

The hunger strike of the Algerian prisoners and detainees abroad (1–20 November 1961) and its echo in the Tunisian newspaper *Al-‘Amal* (The Action)

Fatiha Kechiche

University of Djilali Bounaama, Khemis Miliana (Algeria), Email: kechichefatiha@gmail.com

Received : 23-02-2026 ; Accepted : 18-05-2026 ; Published : 06-06-2026

Abstract

This article offers an account of one of the most important chapters in the struggle of the Algerian prisoners abroad and brings out their cohesion and solidarity with the Algerian War of Independence through the historic hunger strike conducted from 1 to 20 November 1961. Thousands of political detainees and members of the National Liberation Front (FLN) held across the various French prisons took part in it to denounce the policy of repression and arbitrary detention, to demand recognition as political detainees, and to make the Algerian cause known internationally. The strike constituted a powerful instrument of pressure that coincided with decisive rounds of the independence negotiations. The article also shows the considerable solidarity that the Tunisian press extended to this event, foremost the newspaper *Al-‘Amal*, the organ of the Free Constitutional Party (Neo-Destour) (*al-Hizb al-Ḥurr al-Dustūrī al-Tūnisī*), which stood at the forefront of the media platforms that took an interest in covering it and following its developments and dimensions.

Keywords: Algerian prisoners abroad; Hunger strike (1–20 November 1961); Algerian War of Independence; Tunisian newspaper *Al-‘Amal*; International solidarity.

Introduction

Among the consequences of the policy of repression and persecution that characterized French colonial rule in Algeria after the occupation of 1830 was the emigration of thousands of Algerians toward the Arab East and Europe. France ranked foremost among the countries that received large numbers of Algerian emigrants, who came in search of work and in flight from the colonial policy of brutality and reprisal. Even so, residence abroad did not keep these emigrants from contributing to the various forms and methods of the liberation struggle that their country waged against colonialism, whether in the phase of the national movement or in the phase of the great War of Independence, in which the Algerian emigrants played a distinctive role. Even those held inside prisons and detention centers were not deterred by their oppressive circumstances from performing their national duty and helping to make their cause known to international public opinion.

In this context, the hunger strike was among the most important means in which these prisoners found what they sought, and they set about organizing a series of strikes, the most famous of which was the strike of November 1961, in which thousands of detained Algerian emigrants across the various French prisons refused food for nearly twenty days. This strike provoked wide media clamor, particularly in the press of the countries that stood in solidarity with the Algerian cause, foremost among them the Tunisian press, represented by the newspaper that spoke for the

Free Constitutional Party (Neo-Destour), namely Al-‘Amal.¹ This prompts an examination of the role this strike played in serving the Algerian cause, the echo it left on the pages of the newspaper under study, the manner of that newspaper's engagement with it, and the extent of its contribution to making its voice heard before international public opinion.

1. The hunger strike as the prisoners' weapon for claiming their rights and defending their causes

The Algerian War of Independence was not merely a conventional war resting on hit-and-run engagements, nor was its theater confined to the rugged terrain of the mountainous regions and the streets of the cities. It was a confrontation of several dimensions that reached even into the places where the French colonizer believed militant and revolutionary activity would be extinguished. The prisons and detention centers thus turned into arenas of struggle in the fullest sense,² where the National Liberation Front (FLN) managed to open a strong front of political struggle inside these fortresses in order to lay bare French colonial policy before international public opinion, a struggle that took the form of prisoners and detainees resorting to collective hunger strikes.³

The FLN had used this political weapon from the outset of the revolution, in an attempt to apply political-prisoner status to its captives and prisoners as detainees defending a clear political cause, namely the demand for their right to freedom and independence. The practice began in the Algerian prisons, into which thousands of Algerians were thrown, many of them arrested on the mere suspicion of hostility toward France.⁴

Given the media blackout imposed on this kind of political struggle in Algeria, the FLN set about transferring the battle of the hunger strikes into the heart of France itself, where such a blackout was difficult to enforce. From this standpoint, the French prisons witnessed the organization of a series of strikes,⁵ which at first sought to change the prisoners' living conditions with respect to food, clothing, and health care, and to safeguard their personal dignity, such as limiting their exposure to beating and humiliation and securing the right to practice religious observances. These demands later developed into more ambitious ones, such as the demand to apply political-prisoner status and the attempt to pressure the French government into meeting the FLN's demands and giving up some of the conditions and positions that had obstructed the course of the negotiations.⁶ Since achieving such demands required a means of pressure that these prisoners did not possess, the only instrument available to them was the hunger strike, as one of the most effective forms of struggle inside the prisons and detention centers.⁷

On this point, mention may be made of the strike of the historic leader Rabah Bitat (*Rābiḥ Bīṭāt*) at Saint-Malo Prison from 16 to 29 July 1958, in which he demanded his rights as a political prisoner in his capacity as one of the leaders of the revolution. He renewed the strike at Fresnes Prison in October of the same year, which led the four historic leaders (Ahmed Ben Bella (*Aḥmad bin Billa*), Mohamed Khider (*Muḥammad Khayḍar*), Hocine Aït Ahmed (*Ḥusayn Āyt Aḥmad*), and Mohamed Boudiaf (*Muḥammad Būḍiyāf*)), detained at La Santé Prison in Paris, to mount a strike of their own in solidarity with him, a solidarity that brought the prison administration to yield to Bitat's demands on 10 November of that year.⁸

The Algerian detainees likewise mounted a hunger strike at Fresnes Prison on the outskirts of Paris from 18 to 1 July 1959. This strike was crowned by an agreement between a committee representing the detainees and another representing the French Ministry of Justice, which provided for granting political-prisoner status to the political detainees. The agreement was not realized in practice on the ground, so the detainees were compelled to mount another open-ended hunger strike on 17 July 1959.⁹

Under these circumstances, and faced with the growing number of Algerian detainees on hunger strike across the various French prisons, the French minister of justice was compelled to issue a directive (*ta līma*) on 4 August 1959 granting the political detainees a regime resembling political-prisoner status, which allowed them to receive three non-communist newspapers and parcels from friendship associations, and to organize lessons and hold the Friday prayer.¹⁰ This regime was abolished after the appointment of Michel Debré as prime minister in the French government (1959–1962).¹¹

In reaction to this reversal, the wave of protest across the prisons mounted and took on the character of comprehensive hunger strikes that shook most of the French prisons. These produced great media and political clamor that caused considerable embarrassment to the French government, all the more so because many of them were led by the imprisoned leaders of the revolution, with the political weight, popular standing, and substantial international respect they carried, which earned them notable international sympathy. The year 1960 alone recorded the organization of close to 114 hunger strikes.¹²

2. The November 1961 strike: its background, dimensions, and repercussions

The FLN Federation in France continued its struggle across the prisons and detention centers as part of its effort to wrest political-prisoner status for its political detainees. Faced with the French government's obstinacy and indifference toward the demands of this group, the FLN Federation, in coordination with the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA), gave the order for the prisoners across all the French prisons to enter an open-ended hunger strike beginning on 2 November 1961.¹³ This strike counted as a precedent in the history of liberation movements and in the history of the political struggle that the prisons and detention centers had witnessed.¹⁴

This strike lasted a full twenty days, and it grew in force and resonance with the participation of the five leaders of the revolution,¹⁵ in solidarity with the other detainees and in protest against their arbitrary arrest on 22 October 1956.¹⁶ Their communiqué, published on 1 November 1961, set out the aims of this strike and the reasons that had led them to take part in it, which were as follows:

- To expose the policy of French intransigence in violating the laws of war.
- To take part in the general hunger-strike movement in order to obtain political-prisoner status for the political detainees.
- To protest the ill-treatment of the prisoners and the harassment directed at their lawyers.

– To raise their particular grievance regarding the very principle of their detention, which represented a flagrant violation of human rights and an infringement of the sovereignty of an independent state.¹⁷

The revolution needed to mount a general strike encompassing all the penal institutions in France and Algeria, so that its impact would be greater than that of the individual strikes recorded here and there, especially since it came at a sensitive juncture in which a bloody scene had settled over the capital, Paris, in the wake of the 17 October 1961 massacre with which the peaceful demonstrations of the Algerians had been met.¹⁸

From here, the strike came to express the Algerian prisoners' rejection and condemnation of the atrocities committed against the victims of this massacre. It also came amid the resumption of the negotiations and a state of tension between the French and Algerian governments, so that it became necessary to deploy the detainees as a means of political pressure.¹⁹ It also aimed to wrest recognition for the imprisoned Algerian militants of their right to be treated as political prisoners, a recognition more important than a mere material improvement in the conditions of detention, because it fell within the framework of the political struggle, with all the legal consequences that follow from it at both the local and the international level.²⁰

The strike spread across most of the French prisons and detention centers in Algeria and France. Although the number of strikers was very high, reaching nearly 15,000 detainees refusing food, and although the whole world was echoing the strike and voicing condemnation, the French authorities continued to ignore the situation and did not stir until the health of a considerable number of the detainees had deteriorated, foremost the leaders of the War of Independence, whereupon they hastened to transfer them to hospitals.²¹ As the strikers' condition worsened and the pressure of the international community grew, an agreement was reached between the French Ministry of Justice and the representatives of the detainees to grant political-prisoner status to all the Algerian political detainees, on 20 November 1961. After this agreement, and on the same day, the FLN Federation in France issued a statement announcing the end of the strike.²²

3. The echo of the November 1961 strike in the Tunisian newspaper Al-‘Amal

The media and propaganda battle played a distinctive role in the November 1961 strike's attainment of its set objectives. While coverage of the event began modestly in the French and international press, from the very start of the strike it was the most prominent event for the press of certain Arab countries in solidarity with the Algerian cause. Foremost among these was the Tunisian press, headed by the newspaper Al-‘Amal, the organ of the Free Constitutional Party (Neo-Destour), which was keen to relay the latest developments of the strike and engaged with close attention in its events and progress throughout its duration of nearly twenty days. It was thereby one of the most prominent newspapers that helped to break the wall of silence and blackout imposed on the strike, allowing it to make its way toward internationalization and a global audience.

From the first days of the strike's launch, the newspaper worked to praise the strength and steadfastness of the Algerian detainees, expressing its pride in their iron resolve in bearing hunger with patience in order to recover their dignity and to make the voice of their cause heard before international public opinion, and affirming that their strike counted as a precedent in the

history of liberation movements and a lesson that would continue to light the way for those who struggle across the various colonized lands. It wrote: "...The history of the national struggle for independence has perhaps never witnessed what the struggle of Algeria now witnesses, a strike that extends to such a length, with participants numbering thousands of heroes who stand firm against exhaustion and defy the forces of annihilation and decay... This, and the like of this, is what builds immortality for Algeria's struggle and makes of the patience of the valiant Algerian people a luminous page in the long history of the human struggle between good and evil, between freedom and enslavement, between justice and injustice. The hearts that beat today in the world are hearts that beat for the patience of the human being in the face of annihilation and for the struggle of the human being for good and freedom....."²³

In another article it wrote: "...The desperate struggle now waged by our brothers in the prisons of French colonialism is a struggle hallowed by all peoples attached to freedom, one for which the heart of every citizen in the land of this great Maghreb beats. Whatever the sacrifices borne by this eternal great Maghreb, the courage of those who now fight to the death with steadfastness and patience in the depths of the prisons will only strengthen our collective resolve to shatter the last remnants of colonialism and to wipe its traces from our land until humanity is purified of the abomination of this boundless criminality..."²⁴

Conversely, the critical health condition of the striking militants stirred the newspaper's fears and anxiety, which it expressed in more than one article, appealing to the governments and peoples of the world for urgent intervention to save the detainees from perishing and to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe among the Algerian detainees. It expressed this by writing: "...After eleven days of the strike, the condition of the Algerian detainees has come to cry out to the entire world, to its governments, peoples, and organizations, to intervene with the French government by every means, so that it yields to the call of conscience, responds to the most basic principles and rights of the human being, abandons its colonial policy, and halts its savage acts against the strugglers it has cast into the depths of its prisons and internment camps... To every conscience in the world, to every government, and to every organization and body that believes in the principles of humanity, we address our appeal... It is an appeal to humanity, an appeal of right, an appeal of freedom, an appeal of conscience, that they take urgent measures to save the lives of thousands of human beings exposed to the most hideous means of repression, torture, and persecution that humankind has known... Every moment that passes without an urgent measure to save their lives brings nearer the most hideous catastrophe upon humanity in our present age, for the matter concerns the life or death of many thousands of human beings, indeed of the best of human beings..."²⁵

In the same vein, the newspaper published a set of articles in which it strongly condemned the reactions and positions of the French government, marked by obstinacy and persistence in ignoring the strikers' situation, warning it against the consequences of continuing a policy of persecution and indifference in the face of the deterioration and worsening of the detainees' condition. On this matter it stated: "...The hunger strike waged by the Algerian detainees in France has entered its eighth day, while the French authorities have persisted in their obstinacy and have given no weight to the gravity of the measures they have taken against the detainees,

nor to the gravity of the strike waged by the Algerian detainees, nor to the grave responsibilities that the French officials bear for continuing to carry out these measures and savage acts... The French authorities have remained heedless in their error and persistent in their arrogance, as though the matter did not concern thousands of militants, and as though they were not directly responsible for what befalls these detainees, foremost the abducted ministers... We have previously alerted the French officials to the gravity of this strike and to the gravity of their indifference... So what are they waiting for before they grasp the seriousness of the matter? Are they waiting for further days? Or is it a plot whose aim is to put an end to the detainees' lives?...²⁶

The newspaper also warned, for its part, of the serious repercussions that might follow from this policy, leading to the destruction of the chances for peace that the GPRA had made possible, chances that the French officials themselves had expressed a desire for. It stated: "...It is proven to the entire world how clear the contradiction is between the statements of the French officials and their deeds, and therein lies the gravest danger to the prospects for peace that the Algerian government has made possible, prospects that the French officials themselves had expressed a desire for, along with their belief that movement along the road leading to them was near..."²⁷

In its concern to follow the particulars and developments of the strike, the newspaper sought to shed light on the manifestations of the broad international solidarity that the strike movement had drawn, noting the appeals that had risen across most of the world's governments and peoples demanding that France release the leaders of the Algerian revolution and apply political-prisoner status to the rest of the Algerian detainees. On this matter it stated: "...Yesterday the scope of worldwide support for the strike movement waged by the Algerian ministers and detainees widened, and all the newspapers and radio stations came to report their news. Appeals rose from governments and organizations calling on France to release the Algerian ministers and to apply political-prisoner status to the rest of the Algerian nationals. The splendor of the broad solidarity then became manifest in the strike movement organized yesterday by the Arab countries... and the world, through the voice of more than sixty states at the United Nations (UN), called on France to take the initiative and adopt a position. Some African states that enjoy the best relations with France likewise called on it to release the ministers and to improve the treatment of the rest of the detainees. The free people of France in Morocco directed the same appeal to their country. Is all this enough for de Gaulle's pride... or will he remain like an unyielding rock, neither comprehending, nor understanding, nor hearing, nor responding even to the appeal of his friends?..."²⁸

Thus it may be said that Al-'Amal kept pace with the developments of the strike movement from its launch on 2 November 1961 until the announcement of the decision to end it on 20 November 1961, after the French government had responded to the strikers' demands. After this decision was issued, the newspaper published a set of articles in which it expressed its joy and optimism, as well as its pride in the victory the detainees had achieved after twenty days of hunger, pain, and suffering, noting that they were capable of steadfastness and of fighting to the death to endure what is harder still for the sake of their freedom. On this it stated: "...At last the hunger strike waged by the Algerian detainees, headed by the heroic ministers in the prisons of France,

has ended... It ended after these detainees recorded a victory and an act of heroism at one and the same time, for this strike lasted twenty days, during which they endured the pains of violence and cruelty from their jailers alongside the pains caused by hunger. Yet their determination, resolve, and heroism were stronger than everything, stronger than violence, injustice, and terror, and their souls were able to pass beyond the stage of feeling pain to the stage of fighting to the death and standing firm for the sake of Algeria, for which every feeling is made light..."²⁹

Conclusion

From what has been examined above, it may be said that the November 1961 strike represented the culmination of the political struggle that the FLN led inside the prisons and detention centers during the War of Independence. It may well stand at the head of all the hunger strikes these prisons ever witnessed, given its length and its importance in terms of the gains it achieved, for these were not gains confined to the detainees' wresting of political-prisoner status alone, but extended to more important ones, namely the strike's drawing of public opinion's attention to the Algerian cause and the winning of support for it and solidarity with it on a scale the cause had not seen before. These were gains that would not have been achieved but for the distinctive role the press played in publicizing this strike, particularly in the case of certain Arab and Maghrebi newspapers that followed the events and developments of the Algerian revolution with unparalleled attention, foremost among them the newspaper that spoke for the ruling Free Constitutional Party in Tunisia, the Tunisian newspaper *Al-ʿAmal*.

References

Books

1. Ben Gafsia, Omar. *Aḍwāʿ alā tārīkh al-ṣahāfa al-tūnisiyya (1860–1870)* [Lights on the History of the Tunisian Press (1860–1870)]. Tunis: Bū Salāma Publishing, n.d.
2. Ben Hamouda, Bouaalam. *al-Thawra al-jazāʾiriyya... thawrat awwal nūfimbir 1954... maʿālimuhā al-asāsiyya* [The Algerian Revolution... The Revolution of 1 November 1954... Its Basic Features]. Algiers: al-Nuʿmān Publishing, 2012.
3. ʿAbbās, Muḥammad. *Naṣr bilā thaman... al-thawra al-jazāʾiriyya (1954–1962)* [Victory Without a Price... The Algerian Revolution (1954–1962)]. Algiers: Casbah Editions, n.d.

Periodicals

1. Khalīfī, ʿAbd al-Qādir. "al-Thawra al-jazāʾiriyya wa-tajalliyātuhā al-niḍāliyya: al-idrāb ʿan al-ṭaʿām: idrāb nūfimbir 1961 anmūdhajan" [The Algerian Revolution and Its Militant Manifestations: The Hunger Strike: The November 1961 Strike as a Model]. *Dirāsāt* (Journal of Studies) 10, no. 4, History Department, University of M'sila, Algeria, 2018.
2. ʿAbd al-Karīm, Muḥammad. "Ilā abṭāl al-ṣumūd amām al-baṭsh al-istiʿmārī" [To the Heroes of Steadfastness in the Face of Colonial Brutality]. *Al-ʿAmal*, no. 1889, 16 November 1961.
3. ʿAbd al-Karīm, Muḥammad. "Fī sabīl al-ḥurriyya" [In the Cause of Freedom]. *Al-ʿAmal*, no. 1888, 15 November 1961.
4. ʿAbd al-Karīm, Muḥammad. "Maʿa al-ayyām" [With the Days]. *Al-ʿAmal*, no. 1886, 12 November 1961.

5. 'Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad. "Hal yufīq al-mas'ūlūn al-faransiyyūn qabla fawāt al-awān?" [Will the French Officials Wake Up Before It Is Too Late?]. *Al-'Amal*, no. 1883, 9 November 1961.
6. 'Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad. "Hal tataḥarrak al-ṣakhra?" [Will the Rock Move?]. *Al-'Amal*, no. 1890, 16 November 1961, pp. 1–6.
7. 'Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad. "Ma'a al-ayyām" [With the Days]. *Al-'Amal*, no. 1893, 21 November 1961.

Endnotes

¹ A national, political newspaper, the organ of the Free Constitutional Party (Neo-Destour). Its first issue appeared on 1 June 1934. *Al-'Amal* began as a weekly, with Habib Bourguiba as its director and Tahar Sfar as its editor-in-chief; its offices were on Bab Souika Street and it was printed at the Provence Press in the capital, Tunis. Because of its sharp tone and its bold positions toward the French colonial policy pursued in Tunisia, the newspaper was subjected to a ban order in the same year it appeared, on 3 August 1934. It then resumed publication on 30 July 1937, reappearing as an official weekly bulletin in the name of the Free Constitutional Party, printed at the al-Nahḍa Press. It was banned again on 7 April 1938, when an order was issued suspending it for eight days; and before the eight days had ended, the French Resident-General issued an order on 12 April 1938 dissolving the Tunisian Constitutional Party for which it spoke, this following the famous events of 9 April 1938. It thus ceased publication and did not resume its work until 25 October 1955, from which date it became a daily newspaper. Habib Bourguiba and some of his supporters returned to it from its former staff, and it took in many writers and editors who had worked on the newspapers the party had sponsored or who had taken up journalism anew, so that it came to include highly competent personnel and established its own press, becoming one of the major newspapers of the Maghreb. It continued to appear until 1988, then disappeared, only to return under a new name, al-Ḥurriyya (The Freedom). See: Ben Gafsia, Omar, *Aḍwā' alā tārīkh al-ṣaḥāfa al-tūniyya (1860–1870)* [Lights on the History of the Tunisian Press (1860–1870)], Tunis: Bū Salāma Publishing, n.d., p. 213 ff.

² Khalifī, 'Abd al-Qādir, "The Algerian Revolution and Its Militant Manifestations: The Hunger Strike: The November 1961 Strike as a Model," *Dirāsāt* (Journal of Studies) 10, no. 4, History Department, University of M'sila, Algeria, 2018, p. 56.

³ 'Abbās, Muḥammad, *Victory Without a Price... The Algerian Revolution (1954–1962)*, Algiers: Casbah Editions, p. 454.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 454–455.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

⁶ Khalifī, 'Abd al-Qādir, art. cit., p. 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ 'Abbās, Muḥammad, op. cit., p. 455.

⁹ Ben Hamouda, Bouaalam, *The Algerian Revolution... The Revolution of 1 November 1954... Its Basic Features*, Algiers: al-Nu'mān Publishing, 2012, p. 420.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 420.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² 'Abbās, Muḥammad, op. cit., p. 456.

¹³ Ben Hamouda, Bouaalam, op. cit., p. 420.

¹⁴ Khalifī, 'Abd al-Qādir, art. cit., p. 58. [1] [trans.: a stray bracketed "1" appears at this point in the source; reproduced as found, not corrected.]

¹⁵ ‘Abbās, Muḥammad, op. cit., p. 769.

¹⁶ Ben Hamouda, Bouaalam, op. cit., p. 421.

¹⁷ Khalifī, ‘Abd al-Qādir, art. cit., p. 59.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. [1] [trans.: a stray bracketed "1" appears at this point in the source; reproduced as found, not corrected.]

²¹ Ibid., p. 61.

²² Ben Hamouda, Bouaalam, op. cit., p. 421.

²³ ‘Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad, "To the Heroes of Steadfastness in the Face of Colonial Brutality," *Al-‘Amal*, no. 1889, 16 November 1961, pp. 1–6.

²⁴ ‘Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad, "In the Cause of Freedom," *Al-‘Amal*, no. 1888, 15 November 1961, p. 8.

²⁵ ‘Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad, "With the Days," *Al-‘Amal*, no. 1886, 12 November 1961, p. 8.

²⁶ ‘Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad, "Will the French Officials Wake Up Before It Is Too Late?," *Al-‘Amal*, no. 1883, 9 November 1961, pp. 1–6.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁸ ‘Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad, "Will the Rock Move?," *Al-‘Amal*, no. 1890, 16 November 1961, pp. 1–6.

²⁹ ‘Abd al-Karīm, Muḥammad, "With the Days," *Al-‘Amal*, no. 1893, 21 November 1961, p. 1.