

Actions of the Tunisian Army in Gafsa in 2008 and during the Uprising of 2011

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On 12 January 2011, Rachid Ammar, the Tunisian army's chief of staff, refused an order from President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to shoot at protesters. Two days later, Ben Ali left the country, and the regime transition began. This event is too often neglected by the literature in explaining the Tunisian transition. Although street protests were necessary for initiating a change of regime, the occurrence of such protests does not suffice to explain the speed with which the transition actually happened. Instead, the question this article seeks to answer is why such a strong regime, feared by the entire population, collapsed one month after popular protests began. Without neglecting the importance of popular pressure, we argue that the army played a central role in the fall of Ben Ali. Why did it refuse the president's order to open fire at the demonstrators? This article is the first attempt to compare two consecutive events during which the army decided whether or not to open fire at its own population: the 2008 protests in the city of Gafsa and the massive revolutionary protests of early 2011. What are the rationales behind such decisions? Had the army had its fill of the generalized, corrupt regime organized around Ben Ali's personality, or did it choose to back the 2011 protests because it was simply better off for doing so? We tackle questions surrounding the issue of what consequences this decision had on the key actors of the uprising—specifically, Ben Ali, the demonstrators, and the French government.

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After demonstrating why the army refused the order to shoot, we discuss the implications of that decision in explaining why Ben Ali's dictatorship collapsed just one month after Mohammed Bouaziz set himself on fire at his workplace on 17 December 2010. We find that the army was better off refusing the president's order at this point in time due to the balance of power on the field. We show how its decision was a turning point of the Tunisian uprising because it altered the motivations of key players. We also utilize an extended model of game theory to depict the interactions between Ben Ali's regime and the army, focusing on the decision of the army to either accept or refuse the order to shoot at protesters. Finally, we compare two major, popular demonstrations, mentioned above, during which the army had the choice to follow orders and shoot at protesters: the revolt of the Gafsa Mining Basin in 2008 and the uprising of 2011 that led to the Tunisian transition.

Literature Review and Context

Literature Review

Most recent studies explain that unprecedented pressure from below caused the end of Ben Ali's regime. George Joffé argues that the president's fall was due to the organization of the population after spontaneous demonstrations and emphasizes the role of the Tunisian Labor Union UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail).¹ Ahmed Jdey, Mohamed-Salah Omri, and R. A. Judy recognize that social demonstrations, mainly those caused by the defense of moral principles such as freedom, justice, and democracy, played a major role in the overthrow of Ben Ali.² Eva Bellin examines the "power of contagion" and collective action from the population to put pressure on the regime.³ Randall Kuhn sees a direct link between the improvements of human development and social mobilization.⁴ Filipe R. Campante and Davin Chor, though, show how the level of Tunisians' education affected the demand for economic opportunities, maintaining that the lack of jobs was a major factor in explaining the national protests.⁵ Amira Aleya-Sghaier declares that youth unemployment and inequality triggered mobilization to overthrow Ben Ali's regime.⁶ Other studies find mixed results and identify multiple actors in their explanations for the transition.⁷

Even though street protests were necessary for bringing about the change of regime in Tunisia, their occurrence does not suffice to explain the speed with which the transition actually happened. A few articles attempt to identify the rupture between elites, especially the role of the army, as the trigger for change in Tunisia. Zoltan Barany argues that the lack of support from the army was essen-

tial to the success of popular mobilization. He explains that the regime's lack of consideration, its disinclination towards corruption organized by the executive power, and the nonpolitical status of the professional army justified the Tunisian troops' unwillingness to shoot at members of their own population.⁸ Although tensions between the Tunisian army and the regime affected the army's decision, Barany omits from his consideration the fact that the army fired on people during the 2008 protest of Gafsa. Thus, the disdain and the status of the Tunisian army towards the regime is not sufficient to explain the army's decision.⁹ F. Gregory Gause asserts that the army, in order to play a more important role after the transition, took the risk of not backing Ben Ali.¹⁰ However, this position has its limits since the Tunisian army has not actively been a part of the political debate, unlike the events in Egypt during 2013.¹¹ The literature on the role of the army in Ben Ali's fall often uses shortcuts to explain the army's reasons for its decision. Additionally, it appears that the aforementioned studies mainly use descriptive analysis rather than an explanatory demonstration to make their point.

Instead, we find that the army made the rational decision to back the Tunisian people specifically because of the occurrence of massive uprisings; the generals made a strategic move that triggered a change in the behavior of key actors, thereby influencing their actions. Additionally, we claim that the military benefits of a possible intervention were likely to endanger the army's interests. After using an extended model of game theory to demonstrate why the army refused the order to shoot, we discuss the implications of this decision as a means of explaining the collapse of Ben Ali's dictatorship just one month after Bouaziz's self-immolation.

Comparing the Spreading Protests: 2008 versus 2011

The food crisis of 2008 resulted in unprecedented protests by miners in the Gafsa Mining Basin. Such actions denounced unemployment, inequality, a highly corrupt hiring process, and social injustice.¹² From January to July, demonstrations expanded very quickly across the entire region. Many Tunisians took to the streets, including miners, students, and the unemployed. The police and military were sent in, and their repression almost immediately stopped the demonstration. The armed forces shot several protesters (3 deaths and 10 injuries), hundreds were incarcerated, and the protests finally ended.

In December 2010, Bouaziz's suicide triggered major protests that spread nationally in two weeks' time. The police and demonstrators fought in several regions while the army was in charge of protecting strategic locations. On 12 January, the army was sent to the streets, and a curfew was declared. However, when citizens did not abide by the curfew, Ben Ali ordered the army to shoot at them.

The army declined the order, and Ammar was dismissed from his position.¹³ The first question that arises is why the army refused the order to shoot at demonstrators during the uprising of 2011 but accepted the order to do so during the massive demonstrations of 2008. Before proceeding, we must address the relationship between the army and the regime.

Suspicious Relationship between the Army and Ben Ali's Regime

Former president Ben Ali incessantly considered the Tunisian army a threat by virtue of his misperception of its position as an elite political player. For this reason, the army has always been excluded from any political power and was not institutionalized.¹⁴ Tunisian troops have steadily decreased in number over the past decade, totaling only 35,000 underequipped soldiers in 2010.¹⁵ To dissuade the population from contesting his position, Ben Ali based his power on a strong police apparatus, consisting of 120,000 members in 2010. The Tunisian army, unlike others in Middle Eastern and North African countries, lacks significant experience in military action. Furthermore, one should note that this “silent” or “invisible” actor has no economic power.¹⁶

Ben Ali himself was a general in the army that took power in a bloodless coup d'état in 1987; since then, the two have had a contentious relationship. With a good understanding of army forces and their power, Ben Ali found it necessary to weaken the army, lest he meet the same fate as the previous regime.¹⁷ These tensions reached a peak in April 2002, when “thirteen Tunisian military officers, including the army chief of staff Brigadier General Abdelaziz Skik, [were] killed in a helicopter crash.”¹⁸ The army never believed that this tragedy was an accident, instead considering it an act calculated by Ben Ali, who was suspicious of and felt threatened by the military.

Theory and Method

This section addresses the theoretical debate regarding democratic transitions. It discusses theories on popular mobilization and the rupture between elites, emphasizing the role of the army in regime change.

Popular Mobilization

The agency approach on popular mobilization focuses on pressure exerted by the popular masses to explain democratic transitions. Elisabeth Wood describes how insurgencies in El Salvador and South Africa, by changing elites' payoffs, influenced regimes to engage in democratic reforms.¹⁹ Conflicts over redistribution

offer another explanation of democratic transition. Stephan Haggard and Robert Kauffman emphasize inequality in analyzing how popular mobilization threatens elites and increases the cost to repress their population.²⁰ Even though Ben Ali proposed noncredible reforms during the last days before his departure to Saudi Arabia, this approach has limitations because it undermines the fissure between the elites' interests to explain democratic transitions.

Elites' Interactions

The rupture between regime elites may also explain why democratic transitions occur. Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead point out that transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes are triggered by negotiations between "hardliners" and "softliners."²¹ Other studies show how the regime strategically interacts with elites to orchestrate an illusion of political reform. Larry Diamond attempts to explain why democratization does not happen in Arab countries by describing the strategic behaviors of regime elites.²²

The Role of the Army in Transition

The robustness of material and nonmaterial ties between militaries and the regime may help to account for whether or not an authoritarian regime can sustain itself. Comparing the Arab Spring with the 1989 events, Lucan Way demonstrates that popular mobilization often reinforces ties between the regime and the army, preventing popular democratic demands from succeeding.²³ Studies of democratic transitions that emphasize the rupture of elites' interests are limited in their argumentation. Instead of analyzing and explaining in detail how the game between elites is played, they often propose a descriptive analysis.

Extended Model of Game Theory to Explain Democratic Transitions

This article emphasizes the role of the army in democratic transitions and, more specifically, in strategic interactions between the Tunisian military and Ben Ali's regime to clarify his fall in 2011. Our goal is to use game theory to offer a more detailed and explanatory analysis of the interactions between regime elites.

Przeworski's model. The extended model of game theory used here to explicate the Tunisian transitions is mainly inspired by Adam Przeworski's model in his book *Democracy and the Market* as well as an extension of this model presented by Lisa Blaydes and James Lo in their article "One Man, One Vote, One Time? A Model of Democratization in the Middle East."²⁴ Przeworski demonstrates that a regime transition is a result of choices and strategies between political and economic elites within a context of uncertainty in a given society. Tunisia has seen

such a context with a period of high unemployment and economic crisis. Przeworski claims that a transition can happen when elite groups have an incentive to deviate from the status quo and impose a regime change, notably because of the nonestablishment of strong ties between the regime and key elites in a society. Democracy emerges from a bargaining between elites, and, more precisely, when a strong unity between competing democratic elites is created to contest the authoritarian regime. In his model, Przeworski analyzes the choices and strategies of the “protoliberalizers” in a given authoritarian regime and of key actors within civil society at the specific moment when that regime is considering political liberalization.

Blaydes and Lo and Middle Eastern transitions. Blaydes and Lo extend Przeworski’s model and apply it to political transitions in the Middle East.²⁵ They test two of Przeworski’s assumptions by concentrating on Middle Eastern democratic transitions. First, they integrate uncertainty or incomplete information since civil society may not know to what extent an authoritarian regime prefers repression to democratic transition. Second, they cast doubt on the assumed commitment of civil society to democratic principles in the Middle Eastern countries. Their results suggest that democracy cannot emerge when the regime’s repressive capacity is too low. Third, they emphasize the importance of uncertainty and beliefs, both of which essentially determine the type of regime following a transition.²⁶

An extended model applied to the Tunisian transition. The model introduced in this article aims to analyze strategic interactions between the Tunisian army and Ben Ali’s regime that resulted in a transition. Primarily, our extended model draws on the works of Przeworski and Blaydes and Lo, described above. This study acknowledges the latter two scholars’ contribution to Przeworski’s model of transitions—that uncertainty is a crucial determinant that must be taken into account to study regime transitions. However, although Blaydes and Lo assume imperfect information possessed by civil society to account for the resulting type of regime, our analysis principally examines uncertainty and, more precisely, the asymmetry of information between Tunisian elites—namely, Ben Ali and the military. This does not mean that the demonstrators had a complete understanding of the balance of power during the 2011 uprisings. As discussed in the last part of this article, the Tunisian transition reflects the crucial impact of strategic behaviors chosen by elites to signal to the population the current balance of power, solving the problem of civil society’s having only incomplete information before Ben Ali’s escape to Saudi Arabia.

Our methodology differs substantially from that of most studies on the Arab Spring because of the strong focus on analysis. The preponderance of other inves-

tigations compares regime transitions in Arab countries and the role of the army in the different transitions. Consequently, these analyses lack focus, resulting in a misconception about the political economy and the inherent structural differences across countries. For these reasons, we analyze the Tunisian transition exclusively. Unlike Przeworski's and Blaydes and Lo's model, this study does not seek to predict the types of regimes that could arise from the transition; too many factors are in play, and, as the Egyptian case has shown with the army's overthrow of former president Mohamed Morsi, even short-term predictions in an uncertain context are almost impossible.

Considering only the Tunisian case, we try to answer the following questions: Why did the army refuse Ben Ali's order to open fire on its own population? How did this decision affect key actors of the Tunisian transition? How did this decision bring about the president's fall?

Model and Equilibrium

This model depicts the interaction between two key players: the regime of Ben Ali and the army as represented by its chief of staff, Rachid Ammar. It uses the two massive protests of 2008 and 2011 to depict the army's decision to accept or refuse the president's order to shoot at demonstrators as well as the outcome of the revolution.²⁷

Actions and Order of Play

The advanced stage of the protests in 2008 and 2011 obliges Ben Ali to make the first decision in choosing between *asking the army to repress* protesters (Repress?) or to *remain passive* (Status Quo).

In both scenarios, the *status quo* (SQ) is represented by massive street demonstrations opposed to the police (repressing) and the army (dissuading). Moreover, the regime is waiting for weapons, notably from France, that would increase Ben Ali's repressive capacity if the SQ remains. The main assumption here is that the president cannot choose to reform the countries because the protests are too advanced to propose any credible concession.²⁸

If he chooses to order the army to open fire, then Ammar can either *accept* (Accept) or *refuse* (Reject). Finally, Ben Ali will *stay in power* (Stay) with a probability p if the SQ remains, a probability q if the army chooses to shoot at the population, and a probability r if the army rejects the order to open fire.

We identify four potential outcomes in the sequential game presented below (figure 1). Although these scenarios help us understand the army's decision to

refuse to open fire, we focus on the decisive aspect of whether or not Ben Ali leaves power.

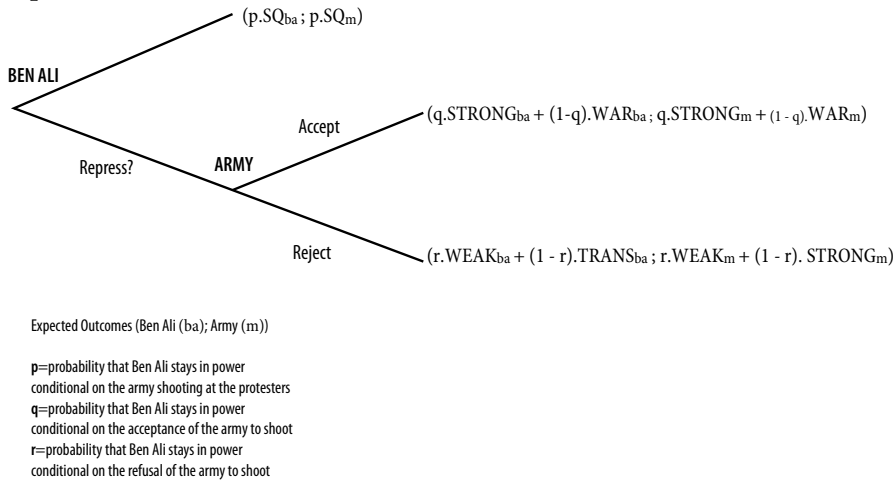


Figure 1. A sequential game between Ben Ali and the Army

Stronger dictatorship (STRONG). If the Tunisian army accepts the order to shoot at its population and Ben Ali stays in power, then the bloodbath’s success will certainly reinforce the complicity and mutual interests between the regime and the army.

Civil (WAR). If the army accepts the order to open fire and Ben Ali is overthrown, then the situation is likely to be a sustained civil war between pro-regime and antiregime forces.

Weakened dictatorship (WEAK). The scenario in which the army refuses Ben Ali’s order and he stays in power will weaken the regime. Desertion of the military’s forces might be seen as a strong signal that the regime’s security forces are divided.

Regime transition (TRANS). This scenario depicts what actually happened in Tunisia (i.e., a regime transition supported by a coalition between the army and the Tunisian people). If the army refuses Ben Ali’s order and he leaves power, then a regime transition is expected even though the type of regime remains highly uncertain. However, we concentrate only on the transition of the Tunisian regime itself—namely, whether Ben Ali stays or leaves power.

Payoffs

Ben Ali’s payoff is determined by p, q, and r, which describe the probabilities that he stays in power relative to the utility to stay in power. The utility is conditional on whether he orders the army to open fire (Repress?) or not (Status Quo). We

assume here that Ben Ali's payoff, if the SQ remains, equals 0. This assumption may hold for the following reason: even though Ben Ali cannot accept contestations of his power and is threatened by a certain number of protesters, he is also waiting for weapons from France. Therefore, since the strength of civil society may be reinforced if Ben Ali stays passive, the repressive force may increase as well if the police and army are better equipped. The assumption here is simply that the balance of power might not change by much if the SQ remains. The following equation gives a good picture of these variations: $p = \text{repressive force} / \text{civil society strengths}$. The army's payoff is also determined by the probability that Ben Ali stays in power, given the expected utility of his staying in power. However, its utility is conditional on whether the army chief of staff accepts or refuses to follow the order. If the SQ remains, then we assume that the army's expected utility is 0. Following the SQ, the army occupies strategic points of the Tunisian territory but does not take direct action either in favor of or against the demonstrators.

Actors' Preferences

Ben Ali obviously prefers staying in power to being overthrown; however, the regime is certainly better off if the transition occurs peacefully rather than through an armed rebellion or a civil war. Therefore, Ali will get a payoff of -2 if the outcome is a civil war (WAR) and -1 if a peaceful transition prevails (TRANS). Intuitively, he will prefer to stay in power, conditional on the acceptance of the army to repress the demonstrators (STRONG) rather than suffer from a contentious situation with the military's force. Therefore, a stronger government will give Ben Ali a payoff of 2 and a payoff of 1 if the game results in a weakened government (WEAK). The SQ, as explained above, equals 0 since the spread of demonstrations might be counterbalanced, for instance, by the acquisition of new weapons and equipment sent by Tunisian allies or by weakening of the street protesters.

We assume that the army is indifferent about either opening fire on the demonstrators, conditional on Ben Ali staying in power (STRONG), or refusing to open fire, conditional on the regime leaving power (TRANS). In both cases, the army will get a payoff of 2 because we assume that its payoff is completely determined by the identity of the regime after the protests.

Moreover, we assume that the army is indifferent about the two outcomes in which it makes a wrong prediction—specifically, in the scenarios of a civil war (WAR) and of a weakened government (WEAK) and will get a payoff of -1. This assumption is indeed discussable, but it does not change the final equilibrium. We use it in our analysis only as a matter of simplicity. The matrix presented below (table 1) describes Ben Ali's and the army's preferences in the sequential game.

Table 1. Summary of actors' preferences

Actors	Ben Ali	Army
<i>Scenarios</i>		
STRONG	2	2
WAR	-2	-1
WEAK	1	-1
TRANS	-1	2
SQ	0	0

Assumptions

The Probabilities q and r . Actors' preferences and payoffs are conditional on the probability that Ben Ali stays in power. Therefore, this section takes into account the probabilities p , q , and r to compute the threshold at which the president is indifferent about either keeping the SQ or repressing the population (Repress?), as well as the threshold at which the army is indifferent about either following or refusing Ben Ali's order to repress the population. The probability r is greater than q as the regime's repressive capacity increases when the military makes use of its weapons. In other words, there is a greater chance that the regime stays in power longer if the army accepts the order to shoot at protesters even though this decision doesn't exclusively determine the outcome of whether or not Ben Ali will fall—thus, $q < r$. The probability p , q , and r is represented by the president's repressive capacity relative to the strength of civil society (i.e., p , q , and $r = \frac{\text{repressive capacity}}{\text{civil society strength}}$).²⁹

Asymmetry of information. Because of incomplete information, Ben Ali's decision to order the shooting is not perfectly based on the army's expected utility because he doesn't know at which points the army will refuse to obey the order to open fire. In other words, Ben Ali has vague information about the limit at which the army will accept the order to shoot. For simplification, we assume here that his decision to order a repression is based on an expectation that the army will follow his order; however, the army follows its preferred expected utility, given our assumption that it has complete information about Ben Ali's expected utility. Even though the Tunisian army has been seen as a "weak" or even an "invisible" actor in Tunisian affairs, it remains a key player, particularly because of this asymmetry of information that the army has taken advantage of. Given the actors' preferences as well as the order of the p , q , and r , we are now able to compute the four possible equilibriums of this game (table 2).³⁰

Table 2. Summary of the four scenarios

<i>Equilibriums</i>	<i>Conditions</i>
(SQ; Accept)	$(q \leq \frac{1}{2}; q \geq -r + 1)$
(SQ; Reject)	$(q \leq \frac{1}{2}; q \leq -r + 1)$
(Repress; Accept)	$(q \geq \frac{1}{2}; q \geq -r + 1)$
(Repress; Reject)	$(q \geq \frac{1}{2}; q \leq -r + 1)$

Results

Figure 2 describes our results and contains information about the four scenarios discussed above, as well as the probabilities that Ben Ali will stay in power. Results are presented via the straight line $r = q$ since we assumed previously that r is surely smaller than q —that is, the probability that the regime stays in power longer if the army accepts the order to shoot at protesters (q) is greater than this same probability conditional on the army's rejection of the order to open fire (r). We turn our attention to the area in which $q \geq \frac{1}{2}$ because we want to compare the 2008 and 2011 demonstrations. We can simply notice here that no equilibrium exists (SQ; Accept), a possibility that might look surprising at first glance. However, it suggests that no situation exists in which the army would agree to repress the demonstrators and in which Ben Ali would prefer the SQ. In other words, whenever the army is ready to accept the order to open fire on the streets, Ben Ali will prefer to order a repression (Repress; Accept).

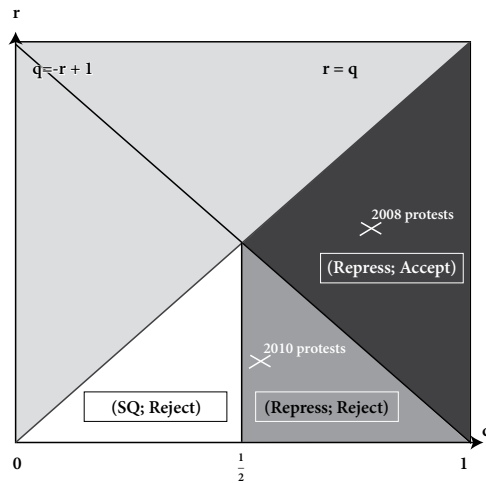


Figure 2. Equilibria of the game relative to the probabilities q and r

Proposition 1: When q is high and not bounded by a low probability r , Ben Ali's regime will order the repression of its population, and the army will accept this order. More specifically, when $q \geq \frac{1}{2}$ and $q \geq -r + 1$, Ben Ali's regime will choose the equilibrium (Repress; Accept) (i.e., the dark area in figure 2). In other words, when the probability that Ben Ali stays in power, conditional on the army agreeing to follow orders, is high enough and the likelihood that the regime stays in power, conditional on the army refusing orders, is high enough, then Ben Ali will decide to order a repression of the population, and the army will accept this order. The 2008 Gafsa protest can be represented within this dark triangle.

Proposition 2: When q is high and bounded by a low probability r , Ben Ali's regime will order the repression of its population, but the army will reject this order. More specifically, when $q \geq \frac{1}{2}$ and $q \leq -r + 1$, Ben Ali's regime will choose the equilibrium (Repress; Reject) (i.e., the gray area in figure 2). In other words, when the probability that Ben Ali stays in power, conditional on the army agreeing to follow orders, is high enough and the likelihood that the regime stays in power, conditional on the army refusing orders, is low enough, then Ben Ali will decide to order a repression of the population, but the army will reject this order. The uprising of 2011, leading to a regime change, is represented within this triangle.

The main argument of this article is that the decisions of the two actors during the two different protests were principally influenced by an asymmetry of information that gave an advantage to the army. Because Ben Ali didn't expect the army to consider rejecting his order, he made his decision only according to the probability that he would stay in power when the army intervened. This decision was likely the most effective way to retain control during the 2008 Gafsa protests. In fact, we can see that the army repressed the population because the probability that the regime would stay in power, even if the army had refused to open fire, was too high. Therefore, the regime made the "best" decision to remain in power. In contrast, the uprising of 2011 demonstrates that the asymmetry of information between the regime and the army was crucial to effecting a regime transition.

In our case, asymmetry of information allows the army to have greater control over the final equilibriums because the generals have more information than Ben Ali's regime. During the 2011 uprising, the probability of the president remaining in power was below the line $q = r + 1$ because the spread of the population had reached a level close to the point where the probability of Ben Ali falling is more likely (towards $q = \frac{1}{2}$ and $r = 0$). The balance of power between Ben Ali's repressive force and the strength of the civil society is such that the army prefers to reject Ben Ali's order to shoot at the population.

If Ben Ali had access to complete information, he would have integrated the probability of the army's rejection of the order into his calculations—doing so would have substantially changed our equilibriums and thus the outcome of the game. If this were the case, then a smaller area would have represented the equilibrium constituting Ben Ali's decision to repress his people and the army's decision to reject this order, and Ben Ali would have preferred to maintain the SQ to giving the order to shoot. Therefore, we can speculate that with complete information, he would have been able to stay in power longer.

However, this equilibrium does not reflect Ben Ali's decision, mainly because of the asymmetry of information that destabilized the regime. In reality, because

he had incomplete information about the army's preferences and payoffs, when Ben Ali gave the order to shoot, the army refused. Thus, we suggest that the president would have been better off and would have stayed in power longer if he had chosen to keep the SQ. Critics of these interpretations may emerge because of the idea that it is easier to draw lessons after transitions have actually happened; however, no one was able to predict such a fast regime change because of the illusion of domination that Ben Ali projected on his population and external actors.

We have attempted to look at the strategic interactions of the elites' behavior to explain the Tunisian transition. The next part of this article provides a detailed analysis of the crucial interactions and strategic behavior that explain how the Tunisian army's decision to reject Ben Ali's order has been crucial in pushing him out of the country.

Analysis

Despite Tensions, Why Has the Tunisian Army Never Attempted a Coup?

Barany proposes the idea that the reasons why the army has never taken action against the regime can explain why it has never taken substantive steps to overthrow the particular power in place.³¹ First, Ben Ali's regime was careful in limiting the army's power in terms of numbers, budget allocation, and the scope of its role and responsibility. Therefore, more influential forces in the political economy of Tunisia largely overshadowed the army as Ben Ali's government conscientiously used the police and other security agencies to secure and control Tunisia's population. Additionally, the regime's decision to send a significant number of officers to the United States to attend training and programs is another reason that reveals the military's disinclination to take power. The Tunisian regime has strategically distracted the army from being involved in political concerns.³²

The weakness of the army's institutional power in Tunisia is not the most determinant factor that explains why the military has never attempted to overthrow Ben Ali's regime. Instead, we maintain that the likelihood that he would stay in power was always too high for the army to attempt any action against him. Béatrice Hibou, in *The Force of Obedience*, magisterially explains how Ben Ali's regime was involved in every strata of Tunisian society and reinforced its power by satisfying key elites and civil society organizations.³³ As long as this long-term equilibrium was sustained, the army could take no feasible actions against the regime, despite the continuous tension between the two forces.

The 2008 regional protests of Gafsa demonstrated that the army was willing to back the regime and commit a crime against its own population. Unlike events of the 2011 uprisings, the spread of the demonstrations did not pose as great a threat to the regime. The army had no choice other than act severely against the demonstrators. Referring to the extended game presented above, we observe that the probability that Ben Ali would remain in power was too high for the army to risk taking the side of the Tunisian population. Doing so would have resulted in the army acting against its interests by accepting retaliation from the regime. Timing was also crucial; the expansion of protests across the entire region proceeded quickly, and Ben Ali's order to the army came when the balance of power on the field was clearly to the regime's advantage. One can fairly ask what the army's decision would have been if the regime had waited a few weeks before ordering a severe repression.

The Importance of Uncertainty and Beliefs in the Tunisian Transition

The army believed that the results of the protests were too uncertain to take a step forward and act against Ben Ali's regime. We assert that, on 12 January 2011, the military was better off refusing the president's order to open fire on the demonstrators and, in doing so, brought a decisive "coup" to change the regime in place (i.e., its preferred outcome). More precisely, the balance of power on the field at that time was such that the probability of having a new regime in place was likely, even with the army on the regime's side. Therefore, the army believed that its action to back the population would make the transition almost certain. Additionally, the risk of shooting at protesters was too high because the new government would have punished it harshly; thus, the army was a determinant in ending the long-term equilibrium built by the regime over a quarter of a century.

We contend that Ben Ali should have kept the SQ instead of ordering the army to shoot. Due to asymmetric information, he miscalculated the probability that the army would do so. This is not to say that the SQ would have allowed Ben Ali to stay in power indefinitely; however, it is very likely that if he chose to keep the SQ, the president would have retained control longer and the repression would have lasted an uncertain amount of time (days, weeks, or months).

Additionally, if the SQ had remained, it is uncertain that the army would have chosen to become an ally to the street protesters. The cost of protesting increases over time for the demonstrators, so it is not financially, physically, or psychologically affordable. Therefore, the likelihood that Ben Ali would stay in power was increasing over time, and because of the tenuous balance of power on the field, the army may not have backed the population as it did. Consequently, we

have demonstrated here that beliefs, asymmetry of information, and timing played a central role in the Tunisian regime transition.

Refusing an Order as a Strong Signal and Commitment Device

The army's decision to refuse the president's order triggered strong signals to the population and Ben Ali's foreign supporters. The following reasons help one understand why the Tunisian regime collapsed barely one month after the army's refusal to act.

A signal well received by the population. First, the refusal of the army to shoot in 2011 was seen as a signal to the population that the end of the Ben Ali regime was possible and potentially close. Susanne Lohmann interprets "the demonstrations as an 'informational cascade' that finally made public some of the previously hidden information about the nature of the regime. With this information in the public domain the viability of the regime was undermined."³⁴ In Tunisia, the nature of the regime was somewhat known; however, when the army refused Ben Ali's order and this information spread, the population stopped overestimating the regime's repressive forces. Thus, the army's decision to refuse Ben Ali's order very likely changed the population's belief in the repressive capacity of the regime; therefore, it played a substantial role in its overthrow.

The army: no choice other than committing. Second, after rejecting Ben Ali's order, the army had no choice other than take the side of civil society to make sure that the transition prevailed. One must not confuse this rationale with differing reports appearing in the French and Tunisian newspapers arguing that the army was an ally of the street. The Tunisian army became an ally of the people only because the same outcome was preferred, given the SQ. When the decisive moment of opportunity to overthrow the power in place arose, the army made a rational choice to reject Ben Ali's order. As such, the strength of civil society increased and became greater than the power of Ben Ali's repressive forces.

A warning for Tunisian allies. Third, the army's refusal to follow Ben Ali's order was a signal to his allies that the end of his regime was near and that its support was likely to hurt the army's reputation. One should not forget that at the time of the refusal of the Tunisian army to act, French weapons were about to be sent to Tunisia to help Ben Ali gain "control" over his population; therefore, timing was crucial. Had the regime received the weapons from France, the president's repressive force would have been much higher, and the game would have completely changed since it would have been very uncertain whether or not the army would reject Ali's order. However, its refusal to shoot at the population reflected the weakness and impending end of Ben Ali's regime, and after the army chief of

staff rejected the president's order, the French government reversed its position and sent no weapons.

Conclusion

Despite the Tunisian army's lack of involvement in the political and institutional sphere, it changed the rules of the game of political transition in Tunisia. The recent literature on Tunisia has mostly focused on the role of popular mobilization. We must emphasize that we do not neglect the role of the Tunisian population, but we maintain that the army's decision to reject Ben Ali's order was pivotal and has generated very strong signals to key actors that changed their beliefs about the evolution and outcome of the popular protests. It is true that some articles have recognized that the role of the military was crucial in explaining Ben Ali's departure, but their analyses have been more descriptive than explanatory. Instead, the extended game introduced here enables us to see the types of interactions, strategies, and outcomes that influenced the army's decision. Blydes and Lo rightly think that uncertainty is key in regime transition; accordingly, we take it into account here as well.³⁵

An alternative approach to explaining why the army refused to act involves connecting the two events analyzed in this article. Arguably, the army's decision to shoot at protesters in 2008 is linked to its refusal three years later; however, one would need to calculate in detail the costs to and benefits enjoyed by the army to shoot at the population. Such a study must be postponed until the archives for the event are released because this approach would necessarily miss important facts that are not yet known, such as possible compensations to the army by Ben Ali. Instead, our approach is based on what is already known and the uncertainty that remains about the change of regime.

Finally, it would be interesting to see more research on business power in Tunisia and its influence on the Tunisian transition. Granted, the Trabelsi family (the family of the president's wife) acted quite unconventionally before the 2011 uprising (i.e., imposing upon banks or businesses to give ["lend"] them money). But such research would prove crucial to understanding the extent to which businesses' discontent is related to the army's decision to reject Ben Ali's regime order, especially in regard to research exploring how business and military elites have interacted prior to transition.

Notes

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23. Way, "Comparing the Arab Revolts." The main argument supported by Way can be summarized by the following: "More often than not, autocrats let go of power not because they want to, but because key political, economic, and military allies force them to give up after deciding that the regime is no longer worth

supporting. The readiness of elites to back the regime in a crisis is generally more decisive to authoritarian survival than the number of protesters in the streets. Thus Tunisia's President Zine al Abidine Ben Ali was forced out of the country by angry crowds of thousands which, though sizeable by Tunisian standards, were hardly large enough to overwhelm the military and police" (19).

24. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and Lisa Blaydes and James Lo, "One Man, One Vote, One Time? A Model of Democratization in the Middle East," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 24, no. 1 (January 2012): 110–46. Blaydes and Lo present their methodology as follows: "We extend a canonical model of political transition developed by Adam Przeworski in *Democracy and the Market* (Przeworski, 1991) to include the possibility of two types of uncertainty. The first—discussed in the original Przeworski conceptualization—is uncertainty on the part of civil society regarding the willingness of regime liberalizers to repress; the second involves the uncertainty of regime liberalizers regarding civil society's commitment to democracy" (112).

25. Blaydes and Lo, "One Man, One Vote, One Time?"

26. Blaydes and Lo present their argument as follow: "The model solution suggests a number of key findings. The first is that the existence of uncertainty is key to the possibility for democratic transition. Second, transition to democracy is only possible when the repressive capacity of a regime exceeds a certain threshold. Given these conditions, democracy occurs when regime liberalizers who prefer democracy to a narrowed dictatorship interact with a civil society that will honor democratic principles." *Ibid.*, 112.

27. Other security chiefs, notably from the police and the president's personal security, have played a role in influencing Ben Ali's decisions. However, we assume here that the army was the decisive actor that made the difference in Ben Ali's escape.

28. Even though Ben Ali made enormous concessions the day before his escape, it cannot be said that the population could take his potential willingness to reform as a credible commitment. Interestingly, Ben Ali's concessions seem to share many similarities with the last speech of Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, in which he made the same types of concessions to his people.

29. Blaydes and Lo, "One Man, One Vote, One Time?"

30. First, the equilibrium (SQ; Accept) describes the situation in which Ben Ali chooses to keep the status quo while the army decides to accept the order to open fire. This condition is given by the following two inequalities:

$$\bullet \quad q \cdot STRONG_{ba} + (1 - q) \cdot WAR_{ba} \leq p \cdot SQ_{ba}$$

As Ben Ali gets a payoff of 0 if the SQ remains, 2 if the army accepts the order to repress the population and he remains in power (STRONG), and -2 if the army accepts the order to repress the population but Ben Ali leaves (WAR), the previous equation becomes $2q + (-1) \cdot (1 - q) \leq 0$

By simplifying, we get $q \leq \frac{1}{2}$

In other words, we can say that Ben Ali's regime will choose the SQ when the probability that he leaves power is equal or lower than half.

$$\bullet \quad q \cdot STRONG_m + (1 - q) \cdot WAR_m \geq r \cdot WEAK_m + (1 - r) \cdot STRONG_m$$

Following the same logic of calculation, we have

$$2q - 2(1 - q) \geq -r + 2 \cdot (1 - r)$$

By simplifying, we get $q \geq -r + 1$

Therefore, the equilibrium (SQ; Accept) equals ($q \leq \frac{1}{2}$; $q \geq -r + 1$).

Second, there is an equilibrium (SQ; Reject) when Ben Ali chooses to keep the SQ while the army decides to reject his order to shoot at the demonstrators. This situation is given by the following inequalities:

$$\bullet \quad q \cdot STRONG_{ba} + (1 - q) \cdot WAR_{ba} \leq p \cdot SQ_{ba}$$

As previously, we get $q \leq \frac{1}{2}$

- $q \cdot STRONG_m + (1 - q) \cdot WAR_m \leq r \cdot WEAK_m + (1 - r) \cdot STRONG_m$

Following the same logic of calculation as previously, we get $q \leq -r + 1$

Therefore, the equilibrium (SQ; Reject) equals ($q \leq \frac{1}{2}$; $q \leq -r + 1$).

Third, the equilibrium (Repress; Accept) exists when Ben Ali's regime decides to repress its people and the army accepts this order. The following inequalities define this situation:

- $q \cdot STRONG_{ba} + (1 - q) \cdot WAR_{ba} \geq p \cdot SQ_{ba}$

Unlike previously, we get $q \geq \frac{1}{2}$

- $q \cdot STRONG_m + (1 - q) \cdot WAR_m \geq r \cdot WEAK_m + (1 - r) \cdot STRONG_m$

In this situation, we get $q \geq -r + 1$

Therefore, the equilibrium (Repress; Accept) equals ($q \geq \frac{1}{2}$; $q \geq -r + 1$).

Fourth, (Repress; Reject) is an equilibrium in which Ben Ali's regime makes the order to repress the demonstrators and the army rejects his order. This situation must satisfy the following inequalities:

- $q \cdot STRONG_{ba} + (1 - q) \cdot WAR_{ba} \geq p \cdot SQ_{ba}$

We get $q \geq \frac{1}{2}$

- $q \cdot STRONG_m + (1 - q) \cdot WAR_m \leq r \cdot WEAK_m + (1 - r) \cdot STRONG_m$

Following the same logic of calculation as previously noted, we get $q \leq -r + 1$

Therefore, the equilibrium (Repress; Reject) equals ($q \geq \frac{1}{2}$; $q \leq -r + 1$).

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32. Ibid.

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35. Blydes and Lo, "One Man, One Vote, One Time?"

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