

**American Political Science Association's Annual Meeting & Exhibition, September 11–14,
2025**

Reimagining Politics, Power, and Peoplehood in Crisis Times.”

Working Paper

Title: Climate Disasters and Ethnic Tensions: Algeria’s 2021 Wildfires

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Abstract

North Africa faces severe climate-related challenges, including rising temperatures, desertification, intense water scarcity, and extreme weather events, such as the growing frequency of wildfires in Algeria. In 2021, the country experienced devastating wildfires that swept through the north and Kabylie region. While the wildfires inflicted tremendous human and material losses and ecological effects, their political and security repercussions have been even more dangerous. The present paper aims to explore the complex interplay between climate change and potential ethnic tension in Algeria, specifically when it is associated with state fragility. Drawing insight from the constructivist approach and environmental security literature, I argue that natural disasters in fragile states can reshape risk perceptions along ethnic lines and particularly demonstrate how the trauma effects of natural disasters can alter how individuals perceive each other and interpret danger based on identity factors.

Introduction

North Africa is a region profoundly affected by climate change, which has created a pressing situation. The area is witnessing rising average temperatures, escalating desertification, and frequent droughts, all of which pose serious threats to the lives of millions due to water scarcity. Algeria, a pivotal country in North Africa, is confronting similar challenges. In recent years, its northern regions have experienced a series of extreme weather events, including floods and

devastating forest fires. Simultaneously, the southern coast is struggling with increasing resource scarcity and rising temperatures. These climate changes jeopardize human security, political stability, and economic development in a country already grappling with political fragility.

In August 2021, Algeria encountered its most significant forest fires in modern history. The blazes ignited almost simultaneously across all northern regions, with the fiercest outbreaks occurring in the Kabylie region, located northeast of the Algerian capital. This environmental catastrophe claimed the lives of 90 individuals and devastated thousands of hectares of forest and residential areas, resulting in enduring ecological damage. Beyond the human and material losses, the disaster carried serious political and social ramifications that threatened to disrupt social cohesion.

A recent natural disaster took a grave turn following the killing of Jamal Ben Ismail, an Algerian citizen of Arab descent. He was targeted by a group of young men from the Tizi Ouzou region, renowned for its strong Amazigh identity, who accused him of deliberately igniting the fire. This incident nearly provoked a widespread ethnic tension and underscored how trauma associated with disasters can reshape perceptions of danger and threat through the lens of identity.

This recent incident carries particular significance as it transpired in a country historically recognized for the peaceful coexistence of two distinct ethnic groups: the Amazigh and the Arabs. Despite some political tensions between the Kabyle region and the central government concerning governance and democratic issues, the two ethnic groups have generally lived in harmony at the grassroots level, without any notable historical conflicts. This context makes the Algerian wildfire crisis a compelling subject for investigation, as it presents an intriguing opportunity to explore the interplay between environmental factors and identity dynamics, as well as their connection to the emergence of conflicts in a multi-ethnic state.

Consequently, this research paper investigates a pivotal question: How can an ecological disaster significantly alter the perceptions of ethnic groups towards one another and potentially undermine social cohesion, despite a lack of historical ethnic conflicts?

It is important to emphasize that the 2021 forest fires were not merely a natural disaster; rather, they coincided with a significant period in Algeria's history. The country was undergoing a profound political transformation in the wake of the 2019 Hirak movement, which resulted in the collapse of the old regime under Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the rise of President Abde Lmajid

Tebboune. This transition brought its challenges, as the new leadership faced scepticism regarding the legitimacy of its rule, with many perceiving it as a continuation of the previous regime under different mechanisms.

Theoretically, this research challenges the notion that climate change solely exacerbates existing conflicts. We argue that the shocks produced by natural disasters can potentially incite conflict even in societies that have not experienced ethnic clashes before. This observation has significant implications for our understanding of the relationship between climate change and social conflict.

The study is structured as follows: The first section examines the theoretical foundation, emphasizing the constructivist approach while linking it to the literature on environmental security. The second section offers an overview of the characteristics of climate change in Algeria and its associated impacts. The third section explores the ethnic composition of Algeria. The fourth section provides an in-depth analysis of the 2021 forest fire crisis, highlighting the key narratives surrounding this event. The fifth section interprets these findings through the lens of constructivism and environmental security theory. Finally, the concluding section presents broader theoretical reflections and policy recommendations for managing climate-related disasters in fragile, multi-ethnic states.

Reframing Environmental Security: Constructivism, Securitization, and the Conflict Nexus

Attempts to link the environment to conflict grew alongside a transformation in security studies after the Cold War. At this time, scholars began to focus on non-traditional threats, arguing that these now posed direct dangers to international peace and state stability. Among these, the environment—especially climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions—was identified as a core "new security challenge"¹

This evolution in the security field significantly shaped conflict studies. Scholars shifted from addressing general environmental security threats toward examining specific environmental conflicts. They highlighted how security, environment, and conflict dynamically interact. In this approach, environmental degradation was no longer seen merely as incidental; instead, it was

¹ Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

recognized as a direct catalyst for instability. Such instability could manifest through intrastate civil wars or by increasing tensions between countries over shared resources²

Subsequent research demonstrated that, in specific contexts, environmental degradation may have a greater impact on security than military threats. Environmental stressors associated with resource scarcity can precipitate armed violence. The likelihood of conflict increases when essential resources such as water, farmland, and forests are scarce, depleted, or distributed unequally.³

Thomas Homer-Dixon is recognized as an early and influential scholar in the field. He contends that renewable resource scarcity, including shortages of freshwater, fertile land, and forests, does not inherently cause conflict. Rather, resource scarcity interacts with factors such as social divisions, weak institutions, political instability, and underdevelopment, collectively increasing the risk of violence. According to Homer-Dixon, reduced access to essential resources functions as a threat multiplier in fragile regions. The most significant risks involve reductions in farmland, water, forests, and fisheries⁴. Scarcity may arise from increased demand, diminished supply, or unequal access resulting from social or political marginalization.

According to Homer-Dixon, population growth is central to how scarcity develops. As demand for land and water rises in crowded areas, states may try to expand territorially. When expansion is not possible, internal tensions often rise, especially if institutions are too weak to manage conflict⁵. Empirical studies over the years show a strong, but complex, link between environmental stress and internal armed conflict. This is most evident in places with poverty and weak governance.

Recent scholarship has shifted from examining gradual environmental degradation to analyzing the impact of climate disasters on social and political stability⁶. Schleussner et al. (2016) found that approximately 23% of violent conflicts in ethnically divided countries coincided with climate-related disasters such as floods, droughts, and heatwaves. These findings

² Homer-Dixon, Thomas. *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

³ Kahl, Colin H. *States, Scarcity, and Civil Strife in the Developing World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

⁴ Homer-Dixon, Thomas. *Environment, Scarcity, and Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Raleigh, Clionadh, and Henrik Urdal. "Climate Change, Environmental Degradation and Armed Conflict." *Political Geography* 26, no. 6 (2007): 674–694.

indicate that in societies characterized by pronounced ethnic divisions, sudden environmental shocks can precipitate violence, particularly when disasters result in fatalities, economic losses, and social disruption. The study emphasizes that disasters do not directly cause conflict but instead exacerbate pre-existing tensions and grievances, increasing the likelihood of violence in vulnerable communities.

Most current studies agree that environmental pressures rarely cause violent conflict on their own. The risk of instability from climate stress depends mainly on how societies govern and adapt. For example, a systematic review led by Katharine J. Mach found that while climate change has affected intrastate conflicts, other drivers like inequality and weak states are more important for understanding how violence begins or escalates. The authors argue that climate pressures mostly act as threat multipliers. They intensify existing vulnerabilities, especially in already fragile states⁷.

Constructivist approaches add another dimension by emphasizing that security is a social construct shaped through discourse and interpretation⁸, not an objective condition. This perspective helps explain how environmental issues become linked to security concerns.

This way of building security through language is central to the Copenhagen School, especially in work by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver. Securitization means a political actor frames an issue as an existential threat. This justifies actions beyond normal politics. It happens through "speech acts," which move an issue like climate change into the national or international security debate. If audiences accept this, the issue is "securitized" and can prompt emergency policy moves⁹.

From a constructivist viewpoint, securitization is a double-edged sword. Framing environmental problems as security threats can mobilize political will and funding. This raises these issues on big agendas, such as the UN Security Council debates on climate security. But securitization can also have unwanted results. It may justify extreme measures, silence dissent, marginalize at-risk groups, or bring in military responses to problems that need cooperation and long-term planning¹⁰.

⁷ Mach, Katharine J., et al. "Climate as a Risk Factor for Armed Conflict." *Nature* 571 (2019): 193–197.

⁸ Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

⁹ Wæver, Ole. "Securitization and Desecuritization." In *On Security*, edited by Ronnie D. Lipschutz, 46–86. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.

¹⁰ Warner, Jeroen, and Ingrid Boas. "Securitization of Climate Change: How Invoking Global Dangers for Instrumental Ends Can Backfire." *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 37, no. 8 (2019): 1471–1488.

The subsequent sections will examine Algeria's 2021 wildfires as a case study to illustrate both the analytical value and potential limitations of this theoretical framework.

Contextual Background: Climatic and Political Landscape of Algeria

Algeria's Climate Vulnerability

Algeria is one of the countries least responsible for climate change, both in terms of overall greenhouse gas emissions and per capita emissions. However, like many other developing nations, it is also one of the most affected by the impacts of climate change.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identifies the Mediterranean basin, which includes Algeria, as a climate change hotspot. This situation has led to various natural hazards, particularly rising average temperatures, prolonged droughts, alterations in hydrological cycles, and declining agricultural production. These changes contribute to food scarcity, pose threats to public health, and increase the occurrence of extreme natural events, such as forest fires and floods¹¹.

1. Rising Temperatures:

Research shows that Algeria's average surface temperature has increased by 0.49°C from 2000 to 2023, which is higher than the global average rise of 0.37°C. This rise in temperature has caused severe heat waves, leading to an increase of over 100 cooling degree days (CDDs) per decade, while heating degree days (HDDs) have decreased by about 70 per decade¹². Furthermore, climate projections from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change indicate that global warming is expected to continue throughout this century. If emissions are reduced, temperatures could reach around 2.6°C; however, if emissions continue to rise, they could reach as high as 5.6°C¹³.

¹¹ Liga, Aldo. 2021. Managing Climate Change and Mapping an Energy Transition in North Africa. Chapter 3 in North Africa 2030, Atlantic Council & ISPI. Available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/report-ISPI-ATLANTIC-COUNCIL-2021-chapter-3.pdf>.

¹² International Energy Agency. 2024. National Climate Resilience Assessment for Algeria. Paris: International Energy Agency. <https://www.iea.org/reports/national-climate-resilience-assessment-for-algeria>.

¹³ Ibid

2. Escalating desertification:

Agriculture occupies 21% of Algeria's land area; however, it relies predominantly on rain-fed irrigation systems, with only 11% of agricultural land being irrigated¹⁴. The rise in temperatures has contributed to the desertification of arable land, pushing the arid region approximately 100 kilometers northward. Consequently, the available land per capita has diminished from 0.75 hectares in 1962 to merely 0.24 hectares in 2008. Moreover, the loss of biodiversity and degradation of vegetation exacerbate the risks associated with desertification¹⁵.

3. Drought and Water Scarcity

Climate projections for Algeria suggest a significant decrease in rainfall along the densely populated northern coast, heightening the risk of drought and forest fires in these vulnerable regions. Conversely, the southern desert areas may face the opposite challenge, with predictions of heavy rainfall leading to flash floods that could jeopardize critical energy and transportation infrastructure¹⁶. Historical data indicate that since the 1960s, Algeria has experienced a reduction in rainfall of approximately 12.4 millimeters per month per century, which has contributed to increasing water scarcity in northern regions of the country.

Currently, Algeria's per capita water availability stands at about 600 cubic meters per year, well below the United Nations Development Programme's threshold of 1,000 cubic meters per year, which is indicative of water scarcity. In response to this pressing issue, the country has extensively utilized groundwater resources in the northern regions, with extraction levels reaching 90%. However, this intensive extraction has led to some aquifers being overexploited, prompting Algeria to invest in desalination technologies. The country is now producing around two million cubic meters of desalinated seawater per day to help meet the growing demand for water.

4. Extreme weather events

¹⁴ Boudiaf, L., M. Derradji, and A. Kalla. 2013. "Impact of Climate Change on Water Resources in Algeria." *Energy Procedia* 36: 1266–1275. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egypro.2013.07.144>.

¹⁵ Sahnoune, F., M. Belhamel, M. Zemat, and R. Kerbach. 2013. "Climate Change in Algeria: Vulnerability and Strategy of Mitigation and Adaptation." *Energy Procedia* 36: P1291. Elsevier. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.egypro.2013.07.146>. Accessed August 14, 2025.

¹⁶ International Energy Agency. 2024. *National Climate Resilience Assessment for Algeria*. Paris: International Energy Agency. <https://www.iea.org/reports/national-climate-resilience-assessment-for-algeria>.

Over the past decade, Algeria has witnessed a rise in sudden natural disasters, with forest fires being among the most significant occurrences. From 2010 to 2019, Algeria experienced an average of 3,000 forest fires annually, which consumed roughly 310 square kilometers each year. In 2021 alone, these fires devastated more than 90,000 hectares across ten provinces, resulting in substantial human, environmental, and economic losses.

Furthermore, Algeria experienced an increase in the frequency and severity of floods. This can be attributed to shorter, more intense periods of rainfall, resulting in torrential downpours and flash floods. Notable incidents include the devastating floods in Bab El Oued, the capital, in November 2001, followed by the severe floods in Ghardaia in 2008 and El Tarf in 2012¹⁷. These events led to significant loss of life and damage to infrastructure. Recent statistics reveal that such floods have consumed approximately 70% of Algeria's annual disaster response budget, which amounts to around \$255 million, underscoring their persistent and damaging nature¹⁸. Furthermore, the Mediterranean Sea level is expected to rise by up to 0.6 meters by 2100 under a high-emissions scenario, posing a threat to infrastructure in Algeria's coastal areas¹⁹.

The impact of climate change on stability in Algeria becomes more pronounced when environmental pressures intersect with social and economic challenges, particularly in the wake of the political transition following the 2019 Algerian Hirak. For instance, the World Bank anticipates that water scarcity will drive significant internal migration toward coastal areas and urban centers like Algiers. These developments will place added strain on urban infrastructure and could lead to the emergence of complex and unforeseen crises, posing a significant challenge to governance.

State Fragility from the Hirak to the COVID-19 Pandemic:

The 2021 Algerian forest fire disaster occurred alongside two major events: the 2019 Hirak movement and the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic²⁰. Assessing the indirect contributions of these

¹⁷ Kamel Mostefa-Kara, *La menace climatique en Algérie et en Afrique: les inéluctables solutions* (Algiers: Éditions Dahlab, 2008), 213.

¹⁸ International Energy Agency. 2024. National Climate Resilience Assessment for Algeria. Paris: International Energy Agency. <https://www.iea.org/reports/national-climate-resilience-assessment-for-algeria>.

¹⁹ International Energy Agency. 2024. *National Climate Resilience Assessment for Algeria*.

²⁰ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). 2021. "Combination of Wildfires and COVID- 19 Threaten Tens of Thousands of Lives in Algeria and Tunisia." IFRC, August 13,

crises to the fires necessitates an analysis of their collective impact on Algeria's social and political institutions.

Following the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, Algeria experienced a comparable episode. On February 22, 2019, widespread protests began across the country. These were later termed the Hirak movement. The protests intensified each week. Notably, the military diverged from its previous support of the regime. Instead, it aligned with the demonstrators and withdrew support from President Bouteflika. On March 26, army chief of staff Lieutenant General Ahmed Gaid Salah invoked Article 102 of the Constitution to call for Bouteflika's removal due to incapacity. Gaid Salah reiterated this demand on April 2. He then requested Bouteflika's immediate resignation, which occurred two hours later²¹.

The Algerian Hirak movement emerged spontaneously and operated without formal organizational structures. It successfully resisted the authoritarian regime's efforts at repression, manipulation, infiltration, and co-optation. Unlike traditional protest movements led by opposition parties, the Hirak forced the regime into a defensive position. Attempts to restore legitimacy through controlled elections failed, as the movement categorically rejected the prevailing political system and its established electoral practices²².

Despite these political developments, opposition to President Bouteflika's pursuit of a fifth term was the main catalyst for protests. As demonstrations continued, participants broadened their demands. They called for the removal of all officials associated with the previous regime. This momentum lasted nearly a year. In 2021, a nationwide lockdown and a ban on public gatherings, enacted due to COVID-19, ended the protests.

Political uncertainty continued into 2021, marked by instability and ongoing mistrust between the opposition and the regime. The cumulative impact of previous crises defined the political context during this period.

2021. <https://www.ifrc.org/press-release/combination-wildfires-and-covid-19-threaten-tens-thousands-lives-algeria-and-tunisia>.

²¹ Sharan Grewal. 2024. "Military Repression and Restraint in Algeria." *American Political Science Review* 118(2): 675. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000503>.

²² Rachid Ouassa, "Algeria: Between Transformation and Re-Configuration," in *Re-Configurations: Contextualising Transformation Processes and Lasting Crises in the Middle East and North Africa*, 60 (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2020).

Although the Algerian uprising achieved its immediate objective by removing the Bouteflika regime and facilitating new elections in December 2019, the election of President Tebboune, a former prime minister under Bouteflika, raises critical questions regarding the depth of democratic transition in Algeria. Tebboune's victory suggests the persistence of established power structures, as the political system has historically demonstrated adaptability in response to crises and emerging challenges.

Two years after the uprising, assessments of its outcomes remain divided. Some activists argue that the movement was instrumental in removing corrupt elites, while others maintain that its objectives have not been achieved. The previous regime has not collapsed but has instead adapted, employing new strategies to retain influence. Although several officials were prosecuted following the uprising, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, formerly a cabinet minister under Bouteflika, remains closely linked to the previous regime and continues to receive support from the military establishment, a key actor in Algerian politics.

In 2020, the authorities banned protests and began requiring prior notification of all demonstrations. They also intensified repression of civil society and the opposition, arresting dozens, including journalists, human rights defenders, whistleblowers, and people who expressed themselves online or participated in peaceful protests. The new transitional phase has clearly shown signs of unease. Despite the new regime's attempt to legitimize the elections that followed the ouster of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, voter turnout in the 2019 presidential election was low at 39.8%. It did not exceed 23.8% during the November 2020 constitutional referendum. Finally, voter turnout in the 2021 legislative elections reached 23.0%.²³

During this period of political transition, the COVID-19 pandemic imposed significant economic and social challenges on Algerian authorities. The pandemic's impact was compounded by the collapse of oil prices in 2020. Algeria depends on oil revenues for nearly 90% of its export earnings. In 2020, real GDP contracted by approximately 5.5%. Global lockdown measures led to an 8.5% decline in hydrocarbon production and a 4.4% decrease in non-hydrocarbon production²⁴.

²³ Presidential election preliminary results. Algerie Presse Service (APS), <https://www.aps.dz/en/algeria/32267-presidential-election>

²⁴ World Bank. "Algeria Economic Update — April 2021." <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/algeria/publication/economic-update-april-2021>

The resulting fiscal deficit in 2020 reached approximately 11-12% of GDP, and foreign exchange reserves declined sharply. Despite government efforts at structural reform, the country's situation remained critical, as persistent unemployment—especially among youth and university graduates—further exacerbated the sense of instability (12.7% overall in 2024; 29.3% among youth; 25.4% among women)²⁵. These trends continued to challenge the effectiveness of the country's response to simultaneous crises.

The combined effects of economic and social pressures, along with ongoing political transition, reduced Algeria's capacity to respond effectively to health, economic, and environmental crises. This vulnerability was evident during the 2021 forest fires, which highlighted the constraints imposed by prior instability on the national response.

The 2021 Kabylie Forest Fire Crisis: A Chronological Overview of Events

During the summer of 2021, the Mediterranean region was impacted by a series of destructive wildfires affecting multiple countries, such as Spain, France, Italy, Portugal, Greece, Turkey, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria. Algeria's northern region was particularly affected, experiencing some of the most severe forest fires in decades. Approximately 134,237 hectares of land were burned in this area²⁶.

The crisis escalated on August 9, 2021, when wildfires ignited simultaneously in several regions of northern Algeria. Provinces including Setif, Khenchela, and Guelma were affected. However, Tizi Ouzou, which is primarily inhabited by the Berber Kabylie population, suffered the most severe damage. Over 71 blazes spread across 18 provinces. Firefighters attempted to contain the fires for two days, but the situation deteriorated rapidly. Algerian authorities subsequently deployed the army to assist with evacuation and firefighting. The fires were not fully extinguished for 10 days, until temperatures decreased and specialized firefighting equipment arrived from Europe.

²⁵ African Development Bank. "Algeria Economic Outlook." <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries-north-africa-peoples-democratic-republic-algeria/algeria-economic-outlook>.

²⁶ Goethe- Institut/Ruya. 2022. "Kabylia Fires Prompt Outpouring of Solidarity: What's Next?" Ruya – Perspectives from North Africa and the Middle East, July 2022. <https://www.goethe.de/prj/ruy/en/dos/sol/23537337.html>

The wildfires caused significant human and material losses. The European Forest Fire Information System (EFFIS) reported that over 62,000 hectares were burned in Algeria in 2021, compared to an annual average of 68,000 hectares from 2008 to 2020²⁷. The fires resulted in 90 fatalities, including 28 soldiers who died during rescue operations. More than 6,000 residents were evacuated to secure locations. The economic impact was severe. The destruction of olive trees and livestock, which are primary sources of income for residents of Tizi Ouzou, was extensive. The fires destroyed more than 25,000 hectares of forest, including 4,610 hectares of olive groves and 700 hectares of fruit trees. Additionally, 100,800 farm animals were killed and 4,470 farm buildings were damaged²⁸.

Lynching and Social Unrest: The Case of Jamal Ben Ismail

After the recent natural disaster, Algerian authorities stated that fires in several provinces were intentionally set to harm the state's reputation. This announcement led to increased fear and uncertainty among residents, contributing to social unrest and a violent incident in the Kabylie region. On August 11, in Larbaa Nath Irathen, Tizi Ouzou province, events escalated further when a mob detained an individual suspected of starting the forest fire. A group forcibly removed the suspect from a police vehicle and killed him in the town square, then burned the body²⁹. This act was inconsistent with the region's reputation for civility and integrity.

The aftermath revealed a tragic mistake. Subsequent investigations determined that the victim, Jamal Ben Ismail, was not responsible for the fire. A 35-year-old artist of Arab descent, he had travelled to Tizi Ouzou province to volunteer as a firefighter. Despite his declarations of innocence, the mob killed him, an outcome widely regarded as a miscarriage of justice.

As news of the incident spread, the event horrified and shocked Algerians nationwide. A video documenting the murder and mutilation of the victim circulated widely on social media. The director of the Judicial Police at the General Directorate of National Police, Mohamed Chakour,

²⁷ NASA Earth Observatory. 2021. "Fire Outbreak in Algeria." NASA Earth Observatory, August 10, 2021. <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/148687/fire-outbreak-in-algeria>

²⁸ Middle East Eye. 2021. "Algeria: Kabylia Wildfires' Aftermath Wreaks Havoc on Local Economy." Middle East Eye, August 25, 2021. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algeria-kabylia-wildfires-aftermath-havoc-local-economy>

²⁹ France 24. 2021. "Algeria Orders Probe into Lynching of Man Accused of Setting Deadly Wildfires." France 24, August 13, 2021. <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210813-algeria-orders-probe-into-lynching-of-man-accused-of-setting-deadly-wildfires>

announced the arrest of 36 suspects, including three women, involved in the murder of Djamel Bensmail in Larbaa Nath Irathen, Tizi Ouzou³⁰.

In response to the crime, blame was directed at the Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylie (MAK), a separatist group seeking Kabylie's independence from Algeria. Notably, two months before the fires, the government had labelled MAK a terrorist organization³¹

Afterwards, authorities issued an international arrest warrant for the group's leader, Ferhat Mehenni, who lives in France. Investigations also indicated that the attack was planned with aid from a foreign power³².

These developments quickly escalated ethnic tensions, which were further intensified by social media. Through online platforms, the exchange of accusations and hostile rhetoric between Berber and Arab communities increased. Algerian society became polarized, with some advocating for justice for Djamel Ben Ismail and viewing the murder as racially motivated, others defending the Kabylie region and criticizing Arab communities, and a third group urging restraint to prevent broader conflict.

Securitization and the Ethnicization of Risk: The 2021 Algerian Wildfires

The 2021 Algerian wildfires constitute an empirical test of constructivist assumptions. Constructivists argue that “identity” is a social construction shaped by practices, crises, shocks, discourses, and ideas—that is, by the actions of various agents, whether states, individuals, groups, or organizations. In other words, identity is not fixed; it can be reshaped, and groups can consequently come to perceive one another differently, transforming relations from a sense of safety to a sense of threat, or from cooperation to conflict.

Relations between the Kabyle (Amazigh) and Arabs in Algeria have usually been calm, with no violent confrontations between the two groups³³. In the past, clashes in Algeria mostly involved

³⁰ Algérie Presse Service. 2021. “Djamel Bensmail Case: 36 Suspects Arrested in Tizi Ouzou.” APS – Algérie Presse Service, August 15, 2021. <https://www.aps.dz/en/algeria/40524-djamel-bensmail-case-36-suspects-arrested-in-tizi-ouzou>

³¹ Algérie Presse Service. 2021. “President Tebboune Chairs Periodical Meeting of High Security Council.” APS – Algérie Presse Service, August 2021. <https://www.aps.dz/en/algeria/39346-president-tebboune-chairs-periodical-meeting-of-high-security-council>

³² Algérie Presse Service. 2021. “International Arrest Warrants against Premeditators of Djamel Bensmail’s Murder.” APS – Algérie Presse Service, August 2021. <https://www.aps.dz/en/algeria/40632-international-arrest-warrants-against-premeditators-of-djamel-bensmail-s-murder>.

the central authorities and opposition in the Kabylie region. However, the killing of Djamel Ben Ismail in Tizi Ouzou showed how a single event can change how groups see each other, especially when the danger is seen as both environmental and ethnic.

The state's securitizing posture toward the fires further complicated the outcomes of the ecological event and pushed them toward dangerous conflictual dimensions. The state did not treat the fires merely as an ecological disaster caused by climate change; rather, they were framed as a direct threat to national security. The Algerian Minister of the Interior declared that the near-simultaneous outbreak of dozens of fires across multiple northern provinces could not be a coincidence but was the work of "criminal hands."³⁴

Thus, official discourse shifted from references to an intense heat wave and harsh climatic conditions to the adoption of a narrative of conspiracy and deliberate sabotage. This change exemplifies Ole Wæver's notion of the security speech act (security discourse): positing an existential threat, rather than a natural phenomenon, legitimized exceptional measures and cast the fires as a hostile act requiring urgent response. From the perspective of the Copenhagen School, what occurred was a fully fledged securitization: the identification of a referent object—the state and society threatened by the fires—and the designation of a threatening actor (terrorist conspirators).

The state, in effect, sought to deflect responsibility for its inability to confront the region's massive fires. Although northern Algeria had seen increased wildfire activity in recent years, logistical preparedness for this type of disaster remained inadequate³⁵. It is striking that the country did not possess a dedicated aerial firefighting capacity, while allocating a substantial portion of the budget to acquiring sophisticated weaponry. Specialized firefighting aircraft from

³³ AP News. 2021. "Africa – Fires/Wildfires: Algeria." Associated Press, August 11, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/africa-fires-wildfires-algeria-c9cba9ea19b978a7d9996167c7e3ff48>

³⁴ Algérie Presse Service. 2021. "Wildfires in Tizi-Ouzou Are of Criminal Origin." *APS – Algérie Presse Service*, August 2021. <https://www.aps.dz/en/regions/40444-wildfires-in-tizi-ouzou-caused-by-criminal-acts>

³⁵ Bouandel, Youcef. 2021. "Why Did Wildfires Claim So Many Lives in Algeria?" *Al Jazeera* (Opinion), August 20, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/20/why-did-wildfires-claim-so-many-lives-in-algeria>

Europe arrived only after several days, as they were concurrently engaged in combating wildfires in Greece and Italy³⁶.

This seemingly non-rational course can be explained by the political fragility of the post-Hirak system and the socio-economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these factors constrained the state's capacity to manage the crisis. Numerous studies indicate that societies exposed to collective shocks from natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, large-scale fires) may reconfigure their perceptions of the "other," especially when such shocks coincide with political fragility and adverse socio-economic conditions.

The state sought to preserve internal stability in the face of accusations of incapacity and negligence; yet the securitization of the wildfires produced consequences far more serious than those accusations. Official statements attributing the fires to subversive groups seeking to destabilize the country fostered a sense of suspicion, doubt, and threat among residents of Tizi Ouzou. These feelings deepened amid shock and fear as people watched their relatives, property, livestock, and lands consumed by the flames, prompting the belief that someone was intentionally trying to burn them out. Under such conditions, the "stranger"—the different other—becomes the "suspect"; the result was suspicion directed toward the other ethnicity, namely Arabs³⁷.

This shift in perception is new to Algerian society, which has long experienced substantial coexistence and integration between Arab and Kabyle (Amazigh) communities. The use by some members of the crowd during the killing of Djamel Ben Ismail of the racist slur "Sale Arabe", which means "Dirty Arab", indicates that the wildfire crisis had begun to take on an ethnic dimension. The lynching shocked Algerians across ethnic backgrounds; unsurprisingly, the hate speech provoked anger among Arabs toward the region. Social-media platforms became arenas for mutual accusations and racist rhetoric between the two sides, generating a tension with an ethnic/racial character that Algeria had not previously experienced.

³⁶ AP News. 2021. "Algeria Battles Wildfires with 2 French Firefighter Planes." *AP News*, August 11, 2021. <https://apnews.com/article/europe-africa-fires-wildfires-algeria-d3837293d6e200fb72bae0f18a6db0d5>.

³⁷ The National. 2021. "As Wildfires Dampened, Misinformation Threatens More Lives in Algeria." *The National*, August 18, 2021. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2021/08/18/as-wildfires-dampen-misinformation-threatens-more-lives-in-algeria/>

Conclusion

This study has examined the significant impact of climate change on the stability and security of states, particularly those exhibiting political fragility, such as Algeria. The analysis demonstrates how natural disasters can exacerbate ethnic tensions in a country otherwise recognized for its social cohesion.

Despite the existence of historical disputes between the central government and the Kabyle population—disputes that led to several confrontations, most notably the Black Amazigh Spring of 2001—the relationship between Kabyles and Arabs at the societal level has remained one of coexistence, integration, and intermarriage. This persisted even as each group retained its distinct cultural and linguistic identity. Furthermore, Algerians of both Arab and Amazigh origin participated together in the national liberation struggle against French colonialism, which reflects a strong and enduring sense of national belonging shared by all Algerians.

The findings of this study reinforce several key theoretical perspectives. Existing research indicates that environmental factors are seldom direct causes of conflict, but they can heighten the risk and complexity of conflict, particularly in states experiencing political fragility, economic hardship, and social unrest. Algeria exemplified this dynamic during its political transition following the 2019 Hirak movement and the economic downturn exacerbated by the global effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020³⁸.

The 2021 wildfires exposed the state's inadequacy in managing such a crisis. This failure stemmed largely from a lack of preparedness for natural disasters of this scale, as well as from critical shortages in logistical equipment and essential firefighting resources³⁹.

From a theoretical perspective, this study offers a significant contribution. While most research suggests that environmental factors can intensify threats in states with pre-existing ethnic divisions, the Algerian wildfires case study demonstrates that even states characterized by peaceful coexistence and social unity may experience ethnic conflict when specific triggers arise. In this context, Ole Wæver has noted that the securitization of certain issues can lead to unintended and adverse consequences. In the case of the wildfires, the Algerian state responded by securitizing the crisis, claiming the fires were deliberately ignited and accusing separatist

³⁸ Yahia H. Zoubir and Anna L. Jacobs, "Will COVID-19 Reshape Algeria's Political System?," Brookings Institution, May 10, 2020, accessed September 8, 2025.

³⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/8/20/why-did-wildfires-claim-so-many-lives-in-algeria>

opposition groups of arson. However, wildfires were simultaneously raging across several other southern Mediterranean countries during the same period—including Greece, Italy, Tunisia, and Turkey. According to official statements, the alleged intent behind setting the fires was to embarrass the authorities and expose their inability to protect citizens.

Although the official narrative may contain elements of truth, issuing such claims at that time constituted a hasty and ill-advised decision. This response directly contributed to a local situation resembling a security dilemma. When fear and trauma combine with suspicion and uncertainty, violence can erupt between groups that begin to perceive each other as threats, even in the absence of prior conflict. This dynamic was evident in Tizi Ouzou, where locals killed and burned a victim from outside the region.

Here again, we reaffirm the constructivist hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of discourse, language, and narrative framing in shaping and reshaping social identities. Indeed, discourse and language can fundamentally alter the way ethnic groups perceive one another. In the case of Jamal Ben Ismail, it was not only the violent act of killing and burning that inflamed tensions between Arabs and Kabyles, but also the language employed by the demonstrators during the attack. Phrases such as "dirty Arab" had an unprecedented impact on the national front, sparking a wave of anger and emotional shock across social media platforms, with some users issuing calls for revenge.

Fortunately, the crisis eventually calmed down, and tensions started to ease, thanks to two key factors that support constructivist theory. First, the victim's father released a widely shared video urging Algerians to act with wisdom and restraint. He stressed the strong bonds between Kabyles and Arabs and explained that the act was the work of certain individuals, not the whole Kabyle community, which is known for its moral values. His message helped reduce sectarian tensions.

The second factor was the vital role played by traditional social structures rooted in the customs and norms of rural communities in resolving conflict—structures that, in this case, proved more effective than the state itself. Notables and religious leaders (shaykhs of *zawaya*) from the Tizi Ouzou region visited the victim's father in his home, offering him *diya* (blood compensation) and formally apologizing on behalf of all Kabyle people. These elders also reaffirmed the values of brotherhood, tolerance, and religious solidarity that unite all Algerians. Once again, this underscores the constructivist assertion that discourse, language, and cultural factors are central to resolving conflict and restoring social cohesion.

In conclusion, identity represents a latent source of potential conflict. Predicting the specific actions or events that may trigger violent conflict in fragile states remains challenging. Nevertheless, future climate change is likely to play a significant role in precipitating crises across North Africa. Algeria must urgently adapt to this emerging reality by investing in disaster and crisis management systems. Adaptation should extend beyond the acquisition of technical equipment and resources and be grounded in a comprehensive approach that encompasses all dimensions of human security.

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