

# PEACEWORKS



## Motives, Benefits, and Sacred Values

EXAMINING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF  
NONVIOLENT ACTION AND VIOLENT EXTREMISM

By Jonathan Pinckney, Michael Niconchuk, and Sarah Ryan



UNITED STATES  
INSTITUTE OF PEACE  
Making Peace Possible

NO. 179 | NOVEMBER 2021

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the psychological and social factors that motivate participation in an ongoing nonviolent action campaign in Algeria. It is based on survey research conducted in early 2020 in partnership between the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and Beyond Conflict and is part of the Neuroscience of Resistance and Violent Extremism (NERVE) project, a joint effort of USIP's Nonviolent Action and Countering Violent Extremism programs.

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**Cover photo:** Thousands of Algerians took to the streets to commemorate the first anniversary of the popular protests in Algiers on February 21, 2020. (Photo by Toufik Doudou/AP)

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Peaceworks No. 179. First published 2021.

ISBN: 978-1-60127-876-0



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# Summary



The motivations for and benefits of participating in violent extremism have been extensively researched. A smaller literature exists on the motivations for and benefits of participating in nonviolent resistance movements. Combining the insights from these literatures should yield major benefits for practitioners and policymakers, particularly in understanding the less-studied nonviolent activism.

This report presents the results of a novel effort to study these two fields in tandem through an in-person survey of activists participating in the HIRAK, a nonviolent resistance movement that arose in Algeria in 2019 in protest of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term and has continued up to the present with the goal of driving reform of the political system. The survey sought to test to what degree several key factors found to motivate participation in violent extremism were also selected as motivating factors by HIRAK participants. Key similarities uncovered include strong feelings of identification with the group, trust in other group members, and views of the movement's goal—in the case of the HIRAK, the goal of democracy—as an uncompromisable “sacred value.” Yet the HIRAK members surveyed mentioned few of the negative motivators previously identified in the literature for participating in violent extremism, such as feelings of low status or victimhood.

The results offer insights in two directions. First, they better inform several challenges nonviolent action movements encounter in recruitment, mobilization, and achieving their stated goals. Second, they may lead to better identification of the unique pathways into violent extremism, distinct from similar pathways that lead to nonviolent action.



A woman holds a sign reading “No to a 5th term” in front of a line of police officers during a March 1, 2019 demonstration against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s decision to seek a fifth term as president of Algeria. (Photo by Fateh Gudoum/AP)

## Introduction

In February 2019, Algerians took to the streets to protest President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s decision to run for a fifth term. In just weeks, the protests grew into a nationwide movement, with millions joining public demonstrations calling for Bouteflika’s resignation and the wholesale reform of the Algerian political system. When both government repression and concessions failed to stall the movement, President Bouteflika stepped down. The movement endured even after this major victory, with activists continuing biweekly demonstrations until the present to continue to push for a new, democratic Algeria free of political corruption.

This movement, referred to in Algeria as the Hirak (“movement” in Arabic), was only the latest example of nonviolent action against President Bouteflika, who first came to power in 1999. In 2011, huge numbers took to the streets to demand political reform in Algeria as part

of the wave of protests throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and Algeria’s Amazigh (Berber) minority has long engaged in nonviolent action to try to secure greater protection of its cultural and linguistic rights.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to past nonviolent movements, the Algerian government has for decades faced resistance from jihadist violent extremists, many of whom refused an amnesty at the end of the Algerian Civil War in 1999 and instead continued to engage in terrorist attacks. While this violence has subsided since the early 2000s, violent extremist organizations (VEOs) such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb remain major security threats in Algeria and throughout the region.

What motivates participants in these different forms of costly political resistance? And what differentiates the motivations of the nonviolent activist from

**[Hirak’s] rapid growth was accompanied by a series of quick successes. President Bouteflika first announced that he would no longer stand as a candidate in the 2019 election, then resigned from office in April 2019, less than three months after the movement’s first demonstration.**

those of violent extremists? An extensive and growing literature has sought to understand the motivations of violent extremists; a similar if smaller literature has examined the mobilization processes and psychosocial benefits of engaging in nonviolent action. Yet the findings from these two relatively disparate literatures are almost never set side by side. Doing so should help practitioners and policymakers better understand how nonviolent action campaigns can best mobilize supporters, on the one hand, and on the other, how nonviolent action can substitute for violent extremism through meeting some of the same psychological and social needs that typically motivate violent extremists.

This report presents research piloting such an approach. The research instrument was a survey conducted among two hundred participants in an ongoing nonviolent action campaign, Algeria’s Hirak. The study sought to test to what degree factors previously found to influence the motivations for and benefits of participation in violent extremism might also influence the motivations for and benefits of participation in nonviolent action. The findings derived from this approach are necessarily tentative, intended to prompt further research rather than to offer a definitive set of conclusions. Yet even the preliminary findings provide powerful descriptive insights into the psychosocial dynamics of participation in the Hirak and how that participation compares to and contrasts with participation in VEOs. One key difference is that Hirak activists appear to experience few of the negative “push” factors that tend to motivate participants in VEOs, such as feelings of victimhood. One key similarity is that even those who participate in the movement infrequently claim that the movement is a significant part of their personal identity.

The findings underscore the potential benefits to be gained from using methods and survey tools developed to study violent extremism to better understand

nonviolent action. Conversely, learning more about nonviolent action groups can help illuminate alternatives to VEO participation to achieve change-oriented goals, as well as uncover important distinctions regarding the pathways to participating in VEOs. Despite decades of research, workers have failed to find *the* causal or explanatory model to explain such participation. The motivations for joining VEOs are diverse, as are the reasons for staying. A deeper understanding of high-risk collective action should help practitioners, policymakers, and researchers better understand what draws people into both, and the paths away from violent extremism to nonviolent action.

## **ALGERIA AS A CASE STUDY**

Algeria presents a good example for study because of its long history of both violent and nonviolent mass action. The widespread social mobilization of the Algerian independence movement under Algeria’s National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, FLN) resulted in a civil society more robust than that of many of Algeria’s neighbors.<sup>2</sup> Yet after the country gained independence from France in 1962, the leaders of the FLN, in particular the military leadership of the National Liberation Army, quickly hardened their control of the country into a single-party authoritarian regime. After a decade of growing corruption, poverty, and state violence, protests and riots against the one-party state in 1988 were brutally repressed by the military, with hundreds killed and thousands detained and tortured.<sup>3</sup> Revulsion at the scale of the violence led to political reforms, culminating in the election of the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) in 1991. However, a military coup to prevent the FIS from obtaining power initiated a brutal, decade-long civil war.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a longtime FLN insider, came to power in 1999 as the civil war was drawing to a close. He retained many of the authoritarian elements of

previous administrations, with power concentrated in a small group of loyalists and the country's oil and gas wealth fueling a "national sport" of corruption.<sup>4</sup> Both violent extremism and nonviolent action continued throughout Bouteflika's presidency. Jihadist militants, with their origins in the Armed Islamic Group, which fought against the Algerian government in the civil war, continued to wage attacks, eventually under the mantle of the group al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.<sup>5</sup> The Amazigh (Berber) group, centered in Algeria's Kabylie region, has had a decades-long nonviolent movement demanding greater political and cultural autonomy from the country's Arab majority.<sup>6</sup> And in 2011, together with people across the Middle East and North Africa, Algerians organized a nationwide movement demanding reduced food prices and political liberalization, to include the ouster of President Bouteflika. Though the 2011 movement failed to remove Bouteflika, its pressure led to significant reforms, including increased public sector wages, lower barriers to the creation of opposition parties, and greater access to public media for the opposition.<sup>7</sup>

The memory and legacy of nonviolent action in Algeria played a pivotal role in the emergence of the Hirak, the movement with which this research project was concerned. Hirak protests began in February 2019, when President Bouteflika announced he would seek reelection to a fifth term in office. Since suffering a stroke in 2013, Bouteflika had rarely been seen in public and spent most of his time moving back and forth between various international hospitals. The reelection announcement thus galvanized nationwide opposition, as it had long been suspected that Bouteflika was not really running the country and that his remaining in office merely provided cover for the country's corrupt political elite to continue their ways.

The Hirak spread rapidly to almost all Algeria's cities and towns—even to longtime regime strongholds.<sup>8</sup> Its rapid growth was accompanied by a series of quick successes. President Bouteflika first announced that he would no longer stand as a candidate in the 2019

election, then resigned from office in April 2019, less than three months after the movement's first demonstration. Bouteflika's resignation galvanized the Hirak to push for greater changes, including a demand for the complete uprooting of generals and officials seen to be entrenched in what the movement deems a corrupt and repressive system. Protests paused in 2020 in response to public health restrictions aimed at containing the COVID-19 pandemic. While some in the movement initially resisted calls to pause activity when the government banned public demonstrations, leading activists argued that voluntarily complying would show the movement's responsibility and the worthiness of its goals. During the pause in street demonstrations, Hirak activists turned to organizing pandemic relief for needy communities.<sup>9</sup> Demonstrations resumed in February 2021 and have been held regularly ever since.<sup>10</sup>

The Hirak has been a largely diffuse and leaderless movement, with no universally recognized leaders or a single concrete agenda. Many protesters fear that adopting formal hierarchical structures will lead to co-optation of the movement.<sup>11</sup> Thus, while there have been several attempts to formalize the movement's leadership, they have almost always elicited significant backlash from the street. Yet this diffuse structure has fortuitously allowed the movement to incorporate a wide range of organizations and perspectives, with human rights groups, student groups, independent unions, and many others aligning themselves with the movement and contributing to its actions. Groups within the movement have proposed dozens of plans for comprehensively reforming Algerian politics.<sup>12</sup>

In the two years since Bouteflika's resignation, the Hirak has continued as a national movement, with protests staged multiple times per week throughout the country, not just confined to the capital, Algiers. The movement has been praised for its broad appeal, bringing together students, professionals, the working class, and the elderly. The durability and effectiveness of the Hirak, in addition to Algeria's demonstrated strong national identity, made it a suitable case study.

# The Psychology of Violent Extremism and Nonviolent Action



To learn more about the similarities and differences between nonviolent action campaigns and VEOs with respect to motivations for and benefits derived from participation in such groups, it is helpful to start with common observations on VEOs and some assumptions frequently made about them. While it is beyond the scope of this report to review the extensive literature on violent extremism, a few of the diverse motivations for participating in such groups bear highlighting and serve as a comparative introduction to the psychological and social aspects of participation in nonviolent activism.

A strong sensitivity to perceived injustice, combined with a tendency to view oneself as a victim, is one common factor motivating people to join VEOs.<sup>13</sup> Another is observance of a set of sacred values. Sacred values are not necessarily tied to a particular religion or ideology but are simply goals or obligations about which no compromise is possible and to achieve which any sacrifice is acceptable. When such values are perceived to be under threat, particularly when they relate to the identities and groups with which an individual most strongly associates, then violence is more likely to be perceived not just as acceptable but as a moral obligation.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the experience of social exclusion may shift values previously perceived more flexibly into the realm of the sacred, increasing a willingness to fight and die for them.<sup>15</sup> Violent extremists may also be motivated by a quest for personal significance, a desire to prove that one matters, which is frequently triggered by experiences of personal or social humiliation.<sup>16</sup>

While violent extremism has rightfully received significant policy and research attention, an implicit bias that sees joining VEOs as antisocial and abhorrent has often obscured the complex reality that many of the motivations for participating in violent extremism are often quite normal. Few participants in VEOs exhibit psychiatric disorders such as psychopathy.<sup>17</sup> The psychological and social factors that tend to lead to violent extremism abound in any polarized society. Yet even in societies experiencing violent extremism, participation in VEOs is exceedingly rare, which makes it difficult to identify the motives that lead participants to violent extremism and the benefits that keep them there. It is likely that the motivations for participating in VEOs are broadly aligned with the psychology of participating in any kind of costly collective action (that is, actions undertaken as part of a community or social group for the sake of a common goal that comes with significant risk or personal cost).

A fine-grained comparative look at another increasingly prominent form of collective action—participation in nonviolent resistance—can help refine the understanding of the motivations for and psychological benefits of undertaking violent extremism. This in turn may lead to better identification of the unique pathways into violent extremism, as distinct from the similar pathways that lead more frequently to nonviolent action.

Research explicitly focused on the motivations and psychological benefits of participating in nonviolent action is much more limited, though there is a sizable body of





Algerians shout during a demonstration in Algiers on April 16, 2021. The crowd of protesters marched in the streets of the Algerian capital in support of the pro-democracy Hirak movement. (Photo by Toufik Doudou/AP)

related work on the psychology of social movements.<sup>18</sup> This literature is helpful in understanding nonviolent resistance because social movements often engage in nonviolent resistance alongside more institutionalized strategies, such as lobbying elected representatives. Like the literature on VEOs, the literature on social movements suggests several motivations for participating in activism, and the social and psychological benefits that come from participation.<sup>19</sup> It seems likely, based on both these literatures, that several important areas of both overlap and difference exist.<sup>20</sup>

One major area of overlap concerns group identification and low social status.<sup>21</sup> When individuals consider their membership in a group (for example, one based in nationality, ethnicity, or social class) to be a significant part of their identity, and also believe that group is

being treated unfairly or has an unfairly low social status, they are much more likely to engage in protest or other social movement activity in an attempt to address the perceived unfairness.<sup>22</sup> If they do not strongly identify with the group perceived as being treated unfairly, they are more likely simply to abandon the group and reframe their identity in some other fashion. This strong group identification is closely connected to the pathway into violent extremism whereby the combination of sacred values associated with group identity and the perception of injustice tend to motivate violent action.

Nonviolent action is similarly often driven by a strong sense of collective efficacy, or a belief that the group as a whole (typically the social movement) is able to achieve the goals it sets for itself.<sup>23</sup> When tied to feelings that one is unable to achieve change on one's

**A belief in the power of the group to do what the individual cannot [do alone] is a strong motivator to engage in the group's primary set of tactics, whether nonviolent action or violent extremism.**

own (low personal agency), a belief in the power of the group to do what the individual cannot is a strong motivator to engage in the group's primary set of tactics, whether nonviolent action or violent extremism.

The literature on social movements emphasizes the importance of a set of emotions that motivates participation in protest, and here too there are natural overlaps with motivations for participating in violent extremism. Anger, in particular, is a common emotion reported across many social movements and among violent extremists.<sup>24</sup>

One drawback to such comparisons is that the existing research on motivations focuses almost exclusively on social movements in developed democracies, where the personal costs of participating in activism are relatively low and participation generally follows accepted political norms.<sup>25</sup> These environments have little in common with the repressive, nondemocratic countries in which most VEOs and social movements engaged in costly nonviolent resistance more typically occur, and thus significant unanswered questions remain about the psychological and social dynamics of nonviolent resistance.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF TESTING IMPLICIT ASSUMPTIONS**

An implicit understanding of the psychological and social dynamics of nonviolent resistance deeply affects how leaders and participants in movements recruit new members, maintain mobilization and nonviolent discipline in the face of repression, and strategically sequence actions to achieve their goals. A similar implicit understanding underlies the work of international practitioners from various fields—such as preventing and countering violent extremism; youth empowerment; community cohesion; and disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration—who provide external support to nonviolent resistance movements. This understanding informs how practitioners identify beneficiaries and targets, offer appropriate substitutions for violence, and effectively assist emerging nonviolent resistance movements.

Yet these implicit understandings are rarely tested. Clarifying them by comparing them with the better-developed understanding of motivations to engage in violent extremism can help nascent nonviolent movements and external practitioners interested in supporting them influence individuals who may be inclined toward violent extremism to more frequently choose nonviolent action. And, separate from the risks posed by violent extremism, a better grasp of the psychological and social motivations to engage in nonviolent resistance and the benefits to be derived therefrom should help such movements more effectively mobilize potential members.

# Research Design, Methods, and Expectations

The research in Algeria was exploratory, aimed at investigating the psychological and social dynamics of Algeria's nonviolent resistance groups using many of the same measures previously used to study engagement and participation in VEOs. It thus sought to provide those working in or researching nonviolent activism a starting point for answering two key questions: (1) How similar are the motives for joining between nonviolent activist movements and VEOs? (2) How similar are the psychological and social benefits conferred on participants?

The survey did not directly compare participants in the Hirak with participants in a violent movement for several reasons. First, studying active members of VEOs comes with several ethical, practical, and legal challenges. Such studies can put both participants and researchers at significant risk of harm and can run afoul of laws against giving material support to terrorism. Consequently, studies of VEO members often take place in the pre-recruitment or demobilization stages. This study aimed rather to focus on current, active participation in a nonviolent activist group. Second, existing research has already elucidated several important psychosocial features of VEOs. And third, each regional context and movement has unique elements that render direct comparisons unhelpful, especially in this case, where the research focused on general psychosocial features of membership.

USIP and Beyond Conflict, a conflict resolution organization with a long history of working to effect transitions to democracy and national postconflict reconciliation, partnered with an Algerian research team to survey two hundred Hirak participants. The investigators

sought to elicit participants' motivations for joining the movement and the various psychological and social factors contributing to their participation.<sup>26</sup> It is important to note that the survey sample was exclusively comprised of members of the Hirak, rather than being a representative sample of Algerians. This means that the survey findings cannot inform broad causal claims about the effects of participation in nonviolent action relative to the experiences of the general population. Instead, the relevant points of comparison are within the Hirak and the respective weights participants assign to different psychological and social factors.

The survey questions focused on three broad areas:

**Demographics and motivation.** Who is participating in the Hirak? Why? Is there a family history of activism? To what extent are participants driven by sacred values and a sense of purpose? To what extent do they express grievance, feel a sense of victimhood, or feel disempowered?

**Other psychological facets of membership.** How tightly knit is the movement? Is there fusion between individual and group identities, as is often seen in VEOs? How do reasons for joining interact with membership and participation? Are those who are driven by a feeling of victimhood or by sacred values more committed? Do individuals derive a sense of power and agency from being part of the group?

**Group-level perceptions.** How do members of the movement view out-groups, such as security services and the government? How does identification with

the movement affect perceptions of trust, patriotism, and the media? How does it affect perceptions of the homogeneity of other groups?

Questions along these lines have been used to study VEOs, yet the same focus areas are relatively unexplored for participants in nonviolent resistance movements in nondemocracies. Because of the preliminary nature of the research, the survey erred toward comprehensively collecting a broad data set, with nearly two hundred questions posed on dozens of underlying concepts. The complete survey results and a more detailed description of the research methods can be found in the methods and statistics appendix, posted on Harvard Dataverse.<sup>27</sup>

Of this larger data set, ten factors stood out as likely to shed light on similarities and differences between the motivations and psychological benefits from participation in nonviolent action and violent extremism (see table 1). All ten of these factors are influential motivators of participation in VEOs or represent the psychosocial benefits to be gained from such participation. Their expected effects in the context of a nonviolent action campaign are summarized in the following three expectations.

**Expectation 1: Motivations similar to those of participants in VEOs.** Like violent extremism, nonviolent action is often motivated by a sense of grievance and forwarded by those who feel they have been excluded from the social or political order, often over multiple generations. Thus, it is likely that a set of negative motivators, such as perceived lack of agency, a sense of victimhood, perceived low status, low trust in government, and a family history of involvement in collective action, would correlate with participation in the movement.

**Expectation 2: Psychological benefits similar to those for participants in VEOs.** Nonviolent action is often described as intensely identity forming, and activist groups often exhibit powerful degrees of in-group solidarity, bolstered when their action is particularly risky, as in the context of Algeria. Thus, in line with the

literature on VEOs, it is likely that active participation in the Hirak would be related to strong in-group identification with the movement, perceived efficacy of the movement, a sense of shared grievance, and trust in movement members.

**Expectation 3: Major differences from participants in VEOs.** Nonviolent action campaigns, unlike violent extremism, typically end with some degree of negotiation or accommodation with their opponents.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that, unlike participants in VEOs, participants in nonviolent action campaigns may be less likely to treat their movement's central goal as a sacred value, something for which any sacrifice is reasonable and no compromise is acceptable. While nonviolent resistance is certainly driven by shared values, it seemed likely that the average participant in the movement would have at least some willingness to compromise, or would see the movement's goals as one value among many. It also seemed likely that, in light of the size and complexity of the Hirak, members would not perceive their movement as homogeneous.

### MAKEUP OF THE SAMPLE

Respondents were recruited during or immediately following nonviolent action demonstrations. After incomplete responses were excluded, the sample of survey respondents comprised 189 individuals, 101 male and 88 female, ranging in age from eighteen to seventy-eight years (mean age, 36.3 years). At least 81 percent were from urban areas, and 48 percent reported themselves to be of Amazigh (Berber) ethnicity. Most of those surveyed reported a significant time commitment to the Hirak, with 71 percent reporting that they participated at least once a week in protest activity and over half reporting that they spent at least three hours participating in demonstrations once they reached the demonstration site. Fifteen respondents reported that they had never participated in the Hirak, and three did not answer the question of whether they participated. They were excluded from most of the following analysis.<sup>29</sup>

**Table 1. Description and measurement of key concepts**

Concept	Description and measurement
<b>Personal agency</b>	A person's belief in own ability to control events that affect own life. Measured through ten questions asking participants how much control they feel they have over different aspects of their lives.
<b>Victimhood</b>	An enduring feeling that one is a victim across many different contexts. Measured using a standard psychological scale with four questions. <sup>a</sup>
<b>Social status</b>	A person's subjective belief about own relative status in society. Measured using a question asking participants to place themselves on a ladder, where people with the lowest status in society are on the lowest rung and those with the highest status are on the highest rung. <sup>b</sup>
<b>Trust</b>	The degree to which a person expresses trust in an individual or group. Measured using questions asking survey participants whether they trusted a named group or institution.
<b>Family history of activism</b>	Response to question asking whether a person's parents or older relatives were involved in activism in the past.
<b>In-group identification</b>	How much a person's identity is connected to membership in a group (in this case the Hirk). Measured through sixteen questions seeking to elicit personal commitment to the group and willingness to contribute.
<b>Perceived efficacy</b>	A person's subjective evaluation of how effective a group is at achieving its goals. Measured with questions asking about the effectiveness of the Hirk, the government of Algeria, the military, and Algerian youth.
<b>Shared grievance</b>	How much a person believes others in the Hirk share the grievances that motivate them to participate. Measured through two standard psychological questions.
<b>Sacred values</b>	Whether a person believes that a certain value is so important that no compromise on it is possible. Measured using a set of questions from the psychological literature with democracy (the Hirk's goal) as the value in question. <sup>c</sup>
<b>Group homogeneity</b>	How much a person perceives the members of a group (in this case the Hirk) as bonded in a single coherent unit. Measured using a standard set of thirteen questions asking survey participants how much they agree with such statements as "People in the movement are like a unified whole." <sup>d</sup>

**Notes:**

- a. Rahav Gabay et al., "The Tendency for Interpersonal Victimhood: The Personality Construct and Its Consequences," *Personality and Individual Differences* 165 (October 15, 2020): 110–34.
- b. This measure is called the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status. See Nancy E. Adler et al., "Relationship of Subjective and Objective Social Status with Psychological and Physiological Functioning: Preliminary Data in Healthy, White Women," *Health Psychology* 19, no. 6 (2000): 586.
- c. Scott Atran and Robert Axelrod, "Reframing Sacred Values," *Negotiation Journal* 24, no. 3 (2008): 221–46.
- d. Technically speaking, the scale is a measure of group "entitativity"; however, we use the more common term "homogeneity" as a close cognate that is more generally familiar. See Brian Lickel et al., "Varieties of Groups and the Perception of Group Entitativity," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 2 (2000): 223.

# Research Findings

The research findings of this project are organized according to the three expectations about motivations, benefits, and differences from VEO participants. This section highlights the general overview of the findings on this topic, areas in which the study's expectations were met, and areas in which the data showed unexpected patterns. Overall, while the data confirmed several of the study's expectations, several surprising and unexpected patterns provide fruitful ground for further research.

## EXPECTATION 1: MOTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION

Why do people participate in the Hirak, and how similar are their motivations to the motivations of people who participate in VEOs? First, respondents were asked explicitly for the most important reason why they participate in the Hirak, with the results summarized in figure 1. The top reason stated was “for the principles,” with political and social reasons also mentioned as important motivators.<sup>30</sup>

A family history of activism also appears to be an important characteristic of Hirak members: 167 members of the sample (94 percent) reported that their family had a history of activism. Of these, the 1988 Black October protests, which initiated a brief period of liberalization that was ultimately dashed by a military coup and the subsequent Algerian Civil War, was a particularly important experience. Forty percent of Hirak members reported family members had participated in the Black October protests.

Yet explicit motivations may not comprehensively capture the drivers of involvement or identification with the Hirak. VEO research suggests that unconscious psychological and social factors push people toward extremist groups and that these drivers may be more important than explicit motivations or expressed grievances, even if they are not directly expressed or acknowledged.

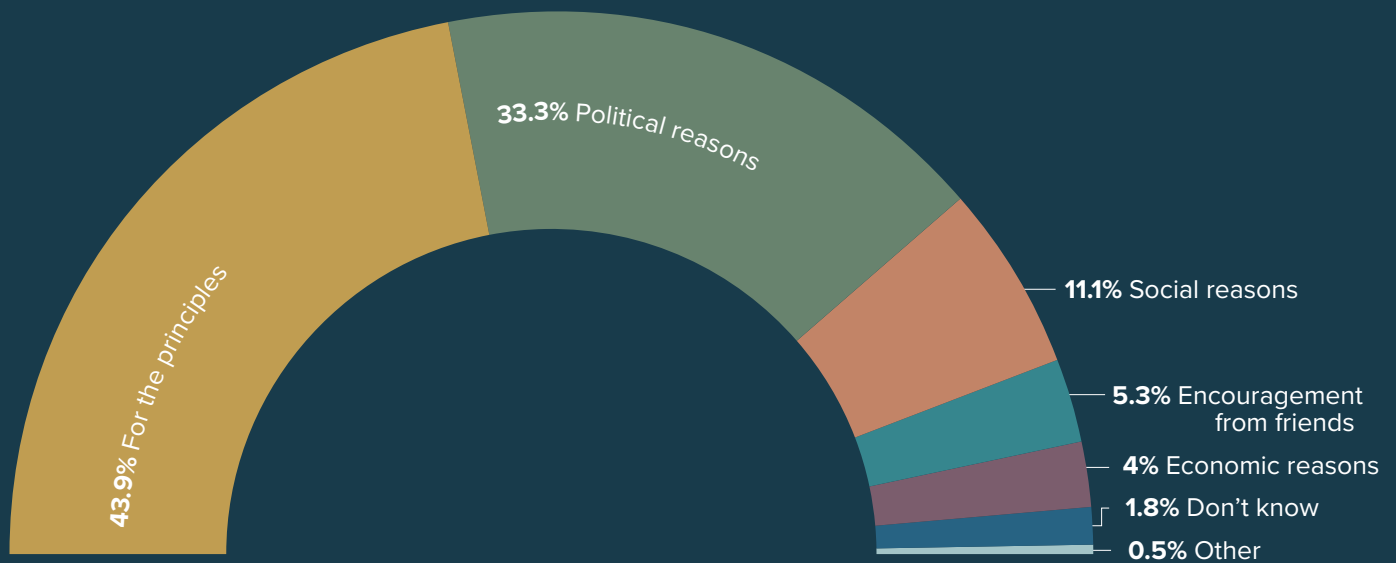
As noted earlier, many of the factors that encourage participation in VEOs are quite common. And while these factors alone do not necessarily or consistently increase the risk of recruitment into violent extremism, they may affect individuals' attraction to collective action generally. Simply, discontent and perceived relative personal deprivation often fuel interest in collective action, either violent or nonviolent.<sup>31</sup>

The study sought to assess some of these unconscious factors among Hirak participants to develop a more comprehensive picture of the individuals who identify strongly with the movement and who may be most devoted to the cause. Specifically, the research explored perceptions of status, agency, victimhood, and trust in government to create a better understanding of implicit factors that may contribute to attraction, identification, and devotion to the Hirak.

Contrary to expectations, the numbers revealed nothing particularly remarkable about members of the Hirak in terms of perceived social status, agency, and victimhood. Members reported relatively high social status for themselves, and middling feelings of personal agency and sense of victimhood. While it is unknown whether these numbers differ significantly from what might be found in a survey of the general Algerian population, in absolute terms they do not indicate particularly powerful motivators.

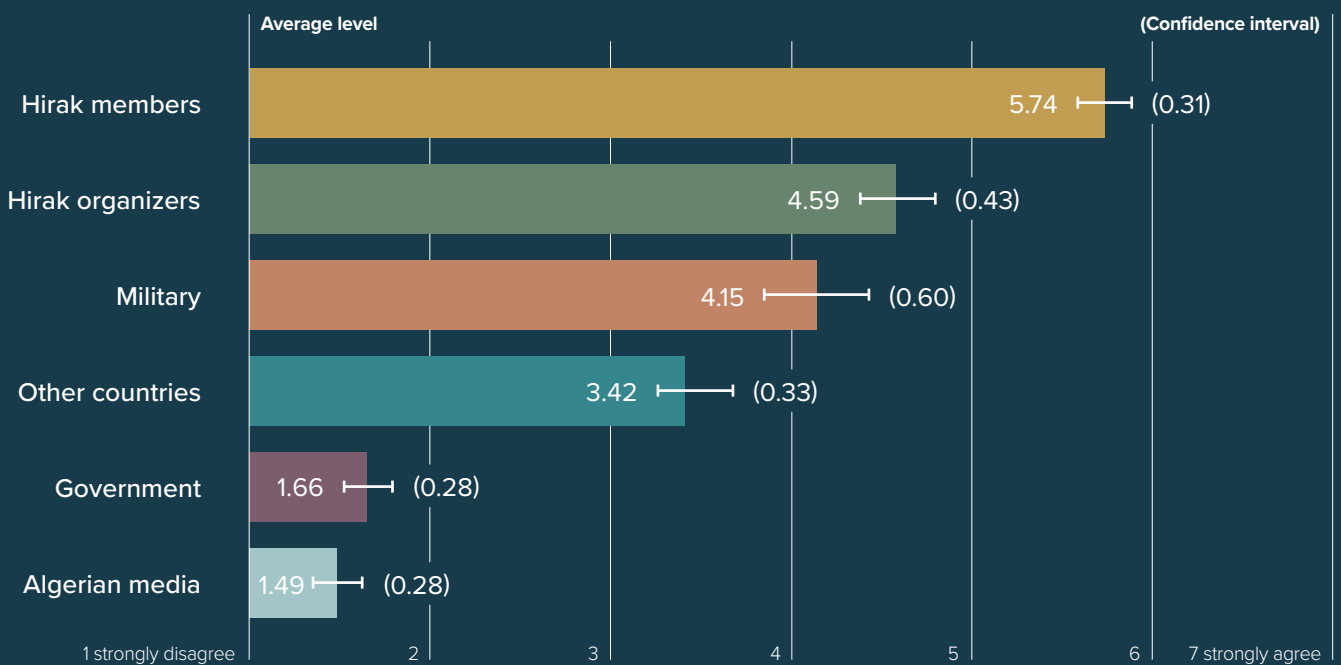
The picture is starkly different when levels of trust are considered (see figure 2). When asked whether they trusted the government, members of the Hirak reported very little trust, with the average level near the bottom of the scale (midway between “strongly disagree” and “disagree”). This is a significant difference from their reported high levels of trust in other members of the Hirak.

Figure 1. Stated reasons for participating in the Hirak



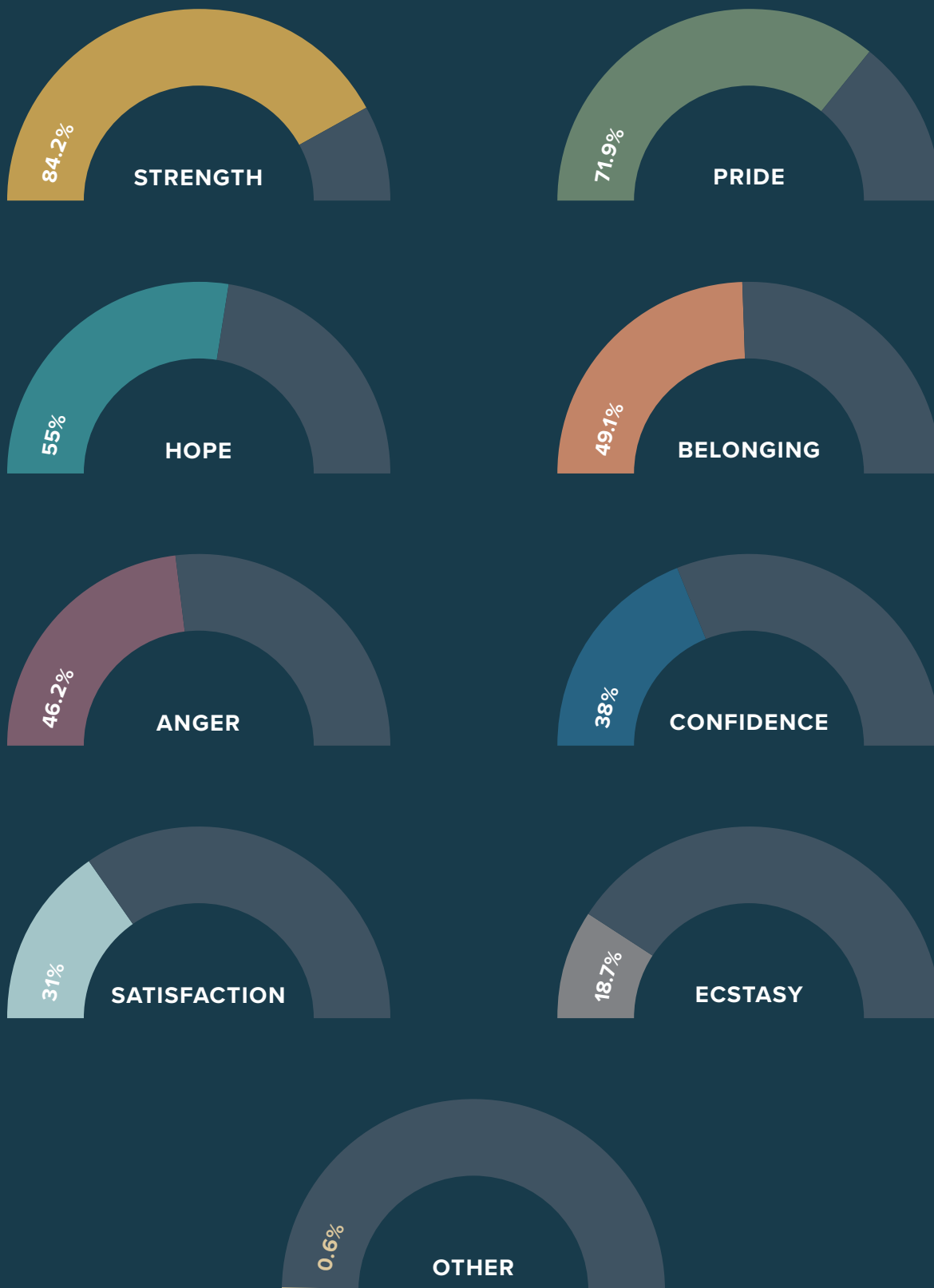
Participants were asked to select a single choice from these options.

Figure 2. Average levels of trust across groups



Bars indicate the average response to the question, "Indicate how much you agree with the following statement: I trust this group." Responses are measured on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 represents "strongly disagree" and 7 represents "strongly agree." Error bars are a 95 percent bootstrapped confidence interval.

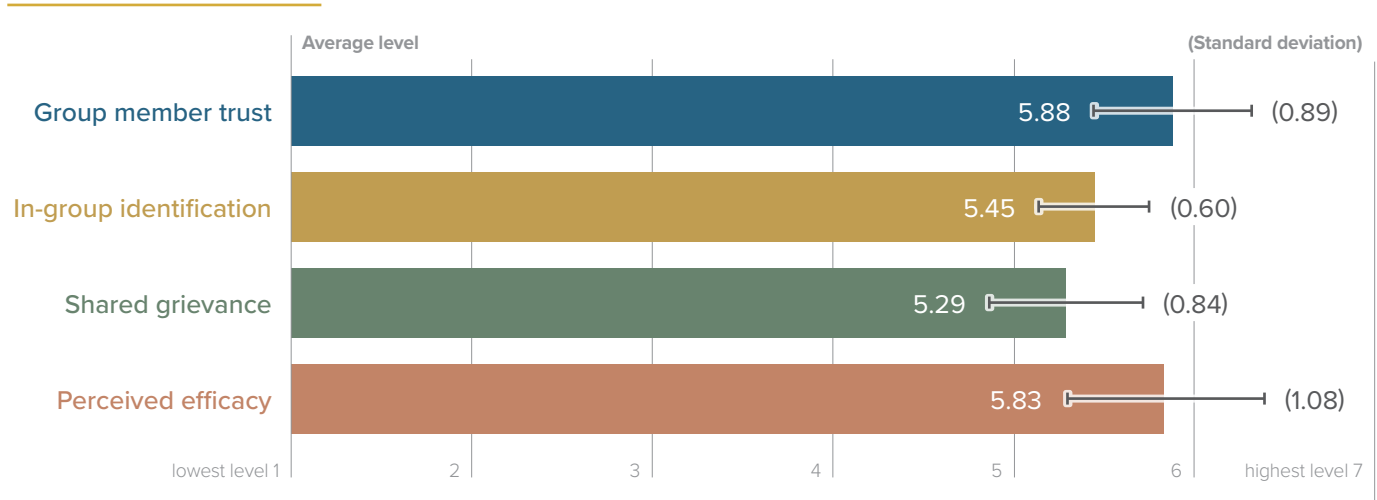
Figure 3. Reported emotions during Hirak events



Participants were asked to select all the emotions they felt while participating in a Hirak event.



**Figure 4. Psychological benefits for participation in the Hirak**



Bars indicate average levels of four key psychological factors among Hirak respondents. See Table 1 on page 11 for details on how these factors are measured. Responses are averaged across multiple questions, all of which are on a scale of 1 to 7. Error bars are a single standard deviation above and below the average.

With respect to the push factors commonly identified in the violent extremism literature, the evidence is mixed on how much these factors might play a role in motivating participation in the Hirak. There is little evidence that Hirak members have particularly low levels of perceived agency or status or high levels of perceived victimhood. However, they reported extremely low levels of trust in the government (though, interestingly, higher levels of trust in the military), and a very large majority of members surveyed had long-standing family histories of activism.

### **EXPECTATION 2: PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS**

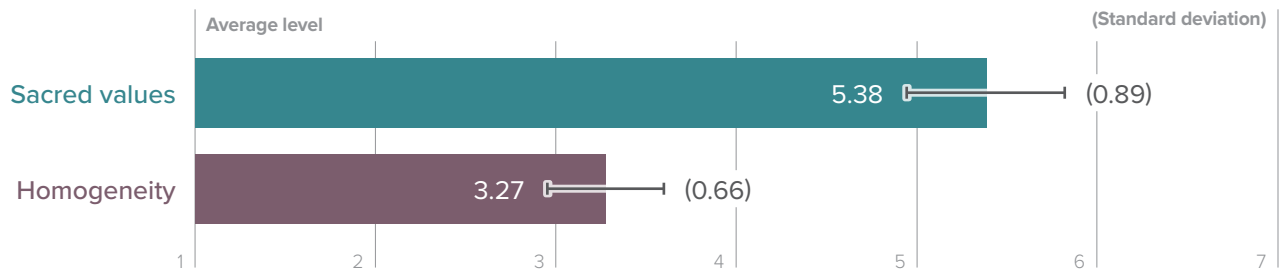
Does participation in nonviolent action give similar psychosocial benefits as participation in VEOs? Does participation in nonviolent action *feel* like participation in highly fused, highly aggrieved, tightly controlled groups like those associated with violent extremism? Survey questions about the emotions that Hirak members experienced while participating in activities for the Hirak dug into some of these topics. Figure 3 summarizes the results. Hirak participants reported a very powerful set of positive emotions while participating in Hirak

protests, with strength the most common emotion (87 percent of respondents). Only 48 percent of respondents (82 participants) reported feeling anger during protests, a surprising finding in light of the prominent role of anger in social movement literature’s accounts of the emotional motivations of protest.<sup>32</sup>

One project hypothesis held that participants in the Hirak, like participants in VEOs, would report high levels of trust in movement members, in-group identification with the Hirak, a perceived efficacy of the movement, and shared grievances. Figure 4, which summarizes the findings on these variables, largely supports this picture.

Strikingly, these high levels of group identification appeared to hold relatively constant across degrees of participation in the Hirak. Even those who participate only a few times a year reported levels of identification with the movement similar to the levels of identification of those who participate multiple times a week. This observation speaks to the Hirak’s ability to play a significant role in its participants’ identities even at relatively low-cost degrees of participation.

**Figure 5. Sacred values and homogeneity among Hirak participants**



Bars indicate average levels of two key psychological factors among Hirak respondents. See Table 1 on page 11 for details on how these factors are measured. Responses are averaged across multiple questions, all of which are on a scale of 1 to 7. Error bars are a single standard deviation above and below the average.

### **EXPECTATION 3: SACRED VALUES AND PERCEIVED HOMOGENEITY**

The third expectation was how the psychological profile of members of the Hirak might differ from factors typically used to explain violent extremism, specifically on the dimensions of sacred values and how much Hirak members perceived the movement to be a single, homogeneous unit.<sup>33</sup> The results are mixed. Hirak members did express quite high levels of sacred values. This finding ran counter to expectation. However, participants tended not to perceive the Hirak as a single homogeneous unit. Figure 5 summarizes these results.

The sacred values finding was particularly striking and thus warrants deeper scrutiny. Sacred values were measured using three questions asking how much

participants agreed with three statements: (1) democracy is something that should never be sacrificed, no matter the benefits of doing so; (2) democracy is something whose worth cannot be measured with money; and (3) democracy is a non-negotiable value. Relatively few participants (4 out of 171) reported the highest level of agreement with all three sacred values variables. Yet almost all (158 of 171) at least moderately agreed with all three statements. There appears to be a strong floor of support for democracy as a sacred value, with relatively few responses below that floor. This finding suggests that few participants in the Hirak will be satisfied with anything that is perceived as compromising on this core sacred value of democracy, which may present a significant challenge for negotiating a solution to the movement's grievances.

# Discussion and Future Directions

The survey sought to uncover the underlying similarities and differences between violent extremism and non-violent action, with a view to better characterizing the motivations and psychological and social benefits of participation for members of nonviolent action movements in high-cost contexts. Its findings only scratch the surface of the many potential relationships to explore at the intersection of these two avenues of costly collective action. Yet even these initial findings (along with the more comprehensive set of correlations described in the online appendix, posted on Harvard Dataverse) provide a fascinating picture that suggests several avenues for future research and potential policy interventions.

When it comes to motivations, the evidence points to sharp differences between violent extremism and nonviolent action, contrary to the initial expectations of the study. 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. A reported family history of activism, however, was a nearly universal characteristic of the participants surveyed.

With regard to psychological and social benefits, a very similar picture can be seen in violent extremism and nonviolent action, as expected. HIRAK members identify strongly with the HIRAK, perceive it as efficacious, and have a high level of trust in other members. Interestingly, these relationships remain strong even among those who participate infrequently.

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.

These findings suggest that the HIRAK is a values-driven movement with porous boundaries that plays a significant role in the identity of many of its members. The complex picture of motivations and benefits that emerges from this survey suggests several key takeaways.

**Porous boundaries yet powerful identities.** One key difference between nonviolent movements like the HIRAK and armed groups and VEOs is the flexibility of membership and porousness of boundaries. It is much easier to join and leave a nonviolent movement than it is to join or leave a VEO. Despite this porousness and the accommodation of infrequent or peripheral participation, the HIRAK elicits strong support, even devotion, and seems to play a significant role in shaping its members' identity. Those who reported participating only once a month or a few times a year still indicated similar levels of group identification as those who reported participating multiple times a week. This result speaks to the advantages of nonviolent resistance campaigns in providing a powerful way for casual yet meaningful participation. In light of the importance of identification with the movement as a motivator, and one that has significant effects on many other important dimensions, the ways in which movements can foster identification as a means of recruiting and retaining membership is an important area of future research as well as a potential avenue for encouraging nonviolent mobilization.

**Participation driven by joy, not pain.** Social, economic, and political grievances are almost always the stated motivation for participation in both nonviolent action and VEOs. Yet at least for the Hirak, it appears that psychological concepts associated with grievance (low agency, a sense of victimhood, feelings of low social status, and so forth) have little salience. Instead, participation is much more associated with feelings of strength, a sense of efficacy, and a feeling of satisfaction from participating in a principled, values-based community. While the design of this study did not allow for analysis of how these factors may have contributed to the staying power of the Hirak, these patterns suggest that mobilizing and sustaining participation in nonviolent action may be better served by rhetoric and activities that build those feelings of strength and powerful group identification than by rhetoric and activities designed to trigger feelings of anger or a sense of victimhood.

**The challenge of sacred values.** Sacred values are a key challenge in addressing violent extremism because by definition, they do not allow for compromise. Hirak members, like many violent extremists, hold their goal (democracy) as a sacred value. While this finding indicates the likelihood of their continuing the struggle even in the face of difficulties, it raises questions about how well the movement will be able to negotiate a compromise to resolve its struggle. This is particularly salient considering the Hirak's diffuse, decentralized structure, with no leaders who are empowered to speak on behalf of the movement. Members of the movement who express willingness to compromise are likely to be perceived as traitors or as "selling out," and their actions will be delegitimized. This high level of belief in sacred values makes it all the more crucial that activists in nonviolent action campaigns be trained in and prepared for negotiations.<sup>34</sup> Future research may

elucidate the degree to which this pattern holds across other movements, and whether it is shared among rank-and-file members and those in positions of more authority and leadership.

This research comes with many limitations that researchers and practitioners should keep in mind. In addition to the specificity of the Algerian context, and in particular the striking success of the Hirak in obtaining the resignation of President Bouteflika, the study sample comprised a very particular subset of the Algerian population (and Hirak membership): relatively young, highly educated, urban, and recruited through an in-person approach by an enumerator at a protest. It was not possible to compare the patterns of correlation in these factors directly with similar VEOs or with the broader Algerian population. Thus, any observations in this report advanced on the basis of the limited findings should be interpreted purely descriptively and viewed as a prompt for future research. Moreover, the data collection process was interrupted by lockdown restrictions put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, limiting the total number of responses.

Algeria's Hirak is an interesting, possibly unique example of prolonged nonviolent resistance that has garnered widespread backing and experienced limited suppression. The movement clearly elicits tremendous support, and its members, even if they are not as cohesive as members of VEOs, share strong values and negative perceptions of the efficacy and trustworthiness of adversaries. Further research should continue to explore if, and in what ways, membership in such movements fulfills grievances and psychosocial needs of possible members, without compromising on principles of pro-sociality and commitment to nonviolent change.

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NO. 179 | NOVEMBER 2021

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A methodologically experimental survey of participants in the nonviolent resistance movement in Algeria known as the Hirak sought to uncover motivations for and benefits of participating in nonviolent resistance movements, a topic infrequently studied in the literature. A comparison of the results with the much more amply studied psychosocial dynamics of participation in violent extremism showed alignment on certain dimensions, such as a view of the movement's goal as an uncompromisable "sacred value," yet little of violent extremism's negative motivations appeared among the survey respondents' answers. The results of the survey, while preliminary, suggest ways in which policymakers and peace practitioners can both focus on enhancing recruitment and retention of nonviolent movement participants and help make nonviolent action an attractive substitute for those psychologically vulnerable to participation in violent extremism.

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