

Military Defection During Localized Protests: The Case of Tataouine

RESEARCH NOTE

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In May 2017, the Tunisian military allowed protesters to storm and shut down an oil valve in Tataouine, in contravention of a direct order from President Essebsi to defend the production site. While scholars have recently examined military defection during mass uprisings, these protests were small and localized. Why did the military disobey President Essebsi in Tataouine? Drawing upon a survey of military officers conducted six months prior to the defection, I show that the military's composition and corporate interests, rather than its professionalism, likely prompted its defection. The majority of the military hails from impoverished regions in Tunisia's neglected interior and identifies with the demands of protesters in these regions. The military also saw the curtailment of its material and political interests in early 2017, giving it little incentive to repress protesters on the regime's behalf. Methodologically, this study provides some of the first survey data of military officers' attitudes toward defection.

Introduction

In April 2017, residents of Tataouine, Tunisia's southernmost governorate, rose up in protest of regional economic marginalization. The protesters staged a sit-in near an oil facility in El Kamour, halting production of petroleum, Tunisia's second largest export. After negotiations with the protesters reached an impasse, President Beji Caid Essebsi on May 10 announced that the army would be deployed to secure the production sites, using force if necessary. Ten days later, however, the army disobeyed Essebsi, allowing the protesters to storm the facility and shut off the oil valve. The military's defection forced the Tunisian government to cave in to the protesters' demands, agreeing to create 4,500 jobs and invest 80 million dinars (\$32 million US dollars) toward the development of Tataouine. Why did the military disobey President Essebsi's order in El Kamour?

The Tunisian military's defection in Tataouine poses a particular puzzle. While militaries occasionally defect during mass uprisings, the protests in El Kamour were small and localized—protests that the literature assumes “even the most underprivileged troops” will repress (Nepstad 2013, 337; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 46; Bellin 2012, 132; Barany 2016, 35). Moreover, the protests occurred in a military zone, which civilians were not permitted to enter, let alone to block the road or storm a facility. In terms of movement characteristics, such small and illegal protests should have been repressed.

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I argue that the Tunisian military's refusal to repress likely stemmed from two factors: (1) its composition, as soldiers and officers are recruited largely from neglected interior regions and thus tend to be sympathetic to protesters' demands, and (2) its corporate interests, which had recently been encroached upon by President Essebsi, giving it little motive to repress on his behalf. Moreover, I find little evidence that the professional or apolitical nature of the military explains its defection.

These arguments draw upon an original survey of seventy-two retired Tunisian military officers conducted in fall 2016. This is the first survey of military officers in the Middle East and one that fortuitously asked officers how they would respond to an order to repress protesters—only months before the military was asked to do so. I find systematic, individual-level evidence that attitudes toward defection track with my expectations.

These results provide some of the first microlevel quantitative tests of the determinants of defection.¹ They suggest that existing explanations for defection during mass protests may also extend to defection during localized protests. This is particularly important, given the greater frequency of small-scale protests. While localized protests may not topple a regime, they often carry important economic and political costs. Moreover, the military's behavior during small-scale protests may also shape future patterns of civil-military relations.

The Tunisian military's defection in Tataouine constituted its first confirmed refusal to repress protesters. While a large literature seeks to explain the Tunisian military's defection from President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in the 2011 revolution (Bellin 2012, 133–34; Brooks 2013; Lutterbeck 2013, 34–36; Makara 2016, 218; Barany 2016, 133–64; Koehler 2016, 11–12), it now seems likely that no such defection took place—that it was only a rumor (Jebnoun 2014, 305; Pachon 2014; Holmes and Koehler 2018).² The

¹For a quantitative, macrolevel test, see Lutscher (2016).

²Major news outlets reported that General Rachid Ammar had said “no” to Ben Ali's order to fire upon protesters, drawing on a post by a Tunisian blogger, Yassine Ayari, on January 7, 2011. Ayari has since admitted that he had made up this rumor to attempt to force the military to defect from Ben Ali.

Tunisian military's behavior in 2017, by contrast, constitutes a clear case of defection, permitting us to more convincingly examine the factors underlying it. In addition, I highlight a new characteristic of the Tunisian military affecting its behavior: a composition that skews heavily toward Tunisia's neglected interior regions.

The rest of this note proceeds as follows. The second section details the events of the El Kamour protests, providing background into the military's defection. The third section generates several hypotheses for why the military may have defected, drawing upon case knowledge and interviews with Tunisian military officers. The next section discusses the survey used to test these hypotheses and the results. Finally, I examine the measures the Tunisian government has taken since the army's defection in El Kamour and conclude that the military will likely continue to be unwilling to repress, short of politically untenable changes to patterns of conscription.

Defection in Tataouine

The protests in Tataouine began in March 2017 in response to soaring unemployment and economic deprivation. Tataouine's unemployment rate had reached nearly 30 percent, well above the national average of 14.8 percent (Cherif 2017). While rich in natural resources, including oil, Tataouine remained neglected and underdeveloped, as profits for decades had been funneled to Tunis and other well-off coastal areas. Protesters therefore demanded that the government reinvest at least 20 percent of the natural resource revenue back into Tataouine and create 4,500 jobs for local residents.

After a general strike in the city of Tataouine failed to secure these concessions, the protesters escalated their tactics on April 23. They travelled 110 km into the desert to El Kamour, the site of a major oil valve operated by TRAPSA, the Sahara Pipeline Transportation Company. Although located in a military zone, the protesters held a sit-in blocking the only road leading to the oil valve, halting production of Tunisia's second largest export.

The sit-in succeeded in getting the government's attention. Prime Minister Youssef Chahed quickly travelled to Tataouine on April 27, but failed to reach an agreement with the protesters. Frustrated by the impasse, President Beji Caid Essebsi on May 10 publicly ordered the military³ to secure the production sites, using force if necessary to clear the protesters and unblock the road.

The protesters "are stopping production of our only natural resources!" exclaimed President Essebsi (2017) in his public address. "What does Tunisia have? We have phosphate, we have gas, and we have tourism. . . . The state must protect the resources of the Tunisian people. . . . So after consultation with the National Security Council, I have decided that the Tunisian military will protect the production sites from any movement that might prevent their exploitation and put an end to the barricades on the roads. . . . Because democracy—its basic condition—is the rule of law." Energy Minister Hela Chikhrouhou went further: "Cutting off routes and halting energy production is a crime! It will

See Farhat (2011). The army was asked only to defend vital institutions, which it did. See also Jebnoun (2014); Pachon (2014), and Grewal (2016).

³There are several reasons why President Essebsi may have asked the military, rather than the police or National Guard, to repress. The first is that the site was in a military zone, where the military is in charge of security. Essebsi may have also sought to use the military's reputation to defuse the crisis. Officers interviewed noted that protesters generally act more deferentially and nonviolently toward the military than toward the police or National Guard.

not be tolerated anymore because it is destroying the economy" (Souissi 2017).

While some officers,⁴ including the Defense Ministry spokesman (Tuniscope 2017), expressed support for Essebsi's order, many others balked. Several military officers posted pictures of their uniforms and insignias on social media expressing support for the protesters, adopting their slogan, "no surrender" (*ar-rakh la*).⁵ In an op-ed to *Leaders* entitled "Love to Kamour," retired General Mohamed Nafti (2017) argued that the army should instead be put in charge of a major development project in Tataouine, replicating the Rjim Maatoug project in Kebili that began in 1985.

On May 17 at the parliament, Minister of Defense Farhat Horchani clarified that, while the military would not clear the protesters, it would use force, if needed, to defend the production site (Jeune Afrique 2017). The Ministry of Defense drafted a decree permitting military units to use "all means of force in their possession to deal with . . . attempts of sabotage or forced entry into the installations."⁶

These vows would be put to the test on May 20, when protesters attempted to storm the TRAPSA facility. After firing warning shots, the army unit stationed there (part of the First Saharan Territorial Regiment) allowed the protesters to enter the facility and close the oil valve (Middle East Eye 2017). Videos of the event show the protesters intermingling with the soldiers, celebrating and chanting the national anthem (Radio Tataouine 2017). Interviews with two brigadier generals who were involved in Essebsi's order to protect the oil site confirmed that the military let the protesters in, although they disagreed on who in particular made this decision.⁷ One account is that the decision came "from the top," referring to then army chief of staff, Divisional General Ismail Fathali. The other account is that it was a personal decision of the commander of the First Saharan Territorial Regiment, Colonel Major⁸ Chokri Belhaj, who was present at the oil site. In videos of the event, Belhaj can be seen speaking to the protesters through a megaphone.⁹

On May 21, Prime Minister Chahed called an emergency meeting with the Defense and Interior Ministers and decided to order the National Guard to reinforce the military in El Kamour. On May 22, the National Guard units forcibly cleared the protesters, killing one (Anouar Sakrafi) and wounding at least seven others. In response, the protesters burned a police station and National Guard post (Gall 2017). Not wishing to escalate the crisis further, the government agreed to negotiate, withdrawing the National Guard and leaving the area back to the military. Having brought the government to the table, the protesters allowed the oil valve to be reopened and did not attempt to reenter the facility.

On June 16, after mediation from the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT), the protesters and government came to an agreement, ending the sit-in. The government agreed to meet the protesters' original demands, promising to create 4,500 additional jobs for local residents and allocate

⁴See, for instance, Meddeb (2017b), *Mosaïque FM* (2017a), and *Mosaïque FM* (2017c).

⁵The pictures were posted in a closed Tataouine Facebook group. See the photos here: https://twitter.com/_med_Dhia/status/862316624967335937 and https://twitter.com/_med_Dhia/status/862376326195535872.

⁶See article 5, presidential decree no. 2017-90, <http://legislation-securite.tn/node/56266>.

⁷Interviews with two brigadier generals who wished to remain anonymous, Tunis, January 9, 2018, and February 8, 2018.

⁸A colonel major is a unique rank in Tunisia between colonel and brigadier general, ostensibly created to avoid having many generals.

⁹Belhaj was identified through personal correspondence with retired Colonel Major Mohamed Ahmed, April 27, 2018.

80 million dinars for the development of the region (Mosaique 2017e).

In short, with the military refusing to repress, the government was forced to rely on the National Guard and ultimately to concede to the protesters' demands. Beyond its refusal to repress, the military also reportedly provided the sit-in with electricity (Inkyfada 2017), despite the protesters' illegal entry into a military zone. Why did the Tunisian military defect from President Essebsi in Tataouine?

Determinants of Military Defection

Several literatures may help us to understand why the Tunisian military defected. One stream of thought emphasizes characteristics of the protest movement itself. Large, cross-cutting, and nonviolent movements, for instance, have been found to be more likely to engender military defection (Binnendijk and Marovic 2006; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011, 46; Nepstad 2011, 10; Nepstad 2015, 127; Huff and Kruszewska 2016).¹⁰ Especially in "endgame" scenarios, when the regime is set to be toppled, militaries do not want to end up on the wrong side of history. If they attempt to repress the protests but fail, they may face reprisals and prosecutions under the new regime, if not their disbandment in favor of a revolutionary army (Barany 2016, 35–37; Pion-Berlin 2016). Where nonviolent protests are massive, spanning the country and cutting across sociopolitical cleavages, militaries should be more likely to defect.

The protests in El Kamour, however, were small—at their peak, roughly one thousand protesters out of a population of eleven million (Cherif 2017)—and geographically localized in a remote setting in the Sahara desert. The protesters were predominantly impoverished and unemployed young men, not a cross-section of society. Moreover, they were not calling for President Essebsi's ouster, but rather for limited concessions; this was not an endgame scenario. Essebsi was sure to remain in power and thus may reward repression and punish defection. Finally, while generally nonviolent, the protests occurred in a military zone, where civilians are not permitted, let alone to block the road or storm an oil facility. In terms of movement characteristics, the military should have repressed these protests.

Other scholars emphasize characteristics of the state. Repression in democracies, for instance, is less frequent and less intense than in autocracies (Rummel 1997; Davenport 2008; Conrad and Moore 2010). Since democratically elected leaders are more constrained by elections, legislative veto points, and a culture of negotiation, they should be less likely to order repression. Despite these constraints, President Essebsi in Tunisia directly ordered the military to defend the production sites from protesters, using force if necessary. Democracy, as Essebsi noted in his May 10 speech, also demands the rule of law.

A related explanation may concern the professionalism of the military. Democratic militaries are professional, apolitical bodies that should shy away from using force against unarmed protesters. By professionalism, authors refer to a corporate identity and ethos that pushes officers to focus on the technical skills of applying violence against a foreign enemy and not to be involved in politics or in domestic repression (Huntington 1957; Janowitz 1960). The Tunisian military is said to have such a professional, "republican ethos," as a result of US military training and its historical marginalization

from political power (Brooks 2013; Taylor 2014; 2016, 57–82; Jebnoun 2014). *If its professionalism is the reason it defected, then we should find that Tunisian officers who were more apolitical should be more supportive of defection.*

However, there are also reasons to believe that professional officers will be less likely to defect. A core component of professionalism is the acceptance of orders from civilian superiors, not to question—let alone disobey—them. Apolitical officers, in particular, may prefer to not take a political stance by defecting from the regime. Repressing protests, by contrast, can be framed as less political—as simply "following orders." Given these countervailing pressures, professionalism may not, at least uniformly, be correlated with defection.

Additional hypotheses can be generated by extending the recent literature on military defection during mass uprisings to localized protests. One of the dominant predictors in this literature is the military's corporate interests, referring to "the position and resource standing of the military organization" (Thompson 1973, 10). Most prominent among these interests are the military's budget, weapons, autonomy, and influence over policy (Nordlinger 1977; Stepan 1988, 93–97). Militaries that are granted greater material and political privileges by the regime are more likely to defend the regime in the face of mass protests (Nepstad 2013; Nassif 2015b; Barany 2016, 31; Koehler 2016). Militaries that are instead neglected, underpaid, and excluded from political power, and especially those who see their resources channeled to a rival, counterbalancing force, are more likely to defect (Brooks 2013; Gaub 2013; Nassif 2015a; Makara 2016, 214–15; Morency-Lafamme 2018).

Corporate interests may also influence defection during small-scale protests, although the mechanisms may be different than during mass uprisings. During a mass uprising, a neglected military that defects may see an enhancement in its popularity for having facilitated the revolution and in turn may see greater material and political power under the new regime. During a small-scale protest, while the leader will remain in power, defection could still lead to an improved situation. Svoblik (2013) describes militaries "contracting on violence"—"demanding greater institutional autonomy as well as a say in policy" (765) if the leader wants it to repress. Defection in small-scale protests may be a means of signaling these demands to the leader, convincing him to satisfy the military's corporate interests so it defends him the next time around.

Even if it does not lead to an improved situation, defection may still be in a neglected military's interests. Repression comes with major social costs, tarnishing the military's reputation among the people. A neglected military may therefore calculate that defending a regime that neglects it is not worth damaging its popularity.

Historically, the Tunisian military had been neglected and counterbalanced by former Presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, languishing with a meager budget, outdated weapons, and little influence over national security decisions (Brooks 2013; Nassif 2015a). While the military's situation improved considerably following the 2011 revolution (Grewal 2016), this growth appeared to stagnate in 2017. After increasing by an average of 21 percent each year since 2011, the military's budget was cut by 4 percent for the first time in 2017, despite not yet having caught up to the salaries of the Interior Ministry, let alone the private sector. More importantly, after gaining political influence through regular meetings of the National Security Council (NSC) between 2012 and 2016, President Essebsi removed the two military members from the council in a January 2017

¹⁰For more on why some movements choose violence or nonviolence, see Stephan (2009), Chenoweth and Cunningham (2013), Dudouet (2013), Lawrence (2013), and Cunningham (2014).

decree,¹¹ depriving the military of input into national security decisions. Officers viewed their removal from the NSC as a major grievance against Essebsi, an “unfortunate” move that “doesn’t help the country handle defense and security issues.”¹²

The officers in fact had been hoping for even greater political influence, not a curtailment. In the survey of military officers described in the next section, 91 percent of officers agreed or strongly agreed that the NSC should have even more than two permanent military figures. *If the Tunisian military’s defection was driven by its corporate interests, we should see officers who believe that the military should wield greater political power be more supportive of defection.*

A final predictor of military defection is its composition, relative to that of the protesters. Militaries that resemble the protesters, for instance as the result of universal conscription, are more likely to defect, while militaries that are instead stacked with the leader’s ethnic, sectarian, or tribal group are more likely to repress the out-group (McLaughlin 2010; Bellin 2012, 133; Gaub 2013; Lutterbeck 2013, 32; Makara 2016, 215; Nassif 2015b; Barany 2016, 25; Morency-Laflamme 2018). More recent qualifications have noted that the composition of the military is important not only at the senior levels, but also among junior officers and soldiers, who will be directly engaging with and potentially firing upon protesters (Nassif 2015b; Albrecht and Ohl 2016). If they anticipate their subordinates being unwilling to fire, senior officers may decide to defect even if they personally want to repress.

While existing accounts have correctly observed that the Tunisian military was not stacked with the leader’s ethnic or religious group (Bellin 2012, 134; Brooks 2013; Lutterbeck 2013, 34; Nassif 2015a; Makara 2016, 218), it would not be fair to characterize it as a nationally representative force, either. Although Tunisia does not have ethnic or religious cleavages, it does have strong regional identities. Former autocrats Bourguiba and Ben Ali, both of whom hailed from the Sahel (coast), privileged the coast in development (Boughzala and Hamdi 2014) and access to political power (Buehler and Ayari 2018). After a brief respite during the postrevolutionary troika government, President Essebsi again hails from the coast and appears to be privileging it as his supporters reside in the coastal governorates (Berman and Nugent 2015). Accordingly, each bout of protests in Tunisian history has emanated from the interior, including the 1983–1984 bread riots, the 2008 Gafsa revolt, the 2011 revolution, and the 2017 El Kamour protests.

Historically, the top brass tended to be populated by officers from the coast (Ware 1985, 38). The former autocrats often knew these officers through personal connections and otherwise expected them to be loyal. In 2013, the postrevolutionary troika government reshuffled the top brass to bring in formerly discriminated officers from the interior regions (Grewal 2016), and under President Essebsi the top brass has remained relatively diverse.¹³ For instance, the chief of staff of the army in 2017, Divisional General

Ismail Fathali—who by one account ordered the defection in Tataouine—hails from Beja in the Northwest, not the coast.

Other than the top brass, the vast majority of the Tunisian military has historically been recruited from the impoverished interior regions.¹⁴ Due to the Tunisian military’s low pay and prestige, well-off families from the coast tended to frown upon a career in the military and generally had the resources to (legally) pay their way out of conscription through an exception known as “individual assignment” (Meddeb 2015). As a result, both protesters and the majority of the military tend to come from the neglected interior regions.

Moreover, since 1999, conscripts have been stationed at the base closest to home, as their pay was not sufficient for transportation for family visits and to return home at the end of service.¹⁵ Accordingly, the First Saharan Territorial Regiment (part of the Saharan Brigade) sent to defend the oil site in 2017 was primarily drawn from Tataouine and other southern governorates.¹⁶ This regional composition has two important implications for the military’s likelihood of defection. First, since the officers and soldiers on the ground are themselves from impoverished families in the neglected interior, they likely identify with the demands of the El Kamour protesters.¹⁷ Second, the protesters may even personally know some of the soldiers and officers, facilitating the fraternization that often precedes military defection (Ketchley 2014). *If the regional composition of the military played a role in its defection, we should see officers from the interior regions be more supportive of defection than those from the coast.*

From the discussion above, we can isolate three potential explanations for the Tunisian military’s defection in Tataouine—its composition, corporate interests, and professionalism—with the following testable implications:

1. *Composition:* Officers from the interior regions should be more supportive of defection than officers from the coast.
2. *Corporate Interests:* Officers who are less satisfied with the level of political and material privileges afforded to the military by the regime should be more supportive of defection.
3. *Professionalism:* Officers who are more apolitical should be more supportive of defection.

Survey of Military Officers

To adjudicate among these possibilities in an ideal world, we would interview or survey the military personnel who were stationed in Tataouine and ask them why they defected. However, the actual officers and soldiers who defected, as active duty personnel, are forbidden from speaking with researchers or the media. Given this limitation, the best alternative is retired military officers, who have undergone the

Mohamed Fouad Aloui, from Sfax; the navy chief of staff, Abdel Raouf Atallah, from Kairouan; the director general of military security, Habib Dhif, from Tunis; and the inspector general, Jamal Boujah, from Kairouan.

¹⁴ Interview with former director general of military security who wished to remain anonymous, Tunis, October 21, 2015. The directorate of military security is in charge of investigating the background of every recruit and thus would be the most knowledgeable of demographic patterns in the military.

¹⁵ Interview with retired Colonel Major Mahmoud Mezoughi and a retired director of internal security who did not wish to be named, Tunis, January 11, 2017. The director of internal security drafted the internal note requesting this change to the Minister of Defense.

¹⁶ Interviews with two brigadier generals involved in Essebsi’s order to fire, Tunis, January 9, 2018, and February 8, 2018.

¹⁷ While not at Tataouine, retired General Nafti, who penned the “Love to Kamour” op-ed, was from Gafsa.

¹¹ See decree no. 2017-70, dated January 19, 2017.

¹² Communication with retired brigadier general who did not wish to be named, May 13, 2017. Similarly, retired Brigadier General Mohamed Meddeb (2017a) wrote that “[t]he total absence of members of the High Command of the Army in the recent composition of the National Security Council is no more reassuring as to the attitude and the will of the Political Power towards the Army. We discuss and decide on national security policies and measures, if necessary the opportunity to declare war or make peace, in the absence of those responsible for implementing them. . . . This reminds me of the conditions of the outbreak of the [disastrous] Battle of Bizerte!”

¹³ In 2017, at the time of the El Kamour protests, the army chief of staff, Ismail Fathali, was from Beja in the Northwest; the air force chief of staff,

Table 1. Officers survey (N = 72)

<i>Demographics</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Rank	
General	0
Colonel major	43
Colonel	50
Lt. colonel	4
Major	3
Branch	
Army	46
Navy	11
Air force	13
Military security	4
Joint services	31
Birthplace	
Tunis	26
Sahel	33
North	24
Center	6
South	11
Foreign training	
United States	54
France	56
Other	10
None	0

Note. Numbers in Branch and Foreign Training do not add up to 100, given that officers in military security are also housed in another service and that officers may go to multiple countries for training.

same training and have had many of the same formative experiences. As the closest approximation to the personnel who defected, retired officers provide an accessible population on whom to conduct our study.

This study therefore draws upon a unique survey of seventy-two retired Tunisian military officers conducted in Arabic in fall 2016. The English translation of all questions used in this article are in Appendix A. The survey was fielded to members of the retired officers association, the Association of Former Officers of the National Armed Forces. Established in March 2011, the association hosts social gatherings for its members as well as intellectual discussions on security- and defense-related topics. The association was home to 174 members at the time of the survey. Sixty-two members filled in hard copies of the survey at the association between August and December 2016, while an additional ten completed an online version in August 2016, resulting in seventy-two surveys total.

While retired officers may be the closest approximation to active duty officers, it is possible that retirement may change officers' attitudes. Although we cannot directly address this criticism with the survey data, we can try to gauge how large of a bias this may be. In particular, we can exploit variation in when officers retired, with the assumption that those who recently retired may be closer to active duty officers' attitudes than those who retired long ago. In the survey sample, officers had retired between 2001 and 2015, with 46 percent retiring after the 2011 revolution (see histogram in Appendix A). As we will see, however, years of retirement had no impact on attitudes toward defection, providing suggestive evidence that retired officers may provide a useful approximation of active duty ones.

Table 1 presents demographic information of the survey sample. The sample consists of senior and midlevel

officers. Of the seventy-two officers surveyed, 67 (93 percent) were colonels or colonel majors. The remaining five were Lt. colonels and majors. The relative seniority of the survey sample is particularly useful for testing our hypotheses, given that the officer who likely gave the order to defect in Tataouine was himself senior: either the Army Chief of Staff, Divisional General Ismail Fathali, or the commander of the First Saharan Territorial Regiment, Colonel Major Chokri Belhaj.

Like most other elite surveys, the selling point of this survey is not that it is a random sample of retired military officers—it certainly is not—but rather that it provides unique insight into a hard-to-reach group of elites. Still, to evaluate the representativeness of this survey, I collect demographic information on all 662 senior and midlevel officers who had retired by 2009. Their biographies are available in an internal Ministry of Defense publication, “Registry of Retired Officers: Commanders and Senior Officers,” produced in June 2009 (the most recent version). Biographies include several pieces of information, including their rank, branch of the military, birthplace, and where they trained abroad, if at all (see Appendix B for a sample biography). While imperfect,¹⁸ this dataset of retired officers can be seen as the population from which the survey sample was drawn.

Appendix C therefore presents the demographic comparison of the survey sample with the retired officers dataset. Since most survey respondents are colonels and colonel majors, the appendix also presents the comparison for this subset. The comparisons suggest that the survey sample is almost perfectly representative in terms of branches of the military, with the vast majority in the land army or in the joint services (logistics, support, etc.). The survey sample is also fairly representative in terms of birthplace, although with a slightly higher proportion of officers hailing from the capital, Tunis, where the association was located. Finally, the majority of officers in both the survey and population have some form of Western training, although the survey has a slightly higher proportion of US-trained officers. While not a random sample of military officers, the sample is therefore fairly representative on key demographic characteristics.

There may, of course, be differences between the sample and the population that are not measurable in these demographics. It is possible, indeed likely, that the officers who chose to be members of the association and/or who decided to take the survey are better networked or more political than the average retired officer, especially given the intellectual, “think tank” nature of the association. While I acknowledge this potential bias in the sample, since it afflicts the entire sample, it should not undermine the validity of the comparisons we will make today.

The dependent variable is whether officers would refuse an order by President Essebsi to repress protesters. The survey asks the following: “Suppose, hypothetically, that President Essebsi asks the military to fire upon protesters. How appropriate would it be for the military to refuse this order?” Answers are recorded from the following options: very appropriate, somewhat appropriate, somewhat inappropriate, to very inappropriate. The dependent variable is therefore coded on a 1–4 scale with 4 being very appropriate (to refuse to fire).

¹⁸The Ministry of Defense publication only included officers who retired before 2009, whereas the survey sample includes officers who retired as late as 2015. Historical reports on the Tunisian military (Ware 1985) do not mention any difference in recruitment patterns in the 1970s, and thus there should not be a major difference in demographics between those who retired in 2009 and those who retired in 2015.

The timing of the survey (fall 2016) provides both pros and cons for this question. On the one hand, the fortunate timing just months before the El Kamour protests provides a unique snapshot into how military officers thought about firing upon protesters before the military was asked to do so. If the survey had been conducted after the defection, by contrast, respondents may have faced social desirability bias to also say they would have defected, potentially hiding their true preferences. On the other hand, given that the survey occurred prior to the El Kamour protests, we cannot be sure that they were thinking about small-scale protests—they may have been thinking of the mass uprising of 2010–2011. However, the only type of protest Tunisia had thus far seen under President Essebsi were localized ones, particularly in the interior regions. Some of these protests even took the precise form of Tataouine; protesters in Gafsa, for instance, had repeatedly blocked the roads to phosphate companies. Immediately prior to the survey, President Essebsi and Prime Minister Chahed publicly complained about the protesters in Gafsa, who then blocked the roads again in October 2016 while the survey was being conducted ([Middle East Eye 2016](#)).

This question, therefore, offers a useful window into how officers viewed military defection and likely in small-scale protests like Tataouine. Among officers who answered the question, 29 percent stated it was very appropriate to refuse to fire, 14 percent stated it was somewhat appropriate, 24 percent chose somewhat inappropriate, and 33 percent chose very inappropriate. Officers indeed did not appear to suffer from social desirability bias to all support defection.

Given the sensitive nature of the question, fifty-one officers answered don't know. This missingness not only decreases the sample size, but could also introduce selection effects if certain types of officers are more likely to say don't know, potentially biasing the results. I will address this issue in three ways, each of which has its flaws but together reveal a consistent story. First, I will analyze the results treating the don't know as missing data, excluding them from the analysis. This is the standard way of analyzing such data, but in this case suffers both from sample size and potential selection effects.

Second, I will operate from the assumption that an answer of "don't know" may still be meaningful. It may reflect a hesitance or ambivalence about whether to repress or defect and therefore may represent an intermediary position between "somewhat appropriate" and "somewhat inappropriate." In other survey work, don't know answers have been shown to reflect a middle category, especially when (like in our case) no middle position was provided ([Kaltou, Roberts, and Holt 1980](#); [Schuman and Presser 1981](#), 161–77; [Sturgis, Roberts, and Smith 2012](#)). This approach will increase the sample size, but ignore the potential selection effects.

Third, following [Berinsky \(2004\)](#), I will explicitly model both the attitudes toward defection and the decision to answer the question in the first place. As described below, a Heckman selection model ([Heckman 1979](#)) will adjust the coefficients to account for each officer's latent propensity to say don't know. This approach addresses both the sample size and selection effect issues, but may be less transparent to readers. While each analysis may have its flaws, consistent results across all three methods make it more plausible that there is a true effect.

We are interested in whether composition, corporate interests, and professionalism shape officers' attitudes toward defection. To measure composition, I record whether officers were born in the wealthy coastal regions (from Tunis to Sfax) or in the interior. About 59 percent of officers

surveyed were from the coast, reflecting a legacy of promoting officers from the coast to these upper ranks. I hypothesize that officers from the interior should be more supportive of defection, as they are more likely to identify with the demands of protesters from the interior.

To measure corporate interests, I record whether officers believe that the National Security Council should have more than two permanent military figures (from strongly disagree to strongly agree). Forty-seven percent of officers strongly agreed, 44 percent agreed, and 9 percent neither agreed nor disagreed that the NSC should have more military members. By contrast, President Essebsi in January 2017 (after the survey) removed all military figures from the NSC—one of the officers' major institutional grievances against the regime. Officers who more strongly agree that the military should have greater representation in the NSC should be the least satisfied with the regime and thus the most likely to defect.

Finally, to measure professionalism, the survey employs a novel, behavioral variable of politicization. The survey asked officers for their level of support for each of the nine most popular political parties in Tunisia.¹⁹ The forty-three officers (60 percent) who chose don't know for every party are coded as being apolitical. The selection of don't know here could either indicate genuine lack of knowledge of political parties or a recognition that officers should not express political opinions even if they privately hold them. Both possibilities are correctly defined as being professional.²⁰

Beyond these independent variables, regression models will also control for demographic variables that may affect officers' attitudes toward defection. These include officers' rank, branch of the military, year of retirement, foreign training, and rating of President Essebsi. Lower-ranking officers, especially in the land army, may be more supportive of defection as officers similar to them would be the ones actually on the ground firing on protesters. Officers who retired more recently, especially after the 2011 revolution, may be more conscious of the military's post-2011 reputation of not firing on protesters.²¹ While almost all officers in the sample received either US or French training, I control for US training to determine if American and French training have differential effects on attitudes toward defection. Finally, officers who more strongly disapprove of President Essebsi may be more likely to defect.²²

Table 2 presents the results of the first two methods (the Heckman selection model will be presented in **Table 3**). Models 1–2 of **Table 2** use the dependent variable excluding don't know, while Model 3 includes don't know as the middle position. For ease of interpreting regression coefficients, I present linear regressions for both dependent variables, though Appendix D shows that results are robust to using ordered logistic regression.

¹⁹ These were Nidaa Tounes, Ennahda, Haraka Mashrou' Tunis, Free Patriotic Union, Popular Front, Afek Tounes, Democratic Current, al-Moubadara, and al-Irada.

²⁰ An alternative possibility would be that officers who select don't know fear some personal cost for expressing their political views. However, this seems unlikely, given that there are much fewer don't know for other potentially sensitive evaluations, such as rating the current commander-in-chief President Essebsi (only 20 percent answered don't know, compared to 60 percent for political parties). A don't know for political parties more likely reflects a professional duty not to comment on partisan politics or a lack of knowledge of political parties.

²¹ As suggested by reviewers, I code this dichotomously (pre- or post-2011), but results are robust to including it as a continuous variable.

²² Officers were asked for their level of support for Essebsi on a 1–5 point scale. Officers answering don't know are coded as 0, though results are robust to excluding them as missing data. Results are also similar when including support for Nidaa Tounes rather than President Essebsi.

Table 2. Effect of composition and corporate interests on defection (OLS)

	<i>DV: Appropriateness of defection</i>		
	<i>Exc. DK (1–4)</i>		<i>Inc. DK (1–5)</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Interior	1.568*** (0.444)	1.535** (0.546)	0.611*** (0.223)
NSC	0.590** (0.254)	0.759* (0.384)	0.410** (0.182)
Apolitical	0.266 (0.461)	0.093 (0.592)	0.361 (0.234)
Rank		0.335 (0.570)	0.189 (0.173)
Army		0.127 (0.608)	0.087 (0.217)
Ret. year		0.264 (0.616)	–0.080 (0.238)
US training		0.398 (0.595)	–0.048 (0.237)
Essebsi		–0.035 (0.237)	–0.046 (0.102)
Constant	–0.776 (1.122)	–3.233 (3.194)	–0.009 (1.236)
Observations	20	20	70
R ²	0.510	0.557	0.208
Adjusted R ²	0.418	0.235	0.104

Note. Statistical significance levels: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

In all three models, composition and corporate interests are the only statistically significant predictors. To visualize the effect sizes, Figures 1 and 2 present the predicted probabilities for each variable in Model 1 while holding other variables at their means. Figure 1 shows that officers from the interior regions were about 1.5 points more supportive of defection on the 1–4 scale (~40 percent of the scale). Similarly, officers who strongly agreed that the NSC should have more military representatives were about 1.2 points more supportive of defection on the 1–4 scale (~30 percent) than officers who neither agreed nor disagreed. The effects of composition and corporate interests are thus not only statistically significant but also substantively large.

The sample size of Models 1–2 and the interpretation of don't knows in Model 3 are of course limitations to this analysis. Yet, the consistent results across these models provide at least suggestive evidence that composition and corporate interests are important factors shaping military officers' decision to repress or defect.

By contrast, the behavioral measure of professionalism was not significant. Officers who were apolitical were no more supportive of defection. However, there may be an important sample selection effect: perhaps officers who are professional were more likely to answer don't know, potentially biasing the results. Indeed, while 48 percent of political officers answered the question, only 16 percent of apolitical officers did so. To account for this potential bias, I run a Heckman selection model (Heckman 1979), which first models the effect of professionalism on the likelihood of answering the question and then subsequently accounts for this propensity in modeling attitudes toward defection.

Table 3. Heckman selection model

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>			
	<i>Answer (0–1)</i>		<i>Defect (1–4)</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Interior	–0.206 (0.380)	1.320*** (0.415)	1.293*** (0.436)	1.309*** (0.435)
NSC	–0.246 (0.304)	0.685** (0.283)	0.668** (0.295)	0.676** (0.312)
Apolitical	–1.022*** (0.394)	0.097 (0.679)	0.227 (0.640)	
US training	0.350 (0.400)	0.276 (0.474)		0.300 (0.450)
Army	–0.528 (0.371)		0.015 (0.498)	–0.030 (0.482)
Rank	0.225 (0.312)	0.417 (0.355)	0.438 (0.406)	0.436 (0.382)
Ret. year	–0.016 (0.053)	0.068 (0.052)	0.076 (0.051)	0.067 (0.052)
Essebsi	0.021 (0.170)	–0.019 (0.167)	0.003 (0.164)	–0.020 (0.169)
Constant	0.3133 (2.115)	–3.626 (2.263)	–3.446 (2.326)	–3.725* (2.213)
Observations	70	70	70	70
σ	0.775*** (0.131)			
ρ		0.092 (0.949)	–0.130 (0.847)	0.217 (0.648)
Log likelihood		–58.700	–58.871	–58.708

Note. Statistical significance levels: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

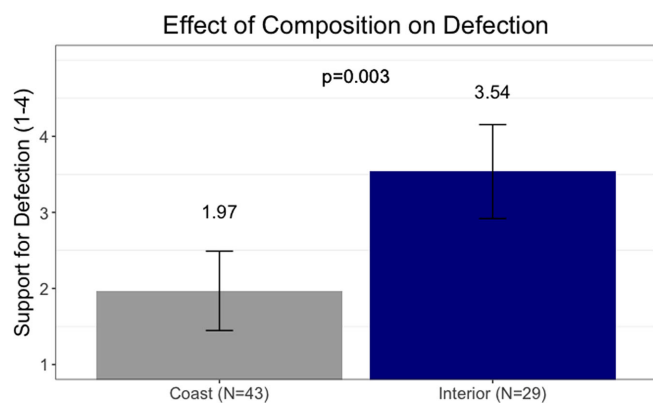


Figure 1. Effect of composition on defection

The first stage of the selection model predicts who answered the question. Table 3, Model 1 presents these results. As expected, apolitical officers were indeed more likely to choose don't know.²³ Officers who studied in the United States (rather than France) were slightly more likely to answer the question, though not significantly so ($p = 0.38$). Officers from the army were slightly more likely to say don't know ($p = 0.15$). No other variable was close to significant.

The second stage of the Heckman then models attitudes toward defection, while including a correction term based on the results of the first stage. It therefore accounts for professional officers' propensity to not answer the question. The key requirement of the selection model is that at least one variable important in predicting who answered the question (first stage) is not also included in the model predicting how they answered (second stage).²⁴ For the sake of robustness and transparency, I will present three second-stage models, each of which drops one of the three variables that were significant or close to significant in the first stage (apolitical, US trained, and army officers).

Models 2–4 present these second-stage results. The results demonstrate that, even when accounting for professional officers' propensity to answer don't know, results are unchanged: composition and corporate interests continue to be the only significant predictors of defection, with similar effect sizes as before. The coefficient on apolitical officers, however, is still far from statistical significance ($p = 0.72$ to 0.89).

The data therefore raise the possibility that professionalism may not cause defection, at least uniformly. As discussed above, however, there may still be competing effects that are canceling each other out. On the one hand, professional officers may not want to take a political position and should thus be more likely to shirk, rather than be politically associated as a supporter of the regime. On the other hand, however, professional officers—whose primary interest may be in following orders—may actually be more likely to repress rather than disobey a direct command from their superiors.

²³This result could indicate that professional officers follow norms of not weighing in on political matters. An alternative interpretation, however, is that officers who answered don't know to the political parties questions also answer don't know to whether they would defect. Either possibility is accounted for in the Heckman selection model.

²⁴If all variables were the same, then the collinearity between the second-stage variables and the correction term would inflate the standard errors (Puhani 2000; Bushway, Johnson, and Slocum 2007). Indeed, the model does not converge when including all variables in the second stage.

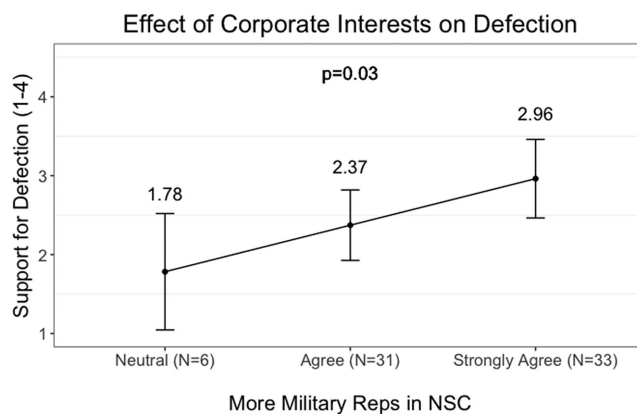


Figure 2. Effect of corporate interests on defection

Implications for Tunisian Democracy

The survey data suggest that the Tunisian military may have refused President Essebsi's order to fire on protesters as a result of its composition and corporate interests. Both of these factors are, in theory, alterable: if President Essebsi were to seek to involve the military in repression in the future, he could change its composition and corporate interests to ensure it would repress. After the Tataouine protests, the few (generally coastal) military officers that support repression have already advocated both. Retired Brigadier General Mohamed Meddeb (2017a), for instance, has advised revising conscription laws to make them more nationally representative, removing the exception for those who can afford to pay their way out of service. Similarly, in an example of Svolik (2013)'s contracting on violence, Fathi Aouadi (2017) has called for enhancing the military's corporate interests—in particular, its size and strength—if President Essebsi wants it to repress, while retired Colonel Boubaker Ben Kraiem (2017) has called for retired officers to be appointed to head state agencies and enterprises.

Some of President Essebsi's actions after the protests appear to fit this mold. On June 30, the anniversary of the founding of the Tunisian armed forces, Essebsi promised an improvement in the military's living conditions and the creation of a new school for military intelligence (Mosaique 2017b). The 2018 budget likewise provided for a roughly 11 percent increase in the military's budget, while the Ministry of Defense pledged to increase salaries to equal those of the Ministry of Interior (Akher Khaber Online 2017). In November, Defense Minister Abdelkarim Zbidi also promised to begin to reform military conscription (HuffPost Maghreb 2017).

While President Essebsi could attempt to satisfy the military's corporate interests, its composition is more difficult to change. Altering the military's composition would entail politically untenable changes to conscription laws. Attempting to force well-off families in the coast to send their sons into the military would be political suicide, as President Essebsi and his party, Nidaa Tounes, receive much of their support from these families.

This is good news for Tunisian democracy, as it implies that a new dictatorship with the military playing a dominant role in repression is likely out of the cards—the military will continue to recruit from the interior regions and as such be unwilling to repress protesters from the neglected interior. However, a reversion to a Bourguiba or Ben Ali style dictatorship, relying on the police and National Guard for repression rather than the military, is still a distinct

possibility. These security forces have yet to be reformed (Sayigh 2016), and the National Guard tends to be recruited primarily from the Sahel.²⁵

The Tunisian government may also have come to this recognition. An active duty brigadier general currently involved in the government's security policymaking revealed that, since the events of El Kamour, the government has sought to rely on the National Guard to deal with protesters, rather than the military. While the military is still directly surrounding vital installations, the police and National Guard are forming a first line of defense, preventing protesters from ever reaching the military.²⁶

Moreover, the government's decisions after the El Kamour protests reflect an elevation of the National Guard, seemingly as a reward for its willingness to repress. In June 2017, President Essebsi extended the term of the commander of the National Guard, Lotfi Brahem, for another year despite reaching the retirement age (Mosaique 2017d). Brahem was then promoted to Minister of Interior in September—the first time in twenty-six years that the Interior Minister did not have a civilian background. In November, the National Guard spokesman, Khelifa Chibani, was then promoted to spokesman of the Interior Ministry, confirming a growing political role of the National Guard. If this trend continues, President Essebsi—or his successor—may be able to recreate a Bourguiba or Ben Ali style dictatorship centered around the ministry of interior; yet, like in those cases, such a regime that lacks the support of the military would prove brittle in response to a mass uprising.

Conclusion

Why did the Tunisian military refuse to repress protesters in Tataouine? Through a survey of military officers conducted just months before its defection, I find that the military's refusal to repress protesters likely stemmed from its composition and corporate interests, rather than its professionalism.

This study provides one of the first examinations of military defection during localized protests. While the stakes may be higher in mass uprisings, localized protests are far more frequent. They also create important political and economic costs for the government. In Tunisia, for instance, localized protests blocking phosphate in Gafsa lost the government almost 5 billion TND (~\$2.5 billion US dollars) in revenue between 2011 and 2016. Politically, governments often look weak for caving in to protesters' demands and harsh for repressing them. Moreover, as discussed in the preceding section, military behavior during localized protests appears to consequentially shape future patterns of civil-military relations.

Substantively, this study suggests that the factors highlighted in the mass uprisings literature also help explain military defection during localized protests. Whether the officers and soldiers on the ground sympathize with the protesters' demands likely plays a key role in driving military defections. While existing literature typically focuses on the military's ethnic or sectarian composition as a proxy for this identification, regional identities may function in a similar fashion. The concordance of the military's regional, ethnic, or religious composition with that of the protesters' appears to be a critical factor motivating defection.

In addition to composition, the military's corporate interests are also an important factor in defections. I find that

those officers who were less satisfied with the political power afforded to the military by the regime were more supportive of defection, even in small-scale protests. While defection in these cases will not lead to the collapse of the regime, it may still serve as a signal of the military's displeasure, potentially convincing the regime to rectify the situation. Even if not, the military is unlikely to tarnish its reputation for the sake of a regime that neglects its interests.

The results also raise the possibility that professionalism may not breed defection, at least uniformly. While professional, apolitical officers may not wish to engage in political repression, their professionalism may also provide them with a sense of duty to follow orders. As measured through officers' willingness to express political judgments, I find that professionalism was not correlated with defection.

Beyond these substantive contributions, this article also provides a methodological innovation: it introduces survey evidence of officers' views on defection. While the survey is limited by sample size, it is the first survey (to the best of my knowledge) of military officers' attitudes toward defection. It also permits the introduction of multiple regression to studies of military defection, allowing us to examine the effect of each hypothesized factor while controlling for others. In doing so, the survey results help us adjudicate between the growing number of hypotheses about the causes of military defection and increase our confidence that composition and corporate interests play an important role.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at <http://www.sharangrewal.com/> and at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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²⁵ Interview with retired National Guard colonel major who did not wish to be named, Tunis, February 7, 2018.

²⁶ Interview with brigadier general who did not wish to be named, Tunis, February 8, 2018.

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