

Les tentatives d'immolation par le feu se multiplient



Lawyer Mohamed Farouk Hassan on his hospital bed in Cairo. The 40 year old Egyptian set himself on fire this week before the country's parliament to protest against his country's direction. Photo: Reuters



[Marc Thibodeau](#)
La Presse

(Paris) Arab media report almost daily new attempts at self-immolation, an illustration of the desperation felt by many citizens of North Africa and the Middle East.

Wednesday in Algeria, a salesman of 37 years, father of six children, wanted to kill himself that way after an altercation with a policeman. It is the eighth documented case in the country in a week. There were also cases in Mauritania and Egypt.

The phenomenon has raised questions among a number of analysts following the fall of the Tunisian regime.

Prakzad Karim, a researcher at the Institute of International and Strategic Relations in Paris, said that we have never seen such a wave of suicide attempts in the Arab world: "The Buddhist monks set themselves on fire during the war Vietnam. We have also seen many women doing the same thing in Afghanistan. But nothing like it in Arab countries."

The absolute ban prohibiting suicide in Islam reinforces the symbolism of attempts in recent weeks, Mr. Prakzad notes, that directly links these acts to the Tunisian revolution. He insists, however, that it is impossible to know exactly what was going on in the minds of those concerned.

The events that precipitated the fall of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali gained intensity after a 27 year old Tunisian merchant, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire in protest against police harassment of which he was the object. "The events there showed the suffering of much of the population of other Arab countries because of economic exclusion, political and social," says Prakzad.

In the Algerian daily *El Watan*, a psychologist, Nacéra Sadou, emphasizes that self-immolation should be seen as an attempt "to reclaim the right to appear, a way to exist, to say 'I'm here'" in a society that is silenced. Self-destruction is the only way to "speak, as access to free speech is impossible," she said.

In the same vein, the president of the Tunisian citizen movement Byrsa Selim Ben Hassen said last week that the ultimate sacrifice is a repudiation of government: “The person who commits suicide says he believes even more competent leaders are needed to help him.”

A statement that is extremely powerful and politically difficult to reverse, according to Rodger Baker, with the U.S. private research center Stratfor. “The sacrifice intrinsically refers to the idea of martyrdom. It means that one is ready to inflict great pain to others or for cause,” he says.

In a long article in *Foreign Policy*, American scientist from the University of Alabama Adam Lankford says we should not attribute too much to the political intentions of people who tried to immolate themselves. Several of them, he says, left no message or document to clarify the meaning of their actions. However, they would have done so had they knowingly attempted to organize a “political protest.”

Although these acts may in hindsight have great symbolic significance, they may first and foremost be a reflection of suicidal predisposition, he said.

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