# Israel and Algeria: Protests, Politics, and Colonialism

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Brief Analysis

## Exploring the parallels in the Israeli and Algerian experiences provides insight into the future of democracy in both countries.

Israel and Algeria may appear dissimilar at first glance—if not entirely at odds in the context of Algeria's traditional role in the radical pan-Arabist camp and supporter of the Palestinian national movement in its formative years, along with Israel's recent geopolitical alliance with Morocco. Yet the respective histories and experiences of these two countries are worth examining in tandem. Indeed, understanding both the differences and similarities shared by Israel and Algeria may offer some insights regarding the challenges facing Israel today.

### The Parallels of Protest

Now in its 29th consecutive week, Israel's mass civil protests against the judicial reform plan proposed by Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right coalition have demonstrated a staying power that even its most ardent supporters could have only dreamed about back in February. Then, 40,000 people went to the streets to protest against the legislative blitz Netanyahu's government had launched against Israel's only effective check on the executive power: the judicial branch. On Monday, the first step of that overhaul was passed by the Knesset in a vote boycotted by all 54 members of the opposition, prompting further demonstrations in the streets. Participants then and now quite understandably believe that they are engaging in something unique. This is certainly true, in the Israeli context.

However, very few Israelis have any knowledge of an earlier mass protest in the region. In 2019, a non-violent civil movement in Algeria known as the "*Hirak*" mobilized up to one million people for weekly demonstrations against their entrenched authoritarian regime. The *Hirak* ultimately lasted for a year, emerging within a regional wave of mass protests that played out in Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon that year and following earlier movements in Morocco (2016-2017) and Jordan (2018). The determination Algerian demonstrators displayed to dispose of the entire corrupt ruling system and replace it with something more democratic was no less impressive and admirable than Israel's protest movement.

Moreover, many of the themes and tools were similar. Israeli protestors now wrap themselves in the flag and embrace the values espoused by the Israeli Declaration of Independence. Algerians, too, reclaimed the heroic ethos of their War for Independence against France. Social media played a central role in the mass mobilization efforts of both cases. And the atmosphere of both protests often resembled a carnival, with participants wielding creative signs, slogans, and songs. As in Israel, Algerian protests drew strength and hope from their surprising numbers, creating a momentum that surprised both themselves and the regime.

However, one overriding difference distinguishes Israel's "Democracy Movement" from the Algerian *Hirak*. The latter drew from sectors of society which had no significant influence within the country's ruling military, bureaucratic, and economic elite. As a result, the Algerian regime was able to sacrifice some of the obvious symbols of the country's kleptocracy, throwing a few of them in prison, while eventually cracking down on the protestors and restoring a sullen quiet.

By contrast, the Israeli protest is being led by a cross-section of the country's most important and productive sectors—elite military reservists, high-tech power players, business and investor communities, and academic, cultural, legal, and public health professionals. Its strength was already obvious in March, when the movement forced the government to halt its planned legislative blitz. Without the cooperation of these sectors, Israel will be fundamentally transformed into a much weaker, illiberal, and ultimately unviable entity.

Connecting these stakeholders entailed decisions as to what issues would—and would not be—the focal point of the movement. Early on, the protest movement was adamant about preventing opponents of Israel's occupation policies from taking center stage. Since then, the movement has become a big tent, encompassing a variety of groups with specific agendas, including anti-occupation groups. Still, the overriding emphasis has been on blocking the judicial overhaul in the name of Israeli democracy and patriotism.

Nonetheless, the contradiction between Israeli democracy and the military occupation and domination of millions of Palestinians has become increasingly clear as the protests continue. This is especially true since many of the government's most resolute proponents of the judicial overhaul bill also espouse a quasi-messianic religious-nationalist philosophy demanding Jewish supremacy and sovereignty over the entire historic Land of Israel. The potential consequences of this trend for the country are stark.

**Connecting Israeli-Palestinian and French-Algerian History**

Though history may not necessarily repeat itself, as Mark Twain allegedly suggested, "it does rhyme."

To be sure, one must be extremely cautious about applying the 'lessons' of the French-Algerian conflict to the Israeli-Palestinian case. Indeed, the considerable differences have often been overlooked by Palestinian and Arab nationalists who have viewed the victory of the FLN over France as a model of emulation and source of inspiration. In contrast to the French colonialist project, the Zionist movement was, for its followers, a movement of self-determination, one that ultimately garnered international legitimacy and the allegiance of the bulk of world Jewry, and Israeli Jewish society coalesced into a cohesive and dynamic entity able to defend itself. Palestinians underestimated this fact in both the first and second intifadas, and likewise have underestimated the determination of Israeli settlers and its political supporters to preserve the settlement enterprise, even as Israel has never annexed the West Bank apart from areas within the expanded municipal boundaries of Jerusalem. Algeria, by contrast, was directly incorporated into the French state.

But similarities are also evident. Much like France's victory over the Ottoman Algerian regency in 1830, Israel had no master plan when it conquered the West Bank in a defensive war. The longevity of these experiences is growing increasingly similar—France ruled Algeria for 132 years. Israel's occupation of the West Bank is already 56 years long and counting. And integral to both experiences was large-scale settlement. Backed by French financial

interests, European settlers from across the southern Mediterranean streamed into the territory and by 1872, their numbers had grown to more than 240,000. Over the next 90 years, the settler population would increase four-fold. What evolved as a result was a multi-tiered judicial, political, and economic framework designed to preserve European privilege—a system very similar to the present system in the West Bank, which is designed to achieve just the same for the half-million Israeli settlers who now populate the area (another 200,000 Israeli Jews live in annexed East Jerusalem), alongside an estimated three million Palestinian Arabs.

Given these similarities, the end to the French-Algerian story can be instructive. By the 1930s, the vast majority of France's population could no more imagine the severance of Algeria from France than if it were Provence, Bretagne, or Savoy and Nice; this would remain the case right up until the late 1950s. Nevertheless, a new generation of Algerian Muslims had emerged from the wreckage and subsequent restructuring of France's "civilizing" project, and they began to challenge the status quo. Eventually, after a number of failed efforts, a small unknown group called the Front de Libėration Nationale (FLN) launched what became known as the War for Independence in 1954.

The ensuing eight-year conflict was slow in developing but eventually took on frightful proportions. Though France appeared to be "winning" at points, the reports of torture used by French forces and the overall momentum of decolonization around the world ultimately broke the consensus in France over maintaining French rule in Algeria, resulting in a bitter divide across the country and rocking the French political system. The ensuing paralysis ultimately led to Charles De Gaulle coming to power and the declaration of the 5$^{th}$ republic of France. Several years later, De Gaulle would oversee the decoupling of France and Algeria—in part due to his conclusion that maintaining French sovereignty in Algeria would pose a demographic threat to France long-term.

This process was agonizing and deadly. Between 1961-1962, ultra-nationalist French military and paramilitary groups conducted a scorched earth campaign against Algerian Muslims. Concurrently, French Algerians and native Algerian Jews, most of whom had been granted French citizenship, fled their homes in panic to "return" to France—a country where most had never lived. De Gaulle himself would survive multiple assassination attempts along with a failed coup.

Over the course of the eight year war, an estimated 250,000-300,000 Muslims, approximately half of them civilians, and about 28,000 French soldiers and civilians **lost their lives (https://books.google.com/books/about/Algeria.html?id=3efpuozCiWYC)** . The legacy of this tragedy and of the entire French colonial encounter with Muslim Algeria continues to shape and even haunt both countries 61 years later.

More than a few things associated with the French-Algerian and Israeli-Palestinian cases do rhyme. First and foremost, both conflicts carry ethno-national-religious connotations which in the age of nationalism, self-determination, and religious resurgence render the utter suppression of one group by another a pipe dream. Both conflicts involve large-scale settlement movements, necessitating the creation of parallel but manifestly hierarchical and discriminatory systems of authority. The brutalizing effect of continued violence from both sides in each case only further dehumanizes the "foe." Both France and now Israel have faced the particular difficulty of being an avowedly democratic state that seeks to maintain an adherence to norms of governance while also seeking to govern an unwilling and hostile population. Finally, both conflicts feature the dangers of internal fissures and violent civil fractures as well as the inevitable influence of outside forces and developments in the trajectory of the conflict.

**The Future for Israel and Algeria**

France's colonial enterprise in Algeria was characterized by extreme violence, and eventually French Algeria disappeared in a brutal and tragic finale despite its existence for more than a century. Israel itself, now 75 years old, is not going anywhere. And for the moment, the final stage Israeli-Palestinian agreement envisaged by the Oslo

Accords appears to be a dead letter.

But those who believe Israel can or should maintain and encourage the further deepening of a one-state, highly-stratified, and discriminatory reality should consider the fate of *Algérie Française*, and of those who paid such a terrible price along the way. Israel has already paid a bitter price, including the assassination of a prime minister, the deaths and injuries of thousands, and the corrosion of legal and civic norms that are no less essential to maintaining Israel's long-term security than a robust military.

Those already-corroded legal and civic norms are now under siege. There is a direct connection between the "judicial reform" efforts and the government's determination to create a one-state reality, a model similar to that which reigned in French Algeria for 130 years. The Democracy Movement may well succeed in breaking that siege, leading to a more centrist government. However, even if this comes to pass, Israel will continue to be confronted with the indigestible reality of the occupation of millions of Palestinians who are unlikely to succumb to whatever carrots or sticks Israel seeks to use. The choice between restoring a political horizon based on compromise and disengagement—with all the angry and probably violent opposition this would entail at home—and maintaining an unviable and even more violent status quo with gradual annexation will be stark.

Algeria, for its part, ultimately failed to develop into a stable and cohesive entity, and was wracked by another round of horrific violence during the 1990s, this between radical Islamist groups and a brutal military regime. Sixty years on, the continued absence of a genuine democratic process under a corrupt and repressive regime is sure to eventually result in additional episodes of mass protest. Their return will further undermine the regime's already tattered legitimacy, with untoward consequences.

In this case, lessons can go both directions. Algerian oppositionists may note from the Israeli non-violent democracy protests the importance of creating a "big tent" to encompass a cross-section of society on both the elite and popular levels, including its historically alienated and increasingly militant Kabyle Amazigh minority. Conversely, the determination of Algeria's authoritarian regime to survive at whatever cost serves as a reminder to Israel's Democracy Movement—and democracy advocates everywhere—that successful challenges to authoritarians and would-be authoritarians are long-haul operations requiring determination, courage, and staying power, with no guarantee of success. Palestinians are undoubtedly watching the Israeli democracy protests closely, and its lessons, as well as the lessons of Algeria, may have value for them as well. ❖


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