020) His was a startling decision, symbolising the regime's unwillingness and inability to change, inciting the population to demand new leadership. The now weekly mass protests may be almost antithetical to the character of Libya's protest, and the type

of change taking place is reflective of that. As new leaders are coming to the fore of Algeria's long-standing regime, and new elections are scheduled, the transition to come is being widely watched with suspenseful anticipation. On October 22, 2019, TRT World Forum organised a closed session to discuss the experiences of these two Maghreb states. The panel and participants analysed the dynamics that have driven events and explored their wider ramifications upon the region. Turkey's own policies have been affected. It is necessary to try and predict what may come next and also suggest potential solutions toward successful transitions for these two countries.

Unrest in Libya

Panel presentations on Libya have repeatedly pointed to the deep divisions in the social and political landscape as having been a fault line for the current conflict. The Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), created by a UN-facilitated agreement on December 17, 2015, has been effectively frozen since its inception. The current legislature, the House of Representatives (HoR), located in Tobruk in Libya's far eastern region, has consistently failed to endorse the GNA. The speakers have suggested that the intransigence of the HoR is facilitated by Khalifa Haftar. Similarly, several members of the GNA inner cabinet have been boycotting it since its creation, notably those close to and representing Khalifa Haftar. One panellist suggested that the situation has left the GNA unable to govern, helping to create a context whereby it has become beholden to corrupt forces. In addition,

the GNA has been at the mercy of various non-state armed groups in Tripoli. The UN and the Special Representative to the Secretary General for Libya (SRSG) Ghassn Salamé have worked since 2017 to enable an inclusive, widely sourced, Libyan roadmap for a new political authority and its mandate. These changes were meant to be inaugurated at a 'national conference' in the town of Ghadames. However, the April 4 unprovoked assault of Haftar's forces on Tripoli required the suspension of this conference. (Wintour, 2019) Libya's current state of war, as well as the political predicament which preceded it, were considered by panellists to be a contemporary expression of legacy problems rooted in Qaddafi's 42-year rule. Of additional consequence are the revolution which dethroned Qaddafi and the active work of foreign and domestic 'counter-revolutionary' forces.

The Jamahiriya and Its Aftermath – A Political Backdrop to the Current Crisis

'In 2011, Libyans removed their tyrant, then quickly realised the difficulties of removing the tyranny', said one panellist in his opening remarks. The speaker continued to intimate that after 42 years, Qaddafi had created a system of governance and political culture which posed the greatest obstacles to the revolution. These hindrances have yet to be overcome.

Libya's political system, the 'Jamahiriya', or state of the masses, has 'lacked internal cohesion', according to an audience participant. It was primarily designed to support a patronage network rather than to govern. One panellist agreed, stating that the system had facilitated a factionalised perspective of politics, leaving gaps and animosities that actors have exploited by seeking to dominate governmental appointments. They have also participated in boycotts and blockades that have delegitimised the state. These activities have interfered with successive governments since 2012, preventing them from establishing meaningful control and addressing urgent issues.

Qaddafi's authoritarian system and hostility to any political expression beyond his ideology was also blamed by panellists for creating an immature political culture incapable of dealing with the post-revolutionary situation. One panellist suggested that the notion of political parties being treasonous made it difficult to build political movements, or for them to gain any trust, which fed into the existing fragmentation and de-legitimation of political bodies and actors. This comment was in response to a participant's point that the accompanying lack of unity among Libya's political elite, and an over-reliance on the UN and international actors to provide policy and implementation guidance, effectively represented an abdication of responsibility from Libyan politicians. This in turn led to a lack of progress, thereby laying the groundwork for the rise of Haftar.

In addition to the political legacy, the war against Qaddafi created an unstable security situation, which also contributed to post-revolutionary political failure. Libya's Arab Spring movement was unique in that it included eight months of 'brutal war', according to one of the panellists' opening remarks, and he claimed that violence has led to present-day ramifications. He went on to suggest that the copious amount of arms throughout the country have remained easily accessible, despite the failed disarmament, demobilisation, and integration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) programmes, which resulted in an increase rather than a decrease in the size of Libya's informal security sector. These informal non-state, armed groups are predicted to continue pressuring successive governments to give in to corruption, which the panellist considered a significant obstacle to attempts at political or security-sector developments.

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Libya's Counter-Revolution – The Haftar Story

Panellists mentioned their view that the inspiration for Libya's counter-revolutionary movement is actually based in the Gulf states, who have viewed the Arab Spring revolutions as existential threats that could impact their own countries if they were not preemptively addressed. This has led to an extremely hostile policy from the Gulf toward revolutionary movements. The first speaker claimed that this was most effectively witnessed in Egypt with the deposition of Mohammed Morsi, and that Libya had then become their current priority.

He continued to claim that Libya's post-revolutionary authorities were naïve, and as such had not recognised the possibility of a counter-revolution following their victory over Qaddafi. He went on to say that this had allowed ex-regime affiliates within Libya, along with their regional allies, to exploit the lack of leadership and organisation in Libya's revolutionary movement, thereby advancing their own interests.

The second speaker built on this idea, proposing that this policy had been initiated through the co-opting of the protest movement, calling for an end to Libya's first post-revolutionary parliament, the General National Congress (GNC), during the winter of 2013. He continued to describe the chain of events leading to the division of the country and the rise of Haftar. He began by mentioning that the parliament had initially decided to continue working, despite widespread calls for the members' resignation, with complaints that they had not made enough progress.

In February 2014 the counter-revolutionary camp backed a retired general, Khalifa Haftar, to announce a coup d'état on television, (YouTube, 2014) which was followed by an invasion of the parliament by armed groups from the city of Zintan, who were then affiliated with Haftar. (Press, 2014) Although the coup attempt failed due to the lack of a military which could be co-opted, it did succeed in expediting the

election of a replacement parliament, the HoR. The panellist continued to state that despite a turnout of just 16% (compared to the 64% turnout for the GNC elections (Press, 2014), the new parliament was called to Tripoli to officially transfer power. Under the cover of an ongoing civil war, in a ruse orchestrated by affiliates of Haftar, a significant proportion of the HoR membership, as well as to-be speaker of the house, Aguileh Salah, went to Tobruk instead. Those who refused to go east filed a lawsuit, claiming that the house had been illegally inaugurated, which created a de-legitimisation of the new parliament. Eventually there would become a de-facto separation of the country into two rival administrative systems.

The account continued to claim that Haftar then started 'Operation Dignity' in eastern Libya, a military operation ostensibly centred on combatting jihadist groups, but which also exploited tribal tensions. The balance of power was thereby reconfigured in Benghazi, and Haftar created a security and political platform for himself and his movement. Haftar's military campaigns in eastern Libya continued until 2018, during which time the panellist claimed that he destroyed 30% of Benghazi and displaced or killed 25% of the population of Derna. During this time, the UAE facilitated the military operation while constructing a vast media operation to depict the operations as a war on terror. Other Libyan personalities were demonised, which deepened the polarisation in Libyan society.

The UN convened meetings between representatives of eastern and western Libya, attempting to bridge the divide and create a unity government, in what became known as the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA). However, military operations continued. The UAE, although a part of the multilateral effort behind the LPA, was simultaneously constructing an airbase in al-Khadim near Haftar's headquarters. This base was crucial for the continued military expansionism that persisted after the LPA was signed. Although

the GNA was formed through the LPA and took its seat in Tripoli, one panellist claimed that Haftar had pressured the HoR, which had remained in eastern Libya under his control, to refrain from officially endorsing the LPA or the bodies it had created. The panellist then continued to explain how this created a political system where all constituent pieces lacked legitimacy. They were incapable of working together, creating a vacuum which Haftar continued to fill militarily.

The continuation of peace talks and attempts to placate Haftar and work him into a wider political system, which the LPA was unable to do, contributed to additional problems: The UAE, France, and more recently Russia became more involved in the process. While SRSG Salamé constructed his bottom-up process, France focused on a top-down solution, bringing Serraj and Haftar to a conference in Paris during May of 2018. (Bloomberg, 2018) This was later followed by meetings between Serraj and Haftar in

Abu Dhabi. (France24, 2019) Despite having obtained favourable terms through his international allies, ten days before the national conference was due to take place, which was the final step in the UN process, Haftar decided to attack Tripoli. The panellist claimed that this action supports a viewpoint that Haftar was never interested in peace, as he views himself as the heir apparent to Qaddafi. The country today is divided between those who reject Haftar's counter-revolutionary project and those who either support it as a vehicle toward realisation of their own interests, or support one of the narratives Haftar uses to justify the operation, such as an attempt to remove non-state armed groups from the capital. The anti-Haftar camp has a numerical advantage, and with the help of Turkey has managed to secure initial successes, most notably in reclaiming the town of Gharyan, which had been used as Haftar's forward operating base. (Reuters, 2019) However, the UAE has endowed Haftar with air superiority which has harmed civilians, destroyed infrastructure and caused a stalemate.

Libya's Internationalised Transition

In response to a participant's questions, one panellist claimed that Libya's geostrategic position and its fragility following the revolution have attracted the interest and intervention of many international actors. As the transition progressed, most of these states either worked with the Gulf powers' counter-revolutionary movement or focused in on narrow strategic objectives, eschewing the UN's wider political process. They failed to protect Libya from the malignant influence of the counter-revolutionary camp. Nevertheless, they have all influenced the trajectory of the transition, as well as the war which is currently in progress.

The infamous split in the international community's approach and perspective toward Libya is symbolised by the rivalry between France and Italy. This has been going on since 2014 and was referred to in one of the panellists' opening remarks. France initially support-

ed Haftar's 'Operation Dignity' for a mixture of reasons: these centred around counter-terrorism efforts following Daesh attacks in France and ongoing operations in Mali. In addition, they wished to maintain and strengthen a security partnership with the UAE, with whom France shares an aligned political preference for 'strong man' rule in the Middle East and Africa. Italy, contrary to France, was trying to maintain its political and economic influence over its former colony, and also protect the interests of Eni, the multinational oil and gas company which has interests in Libya's hydrocarbon sector. From 2015 onward, Libya had become a national security issue for Italy, as large amounts of migrants began crossing the Mediterranean. This led Italy to secure a fragile yet functioning network of deals with non-state armed groups in western Libya. They were responsible for lessening the flow of migrants, at the same time maintaining a

close relationship with the GNA, which was necessary for Italy to increase its economic interests. Eventually, the competing interests of France and Italy came to head. France continued to materially and diplomatically support Haftar's military expansionism, while Italy sought to buttress the GNA. However, Italy's internal political strife allowed France to eventually dominate the international conversation and policy. France has continued to shield Haftar and build international diplomatic solutions around him.

Since the ascension of Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi to power in Egypt, Egypt has attempted to project its politics onto Libya through support of Haftar. Sisi was Haftar's first international sponsor, and aside from his ideological alignment and economic opportunism, he has attempted to use Haftar's forces to secure their shared border, a region which had become a thoroughfare for the insurgency in Sinai. (Dentice, 2017) However, as Egypt gradually became supplanted by the UAE, France and Russia, and Haftar became less capable of protecting their mutual interests, they began to explore other solutions. While maintaining military support for Haftar, Egypt is attempting to help manufacture a new political system by sponsoring a meeting of the HoR in Cairo to support Haftar. Egypt is working with Haftar to create a new government that could supplant the GNA, according to one of the panellists.

This will complement existing strategies to undermine the work of the UN. They will call for a greater role for the African Union (AU) in mediation, an organisation which Sisi currently chairs.

The internationalisation of Libya's transition has become apparent throughout the course of the conflict, according to the first panellist. He highlighted how Tripoli is bombed daily by Chinese drones piloted by Egyptians and Emiratis, while Haftar's forces shell the capital. They defend Haftar's forces with ordinance sourced by the UAE and delivered through Egypt. The UAE has also helped to orchestrate the deployment of Sudanese mercenaries to support Haftar. (AFP, 2020)

Russia, which has financed Haftar through printing a parallel currency since 2015, has also supplied technicians to maintain his ageing Soviet-era fleet. Russia has recently sent mercenaries from the Wagner Group to the front lines in Tripoli. (AP, 2019) They had previously been operating in Syria. While foreign interventions have been documented in detail by the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee's panel of experts, there is little international response or accountability. France and Russia have been able to block the mechanism of the UN Security Council.

Algeria's Popular Political Push

The year 2019 has been characterised by weekly political protests in Algeria. Millions of civilians have taken to the streets nationwide, imploring the authorities to reform the political system. Although the movement was able to exert pressure on the ruling authorities to postpone elections and commit to personnel and constitutional changes, there has been increasing friction between the two camps because of build-up to the December 12 elections. The peaceful popular movement dubbed the 'Hirak' was clear

about the spirit of change it wanted to see, but less clear about the specificities and implementation of that change. These vagaries, the lack of personalities within the Hirak, as well as worsening political and economic imperatives which demanded attention, created a context whereby the ruling party felt more confident that it could reassert itself; it planned to contain the Hirak and call for slow change that would begin at the ballot box and then be controlled.

A Lack of Trust

With the memories of Algeria's bloody civil war still prevalent in the minds of many, Algeria was the sole North African nation that did not experience significant upheaval in 2011. However, since 2014, persisting economic stagnation amid depreciating oil revenues have fuelled an increasingly tense atmosphere. Nevertheless, the panellist stated that many preferred to look to the 2019 elections as a turning point, believing that long-reigning Abdul Aziz Bouteflika would inevitably step down. Because he had reached the constitutional term limit, and the effects of his age and ill health had prevented him from making public speeches since April 2013, he was not expected to remain in political life.

However, when he was put forward for a fifth consecutive term in January it sparked outrage.

According to the panellist, this became a reckoning of the deficit of trust existing between the people and the civilian and military elite, labelled the 'pouvoir'. Given Bouteflika was hospitalised in Geneva at the time of the announcement, the panellist claimed this announcement was widely perceived as being the product of an out-of-touch elite, incapable of change. The fundamental deficit of trust underscoring the situation is highlighted by the persistence of protests since Bouteflika was officially forced out in April. The demands of the protestors have been clear in calling for an end to the entire system that put forward Bouteflika: it involves military and business aspects of the pouvoir as much as the political leadership. According to the panellist, these have been collectivised by the protestors.

The Hirak

The Hirak was depicted by the panellist as the eventual popular reaction to the shock and anger that came from January's announcement. Starting in February, it was the coalescence of a position of rejection against the wider system. The Hirak considered itself a necessary dynamic to confront the pouvoir, who had accumulated considerable popular resentment; the pouvoir had been seen enjoying wealth in Europe while the situation grew worse in Algeria. Initially the Hirak was considered as an attempt to shake the pouvoir out of a state of denial that had led them to believe that they could persist with the status quo. But quickly, it evolved into a call for the entire ruling class to leave.

The panellist stated that since February, student protests have occurred every Tuesday. Mass protests had taken place every Friday, drawing millions nationwide without fail. The Hirak has remained peaceful and socially conscious – even cleaning up

after themselves (Guemar, 2019) and although they have extracted concessions from the ruling regime, they remain steadfast and consistent in their original demand for all to leave. While the slogans of the Hirak provide clarity as to their demands - the example provided by the panellist was the call for a civilian administration governed by rule of law, through the slogan 'this is a republic not a barracks' - they have made their demands without providing a vision or schema for a follow-up system. The panellist described the nature of the Hirak in making peaceful, collective demands of a ruling elite expected to implement them as distinguishable from the Arab Spring revolutions which often devolved violently.

Nevertheless, the past few months have seen an increase in dynamics that may force the Hirak to alter its nature. The panellist recounted that arrests against local leaders, media strangulation, attempts to prevent protests from occurring, or angry responses to political

rallies were signs of a growing hostility from the regime. The protest movement has failed to wane with the passing of time, even in response to reforms and concessions granted so far. The changing approach from the regime has been related to the presidential elections scheduled for December 12, an event which the HIRAK has met with disdain as their fundamental demands have been left unaddressed. The regime's sterilisation of the candidate selection process, with five regime loyalists on the ballot, has left the HIRAK

feeling vindicated. The face of Algeria's military, Qaid Salah, is adamant that these elections represent the only path to change without plunging Algeria into the unknown. This has conjured up reflections of Algeria's harrowing civil war. That candidates have been met with empty rallies and defaced posters has suggested that despite the regime's growing frustration, the HIRAK is unlikely to wane or temper its position. This suggests that just like in January, elections to come might predict further political unrest.

The Response of the Algerian Regime

The Algerian military was considered by the panellist to be the real power of the Algerian state, and its protection is the reason that the state survives. This is evidenced by the military's influence behind the selection of presidents and prime ministers. It is a reality at the heart of the HIRAK's demands, unaffected by the resignation of Bouteflika or the interim government which has ruled since. The panellist claimed that Qaid Salah has emerged as the face of the regime during the interim period. He made 34 public addresses, compared to four by the President, and none at all by the Prime Minister.

At first, the regime attempted to provide concessions to the HIRAK, hoping to satisfy them enough to reduce the size of the protests, and at the same time maintaining control of the overall situation. It was a policy which the panellist claimed was exemplified by the interim government's anti-corruption drive, which resulted in the arrest of current and former officials, including former prime ministers and Said Bouteflika, who managed his brother's inner circle. However, many read this as an attempt by Qaid Salah to reshuffle the regime in his favour. The HIRAK felt vindicated when the policy shifted to an attempt to throttle the protests once the regime's initial goal failed.

The panellist explained that over the last few months the state has arrested journalists, activists, military

veterans and a party president in an attempt to coerce and contain the HIRAK. The panellist further noted that the state has also been comforted by the fact that it has been able to enact this policy shift without attracting international condemnation. Qaid Salah and the five generals who form his inner circle have also expanded control over Algerian media. The recent closure of the Maghribiya television station, which was the last remaining Algerian channel which discussed the HIRAK, is seen by the panellist as an attempt to starve the movement of attention and validation. The panellist also considers the continuing Internet cuts as part of this wider strategy to curtail the organising and publicity power of the HIRAK.

After having been forced to twice postpone the presidential elections due to pressure from the HIRAK, it is clear that Qaid Salah will commit to the December 12 elections despite public outcry. However, despite the regime's careful cultivation of the electoral process, it is unlikely to successfully stabilise the situation. The HIRAK's boycott of the election process means that the new president will immediately be confronted with a crisis of legitimacy and huge pressure to enact reforms. Meanwhile, the regime's unwillingness to relinquish control of the political process makes it inevitable that the new President will not have the freedom or authority to mediate between Algerian factions or enact meaningful change.

International Interference in Algeria

Although Algeria prides itself on maintaining a foreign policy doctrine of non-interference, and it tends to assertively protect its own independence, the panellist and participants considered that developments over the past nine months have strengthened the relationship between the pouvoir and various foreign entities.

Although France has largely remained quiet over developments in its former colony, and it has been wary of any overt involvement for fear of provoking anti-French sentiments among the Hirak, it was considered that more tacit support for the pouvoir and their attempts to control the situation are forthcoming from Paris. The panellist pointed to a potential French role in closing the Magharibia television station, and a meeting between French Foreign Minister Jean

Yves le-Drian and his Algerian counterpart Sabvri Boukadoum shortly after the closure were seen as indicative of this action.

Through the Hirak and the fractures that they have created among the pouvoir, Algerians have also been able to discover the extent of Emirati economic ties to prominent members of the regime. Responding to a question, the panellist explained that through joint ownership companies, the UAE has been able to develop a significant role in Algeria's import market, an economic strategy in line with Emirati activity elsewhere in the region. He further considered that the UAE is using their commercial links to support the pouvoir in resisting and counteracting the Hirak.

Turkey's View

The panellist responsible for this topic considered that Turkey is assuming a long-term perspective for North Africa. Turkey remains interested given predictions that dynamics signify strong growth for the continent over the next few decades. He explained that Turkish involvement is often driven by its merchant class; they are increasingly interested and are investing in the continent, attempting to pursue a model of partnerships that could facilitate larger infrastructure projects to interlink the continent. Therefore, they could boost the value of Africa's markets and any economic partnership.

The interest in deeper partners was considered by the panellist to create an interest in Turkey at the state level. Turkey could support projects that would enforce the rule of law and prevent the current political cycles which close markets and foment instability. Instead, involvement with Turkey could create an environ-

ment where business could flourish. To this end, the panellist considered that the economising model established by the AK Party can be replicated in other North African states, representing a stable platform for reform that would satisfy popular demands while averting political unrest.

Instead, involvement with Turkey could create an environment where business could flourish.

Conclusion

In general, it is becoming increasingly clear that the region is experiencing a period of creative destruction. It is a phenomenon which must be protected and allowed to flourish. The political systems in place, usually established at the time of independence or shortly thereafter, are decreasingly able to provide for their people or facilitate the social and economic evolutions that are taking place. Nevertheless, it is a phenomenon which various regional powers are seeking to contain. It was widely considered by panellists and participants that the UAE sees this as an existential threat, believing that the best possible change would be to weaken the countries of the region, allowing them to be more susceptible to their regional political and economic policies. The participants considered that the strategy for pursuing this end included attempts to make the old regimes of the region dependent on the UAE, either militarily, like in Libya, where they have animated Haftar's campaigns since 2014, or economically, as they have helped the Algerian *pouvoir* offshore the nation's capital. Although it is a region that has usually been within Europe's sphere of influence, participants suggested that European fears for the future are leading to a policy that is predicated on maintaining the region as a provider for energy and a vehicle for European security.

Algeria's future remains increasingly uncertain. The response to the December elections will reveal the character of the next chapter in the interplay between the *Hirak* and the *pouvoir*. At a fundamental level, Libya and Algeria were seen by participants to be dealing with similar problems, although they were expressed in different contexts. For Libya, there remains no clean way for any side to control the country militarily; the longer the war continues, the more difficult it will be to repair the social fabric and address the long-standing political and economic issues. Algeria and Libya were also seen by those involved in the discussion to share many of the same threats, and the manipulation of social and traditional media were considered the most severe of these.

While North Africa may be experiencing unprecedented political unrest, this is the result of transitions taking place which are necessary for the state's ability to adapt and prosper in the changing world. Algeria and Libya exemplify the current unrest which is taking place and the general threats to the region's transition. If they are not protected, the transitions will be prolonged. Destructive consequences will create destabilising dynamics throughout the African continent and across the Mediterranean.

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