

Tunisia's Foiled Coup of 1987: The November 8th Group

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In 1987 Tunisian prime minister Zine al-'Abidine Ben 'Ali seized power from the ailing president, Habib Bourguiba. Less well-known is that Ben 'Ali's coup had preempted another coup plot planned for the following day. This article recounts the story of this latter plot, led by the November 8th Group, a coalition of about 200 individuals in the military, security forces, and the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI). Drawing on memoirs and interviews, the article explores the plotters' motivations, post-takeover plans, and ultimate failure. It highlights how Bourguiba's coup-proofing strategies shaped the plot and its outcome, concluding with a discussion on the foiled coup's lasting impact on Tunisian civil-military relations.

Of the military establishments in the Arab world, Tunisia is almost unique. It is a non-praetorian, highly professional body of officers and men which, as an armed force, never mounted a coup or fomented revolution against the state . . . ¹

Unlike most other North African armies, Tunisia's had never even attempted a coup . . . ²

The Tunisian military has long been characterized as a professional and apolitical force. Observers have claimed that it has never staged a coup, even viewing coups as “anathema to its institutional culture.”³ This professional ethos is often traced back to Tunisia's founding father, Habib Bourguiba, who banned the military from political activity and sent officers for training almost exclusively in Western democracies.⁴

While many Tunisian officers are indeed averse to coups, newly released material suggests that such accounts may need qualification. Tunisian officers have helped plot at least two coups since the military's founding in 1956: the first, in 1962, alongside

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1. L. B. Ware, “The Role of the Tunisian Military in the Post-Bourguiba Era,” *The Middle East Journal* 39, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 37, www.jstor.org/stable/4326972.

2. Zoltan Barany, “Comparing the Arab Revolts: The Role of the Military,” *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 4 (Oct. 2011): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2011.0069>.

3. Hicham Bou Nassif, “A Military Besieged: The Armed Forces, the Police, and the Party in Bin 'Ali's Tunisia, 1987–2011,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 1 (Feb. 2015): 80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743814001457>.

4. For examples, see Eva Bellin, “Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring,” *Comparative Politics* 44, no. 2 (Jan. 2012): 134, www.jstor.org/stable/23211807; Risa Brooks, “Abandoned at the Palace: Why the Tunisian Military Defected from the Ben Ali Regime in January 2011,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36, no. 2 (2013): 205–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.742011>; William C. Taylor, *Military Responses to the Arab Uprisings and the Future of Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East: Analysis from Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

supporters of Bourguiba's rival, Salah Ben Youssef,⁵ and the second, in 1987, alongside Islamists affiliated with the Islamic Tendency Movement (*Harakat al-Ittijah al-Islami* or MTI, from the French *Mouvement de la tendance islamique*). While both plots failed, their existence challenges the prevailing narrative of the Tunisian military as disinterested in politics and unwilling to seize power.

This article recounts the story of the 1987 coup plot, led by a group of about 200 individuals self-styled the National Salvation Group (*Majmu'at al-Inqadh al-Watani*) and alternatively known as the November 8th Group, the Group of 87, or the Security Group (*al-Majmu'a al-Amniyya*). Drawing on original interviews with those involved as well as memoirs, this article describes the plotters' motivations, post-takeover plans, and ultimate failure. Beyond detailing the facts of the plot, this article also attempts to answer three analytical questions. First, how did members of a professional, apolitical military come to join the coup? What factors led them to plot against the regime? Second, how did Bourguiba's coup-proofing strategies affect the plot's organization and eventual failure? Finally, what impact did the foiled coup have on future patterns of civil-military relations?

The autobiographical and interview material reveal that the coup-plotters were motivated by both policy disagreements and ideological concerns. The coup-plotters' primary grievance was with Bourguiba's national security policy, particularly his insistence on executing Shaykh Rached Ghannouchi and other leaders of the MTI, which the plotters believed would lead to civil war. Many also sympathized with the Islamist movement, while others criticized Bourguiba's growing senility and despotism.

The coup-plotters, however, were constrained by two coup-proofing strategies employed by Bourguiba. The first was to favor more secular, coastal officers in promotions to the military's top ranks, while the second was to counterbalance the military with the National Guard and the police, both under the umbrella of the Ministry of Interior. The discrimination in promotions meant that the Islamist coup-plotters could recruit only from the lower ranks, while the counterbalancing forced the coup-plotters to recruit also from the internal security forces. These constraints enlarged the size of the required coup coalition, increasing the probability of detection. Ultimately, a police officer revealed the plot to Prime Minister Zine al-'Abidine Ben 'Ali, who preempted the coup by 24 hours and subsequently tortured and imprisoned the coup-plotters.

The lesson Ben 'Ali learned from this episode was that Bourguiba's coup-proofing strategies had worked in foiling the Islamists' plot. Upon assuming the presidency, Ben 'Ali therefore doubled down on the discrimination in promotions and counterbalancing of the military with the Ministry of Interior. These strategies, while effective in preventing coups, also generated resentment toward the regime, leaving Ben 'Ali without the help of the military in the 2011 revolution.⁶

5. For more on the 1962 coup plot, see Noura Borsali, 1963–1956, *بورقية والمسألة الديمقراطية*, [Bourguiba and the democratic issue, 1956–63], trans. Muhammed 'Abd al-Kafi (Tunis: Arabesques, 2016).

6. Barany, "Comparing the Arab Revolts;" Brooks, "Abandoned at the Palace;" Bou Nassif, "A Military Besieged."

METHODS

The existence of an Islamist-led coup plot for November 8, 1987, has been confirmed in the literature,⁷ though details are sparse. To discover the motivations and plans of the November 8th Group, I conducted interviews with five of its members. Each interview lasted one to two hours and went in depth into each plotter's role, why they joined, what they believed to be the plan for November 8 and beyond, and why the operation failed.

The coup-plotters were challenging to find and generally hesitant to refer me to others or be quoted by name. I used two entry points to access the group. The first was through veterans associations, including the Justice for Military Veterans Association (known as *Insaf*, or “justice,” from its Arabic name *Jam‘iyyat al-Insaf Qudama’ al-‘Askariyyin*) and the Tunisian Association of Military and Paramilitary Veterans (*Association tunisienne des anciens militaires et paramilitaires*). Though *Insaf* was formed in 2011 primarily to lobby on behalf of military personnel purged in the 1991 Barraket Essahel affair,⁸ one of the cofounders, ‘Elmy Khadhri, was part of the November 8th Group. The second entry point was through the *Ennahdha* Movement (from *al-nahda*, “the revival”), the party that grew out of the MTI and led Tunisia’s first postrevolutionary government after 2011. At *Ennahdha*’s headquarters I met one of the ringleaders of the coup plot, Said Ferjani, as well as another plotter who is also politically active in the party.

All the November 8th Group plotters interviewed were part of the military, where-as military personnel made up no more than a third of the group. This is an important bias in my interview sample that should be kept in mind, though it can be justified on two fronts. First, the inner circle of the November 8th Group was also predominantly made up of military officers. Second, the military is the focus of this article, which seeks to explain how a professional force could come to plot a coup.

In addition to these interviews, I drew upon published accounts of other members of the group: Salah Karker, interviewed by François Burgat;⁹ Moncef Ben Salem, through his autobiography;¹⁰ and Sahbi ‘Amri, in both a talk at a Tunisian think tank and a lengthy social media post.¹¹

7. For instance, see ‘Abdallah ‘Amami, النهضة الإسلامي: أمودج الإرهاب في العالم الإسلامي [Terrorist organizations in the Islamic world: The *Ennahdha* model] (Tunis: Dar al-Tunisiyya li-l-Nashr, 1992), 263–76; François Burgat, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*, trans. William Dowell (Austin: University of Texas, 1993), 224–28; Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia: The History of Ennahdha* (London: Hurst, 2017), 63–66.

8. In 1991, 244 military personnel were arrested, tortured, and expelled from the military on false charges of meeting with *Ennahdha* in the coastal town of Barraket Essahel to plot a coup. See Sharan Grewal, “A Quiet Revolution: The Tunisian Military after Ben Ali,” *Carnegie Middle East Center* (February 24, 2016): 4, 14n15.

9. Burgat, *Islamic Movement in North Africa*, 224–28.

10. Moncef Ben Salem, *The years of embers: سنوات الجمر* [Memoirs of an academic researcher and political prisoner: The years of embers] (Tunis: self-published, 2013).

11. “Séminaire avec Docteur Sahbi Amri: La branche sécuritaire armée de la Tendance Islamique” [“Talk with Dr. Sahbi ‘Amri: The armed security branch of the Islamic Tendency (Movement)”], Institut Tunisien des Relations Internationales, May 17, 2016, <https://tunisitri.wordpress.com/2016/05/17/seminaire-avec-docteur-sahbi-amri-la-branche-securitaire-armee-de-la-tendance-islamique/>; Sahbi ‘Amri, “هل يستقيم الظل والعود أعوج؟؟؟ الجناح العسكري السري لحركة النهضة . . ومحاولاته الانقلابية بين نوفمبر 1987 وأفريل 1991” [Continued on next page]

I also interviewed the key players in Ben ‘Ali’s November 7 coup, to determine both how much they knew about the November 8 plot and how they planned and executed their own. I interviewed Brigadier General Habib ‘Ammar, commander of the National Guard at the time, and drew upon his autobiography.¹² I also spoke with Colonel Mohamed Mahmoudi, the commander of the National Guard Special Unit.

Interlocutors from both groups were likely to be biased in their accounts, seeking to describe their coup plot in a positive light and their opponents’ in a negative one. Where possible, I include the narratives of both “sides” in the text, but in some instances I focused only on the account I felt more plausible while presenting the counternarrative in the footnotes.

CONTEXT

Tunisia’s founding father, Habib Bourguiba, had served as its leader since independence in 1956. After 20 years of economic growth and little domestic opposition,¹³ President Bourguiba’s hold on power grew tenuous in the late 1970s and 1980s. A number of factors combined to threaten and ultimately terminate his rule, including a deteriorating economy, a growing Islamist opposition,¹⁴ and Bourguiba’s waning mental capacity.

Economic frustrations had led Tunisians to rise up against Bourguiba. The first shock to the system was the January 1978 general strike by the Tunisian General Labor Union (known as UGTT, from the French *Union générale tunisienne du travail*). While the strike was suppressed, Libyan leader Mu‘ammar al-Qadhafi attempted to rekindle the popular insurrection by sending commandos to attack army outposts in the inland mining town Gafsa on the strike’s anniversary in 1980. The most threatening blow then came in January 1984, when a massive “bread uprising” (*intifadat khubz*) fueled by a cut in subsidies was calmed only by their reinstatement.

Bourguiba simultaneously faced a growing challenge from Islamist circles. In 1981 Rached Ghannouchi cofounded the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI), later renamed Ennahdha, which began to proselytize on university campuses and to permeate civil society. A number of smaller Islamist groups also emerged and pursued more

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[“Is the shadow straight and the stick crooked??? Ennahdha’s secret military wing . . . and its coup operations between November 1987 and April 1991”], July 25, 2016, posted on the official Facebook page of veteran Tunisian human rights advocate Ali Ben Salem, <https://fb.com/3am.ali.ben.salem/photos/a.3111782738922076.55865.311767918923558/815698731863805/>.

Although I do not cite it much in this article, researchers may benefit from a rich account of the events told by coup-plotter Tayeb Boudiaf in the memoir of another veteran security official, see Nouri Bouchaala, *مذكرات ضابط أمن: قيس من الذاكرة: [Memory vault: Memoirs of a security officer]* (Tunis: Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center, 2015), 399–417.

12. Habib Ammar, *Parcours d’un soldat: Entre le devoir et l’espoir* [A soldier’s journey: Between duty and hope] (Tunis: Simpac, 2016).

13. The primary political opposition during this time came from the Left, particularly the Tunisian Perspectives movement. For more, see Abdeljalil Bouguerra, *De l’histoire de la gauche tunisienne: Le mouvement Perspectives, 1963–1975* [On the history of the Tunisian left: The Perspectives movement] (Tunis: Cérés, 1993).

14. For more on the ideological conflict between Islamists and Bourguiba, see Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*, 27–33.

violent tactics. For instance, in 1984, more radical MTI members broke away to form a group called Islamic Jihad (unaffiliated with other organizations of the same name), which claimed responsibility for bombings at four hotels in the coastal towns of Sousse and Monastir on August 2, 1987.¹⁵

Compounding these domestic threats was Bourguiba's ailing mental health. As early as 1971, doctors had diagnosed Bourguiba with "involuntional depression and 'mild but definite arterial brain damage.'" ¹⁶ By autumn 1987 the 84-year-old Bourguiba was well past his prime, acting erratically and suffering from dementia. In October Bourguiba signed a decree appointing several new ministers, but the next day swore he had not. He also "named a new chief delegate to the United Nations . . . but then forgot about it and named a second man a few days later."¹⁷

In this state, and fueled by paranoia about Islamists, Bourguiba attempted to pin Islamic Jihad's August 1987 bombings on Ghannouchi and the MTI. Bourguiba ordered the arrest and trial of 90 MTI members, including Ghannouchi, urging the death penalty for all. On September 27, judges sentenced seven defendants to death, giving Ghannouchi life imprisonment.¹⁸ Furious at what he deemed a lenient sentence, Bourguiba — against the advice of Prime Minister Zine al-'Abidine Ben 'Ali — ordered a retrial and demanded 12–15 executions by November 15. The retrial was set to begin Monday, November 9.¹⁹

MOTIVATIONS

The majority of Bourguiba's advisors opposed the executions, fearing they would make Ghannouchi a martyr and spark retribution, if not civil war. The interim leaders of the MTI while Ghannouchi was in prison, Salah Karker and Mohamed Chammam, agreed and looked for ways to defuse the crisis. Karker asked:

In a phase like this, what could be done? France was not there to say to Bourguiba: "No, stop . . ." The United States did not come to say to him: "No, stop. . . it's not the right way." We could not find the parliament, which could have said to itself: "For the first time, I [*sic*] will make a decision . . ." Neither his prime minister nor his ministers advised him [to do this]. Tunisia had no choice. . . . There were two possibilities: either a civil war or the departure of Bourguiba.²⁰

15. Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*, 64.

16. [James] Relph, US Embassy Tunis, to Secretary of State, "Subject: Illness of President Bourguiba," January 3, 1971, telegram no. 0200Z, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976*, vol. E-5, part 2, Documents on North Africa, 1969–72 (published digitally, 2007), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve05p2/d151>.

17. Paul Delany, "Senile Bourguiba Described in Tunis," *New York Times*, November 9, 1987, <https://nyti.ms/29taHWR>.

18. Steven Greenhouse, "Tunisia Condemns 7 Moslem Extremists to Death," *New York Times*, September 27, 1987, <https://nyti.ms/29zHES4>.

19. Delany, "Senile Bourguiba Described in Tunis."

20. Quoted in Burgat, *Islamic Movement in North Africa*, 227. See also "Contre l'oubli: Le projet du Coup d'État du MTI du 8 novembre 1987 (1)" ["Against forgetting: The MTI coup plot of November 8, 1987 (1)"], Institut Tunisien des Relations Internationales, March 1, 2016, <https://tunisitri.wordpress.com/2016/03/01/contre-loubli-le-projet-du-coup-detat-du-mti-du-8-novembre-1987-1/>.

Given this assessment, three young MTI activists — Said Ferjani, Moncef Ben Salem, and Belgacem Ferchichi — began plotting to remove Bourguiba from office. Ferjani, 33, a former air force sergeant; Ben Salem, 34, a mathematics professor; and Ferchichi, 29, an advisor in the Ministry of Education, decided on October 15 to start talking “to the people that [they] knew within the army, the security forces, and the civilian population, to facilitate a *coup d'état* on the 8th of November,”²¹ the day before the retrial was to begin. Unknown to Ghannouchi, but with the blessing of Karker and Chammam,²² the three young activists assembled a team of 219 individuals, including 66 from the military and 62 from the Ministry of Interior.²³

In recruiting this team, the three MTI activists were able to draw upon an existing network of sympathizers within the military and security institutions. While this network may have been the result of a strategy of infiltration,²⁴ Karker would later claim it was organic. The MTI did not “throw out such and such a category of citizen because of their professional training. . . . As there are businessmen and intellectuals who accept our ideas, well, there are soldiers.”²⁵

Beyond Ferjani, Ben Salem, and Ferchichi, the inner circle of the coup plot included officers from the army, air force, and the National Guard.²⁶ The identities of 103 of the 219 coup-plotters were revealed in a 2016 social media post by a civilian coconspirator, Doctor Sahbi ‘Amri.²⁷

21. Said Ferjani, “The ‘End of Islamism’ and the Future of Tunisia,” Hudson Institute, April 26, 2016, www.hudson.org/research/12349-the-end-of-islamism-and-the-future-of-tunisia. Anne Wolf was skeptical that the coup could have been plotted in just four weeks and suggested the plotting had begun much earlier, see *Political Islam in Tunisia*, 64–65. Yet the October 1987 date for the first meeting was confirmed by an army staff sergeant in the group’s first circle. However, it is possible that the group (or at least the inner circle) had assembled earlier to discuss an eventual coup, but only decided on the November 8th date in mid-October. Interview by the author with army staff sergeant A, involved in the plot but did not wish to be named, November 24, 2015, Tunis.

22. Bugarat, *Islamic Movement in North Africa*, 224; Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*, 65.

23. Interview by the author with Said Ferjani, February 2, 2018, Tunis. Sahbi ‘Amri and Moncef Ben Salem claimed there were 156 and 157 members, respectively. These figures represent the number of coup-plotters who were arrested in the aftermath of the coup’s failure. Ferjani, however, claimed that an additional 60 or so individuals evaded arrest, whether by fleeing the country or remaining underground. In 2003 Ben Salem also noted that “many elements of the Group have fled abroad,” see letter to Ahmed Manai, “Le Group Sécuritaire” [“The Security Group”], March 25, 2003, published by the Institut Tunisien des Relations Internationales, December 2, 2010, <https://tunisitri.wordpress.com/2010/12/02/tunisie-1987-mti-groupe-securitaire/>. For ‘Amri’s account, see “هل يستقيم الظل والعود أعود؟؟؟” [“Is the shadow straight and the stick crooked????”].

24. Alaya Allani, *الحركات الإسلامية بالوطن العربي: تونس نموذجا* [Islamic movements in the Arab homeland: Tunisia as a model] (Cairo: Dar al-Mahrusa, 2008), 222; Ahmed Nadhif, *المجموعة الأمنية: الجهاز الخاص* [The Security Group: The special apparatus of the Islamist movement in Tunisia and the 1987 coup] (Tunis: Diyar, 2017), 134.

25. Bugarat, *Islamic Movement in North Africa*, 225

26. The inner circle included, from the army, Staff Sergeant Salah ‘Abdi, Captain ‘Abdullah Harizi, Captain Lazhar Ben Khalifa, Captain Ahmed Slaymi, Captain Sami al-Gharbi, and officer Ahmed Hajri; from the air force, Captain Kamal Dhif, officer Ibrahim al-‘Amouri, and officer Djemaa Ouni; and from the National Guard, First Lieutenant Taoufik Majri and Sergeant Bashir Ben Ahmed. Ranks determined through an interview by the author with retired colonel Major Mustapha Ben Moussa, July 12, 2018, Tunis. See also ‘Amami, *تنظيمات الإرهاب* [Terrorist organizations], 272.

27. ‘Amri, “هل يستقيم الظل والعود أعود؟؟؟” [“Is the shadow straight and the stick crooked????”].

Why would members of a relatively professional and apolitical military join this coup plot? Asked about his motivations, one army staff sergeant involved in the plot replied, “In 1987 the country was going in the wrong direction, without authority and without the law. The people were in the streets everyday protesting and rioting. . . . In this state we thought the death sentences [for the MTI leaders] would lead to civil war.”²⁸ Another plotter in the army claimed, “Tunisia was on the brink of civil war. . . . Our goal was the same as our name: the salvation of the nation. We needed to save the country from bloodshed.”²⁹

Each of the military coup-plotters I interviewed pointed to the potential executions as their primary motivation, fearing it would lead to civil war. Though they were not officially members of the MTI, many were pious Muslims and sympathized with the Islamist movement.

Most plotters interviewed also highlighted Bourguiba’s increasingly senile and autocratic rule. Several recounted Bourguiba’s often-cited response to a journalist’s question about the regime (*système* in French, or “system”) he had set up in Tunisia: “The system?” What system? I am the system!” Although Bourguiba’s remark was from the early 1960s,³⁰ every coup-plotter who mentioned this quote cited a 1986 *Der Spiegel* article that repeated it and claimed that Bourguiba “has failed to ensure his own succession.”³¹

For instance, ‘Elmy Khadhri, a staff sergeant from the inland town of Kasserine, explained:

I had feelings for the country. Senegal and Mauritania were advancing more and more, and we were going backward! Bourguiba was not president of the country; he owned the country! It was his property. In France and the United States, the president changes every couple of years. We had the same one for 30 years! Maybe it was acceptable while he still had rationality, but then he started going crazy. We reached the moment where in the morning, the president would appoint a new minister, and by the evening he would fire him! [Before serving as] Prime Minister [from 1989 to 2011, Mohamed] Ghannouchi was a minister under Bourguiba but then was removed because his name is Ghannouchi! Bourguiba also fired the minister of culture and then called him later that day and said, “Where are you?” The German newspaper *Der Spiegel* asked Bourguiba, “what comes after you?” He said, “Today I rule, after me, who cares?”³²

In sum the coup-plotters were motivated to break with the military’s apolitical tradition due to both corporate grievances and ideological concerns. On the one hand they disagreed from a national security perspective with the decisions Bourguiba was making. This can be seen as a corporate grievance, as it indicates that the plotters did not accept

28. Interview, army staff sergeant A, Nov. 2015, Tunis.

29. Interview by the author with army officer B, involved in the plot but did not wish to be named, January 27, 2017, Tunis.

30. Clement Henry Moore, *Tunisia since Independence: The Dynamics of One-Party Governance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), 41.

31. “Was für ein System? Das System bin ich” [“What kind of system? I am the system”], *Der Spiegel*, November 17, 1986, www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-13521598.html.

32. Interview by the author with ‘Elmy Khadhri, November 2, 2015, Tunis.

that the civilian president had “a right to be wrong”³³ and instead wished to have veto power over such national security decisions. On the other hand the coup was also an extension of broader societal conflicts: the growing secular-Islamist cleavage had penetrated even the military, leading some of the more religious officers to support an Islamist coup.

FROM COUP-PROOFING TO COUP-PLOTTING

In organizing their coup, the plotters faced a series of challenges and constraints. The first, typical to all coups, was the threat of detection. Coups are treasonous, extra-constitutional affairs, often punishable by death. Especially in autocratic regimes with strong intelligence and monitoring capabilities, like Bourguiba’s Tunisia,³⁴ coup-plotters must take steps to limit the possibility of detection.

The plotters pursued two tactics in this regard. The first was to selectively recruit the minimum number of individuals needed to carry out a coup. As each additional person increases the risk of detection, the plotters focused on two criteria: established sympathy with the Islamist movement, signaled, for instance, through mosque attendance or familial relations, and “added value” to the plot, based on the officer’s location, rank, and function.

The second tactic the coup-plotters pursued was to segment the coup coalition into small cells of three or four people. Each individual member, therefore, would only know the person who recruited him, whomever he subsequently recruited, and the people he would directly interact with during the coup. In case one cell was detected, therefore, the amount of information about the plot that could be revealed under torture would be limited. According to Said Ferjani, even among himself and the two other MTI leaders (Moncef Ben Salem and Belgacem Ferchichi), no one of them knew all 219 names.³⁵

However, the plot was also weakened by two specific coup-proofing strategies employed by Bourguiba, which required a larger-sized coalition to plot a viable coup, thereby increasing the risk of detection. The first strategy was to favor secular officers who hailed from Tunisia’s wealthier coastal regions in promotions to the top ranks.³⁶ While these areas accounted for just 33 percent of Tunisia’s population, they claimed

33. Peter D. Feaver, “The Civil-Military Problematique: Huntington, Janowitz, and the Question of Civilian Control,” *Armed Forces and Society* 23, no. 2 (1996): 154, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9602300203>.

34. Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia*, trans. Andrew Brown (Cambridge: Polity Books, 2011).

35. Interview by the author with Said Ferjani, February 2, 2018, Tunis.

36. L. B. Ware, for instance, observed that: “For the most part, the officer corps is drawn from the coastal Sahel [region] and its two centers of political and commercial importance, Sousse and Monastir, and the environs of Tunis, which include Bizerte and Cap Bon.” See “Role of the Tunisian Military,” 38. Noureddine Jebnoun confirmed that Tunis, the coastal town of Nabeul, and the Sahel are overrepresented in the military’s senior leadership. See his “In the Shadow of Power: Civil-Military Relations and the Tunisian Popular Uprising,” *Journal of North African Studies* 19, no. 3 (2014): 299, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2014.891821>. Bourguiba likewise favored the coast in ministerial appointments. See Matt Buehler and Mehdi Ayari, “The Autocrat’s Advisors: Opening the Black Box of Ruling Coalitions in Tunisia’s Authoritarian Regime,” *Political Research Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2018): 330–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912917735400>.

71 percent of the top military positions throughout Bourguiba's rule.³⁷ Bourguiba, who himself hailed from Monastir, tended to personally know these officers (or their families) and otherwise perceived them as more secular and, therefore, loyal to the regime.³⁸

Because of this bias in promotions, the Islamist coup-plotters were limited to recruiting only from the lower ranks of the military. The highest-ranking military officer they were able to reach was Major Mohamed Mansouri (and similarly only one major in the Ministry of Interior, Ahmed 'Aouadi). Most were captains, lieutenants, and sergeants. While it is not unheard of for a coup to be successfully carried out by junior officers, they are far more difficult than when led by senior officers, succeeding only 42 percent of the time compared to 68 percent.³⁹ Senior officers can rely on their legitimacy and "soft power . . . to manipulate the beliefs and expectations"⁴⁰ of their subordinates, even when those subordinates are not part of the plotting or even informed of the coup ahead of time. Senior officers similarly command greater legitimacy among the people, decreasing popular resistance to the coup.⁴¹ For senior officer-led coups, therefore, only a few people at the top of the military need to be part of the coup-plotting.

Junior officer-led coups, by contrast, rely on numbers and the projection of hard power in order to convince their superiors (and the population at large) that resistance is futile.⁴² For a junior officer-led coup "to stand a chance, a large number of [personnel], not just a few powerful actors, will have to join."⁴³ These coups, therefore, require much larger coup coalitions, increasing the risk of detection. Recalling the November 8 plot, ringleader Moncef Ben Salem wrote in his memoir that one of "the most important deficiencies in the plot [was] the absence of senior officers who can be relied upon to

37. Data collected from an internal Ministry of Defense publication, "سجل الضباط القدامى (القادة والسامون)" ["Registry of retired officers: Commanders and senior officers"] (2009). The coastal areas described refers to Tunisia's northeast coast, including Tunis and the towns of Bizerte, Nabeul, Sousse, Monastir, and Mahdia. The top positions here refer to the chiefs of staff of the army, navy, and air force, the director-general of military security, and the inspector-general of the armed forces.

38. A former brigadier general who served as director-general of military security admitted that officers were often passed over for promotions based on their religiosity or other cues of potential sympathy toward Islamists, such as having a brother, friend, or even neighbor being a known Islamist. Interview by the author with retired brigadier general C, who was not involved in the plot and did not wish to be named, October 21, 2015, Tunis. See also Sharan Grewal, "Military Defection during Localized Protests: The Case of Tataouine," *International Studies Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (June 2019): 262, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqz003>.

39. Naunihal Singh, *Seizing Power: The Strategic Logic of Military Coups* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 66. See also Dorothy Ohl and Evgeny Finkel, "Coups and Military Ranks," George Washington University comparative politics workshop (November 15, 2013), <https://gwucpw.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/ohl-finkel-cpw.pdf>.

40. Singh, *Seizing Power*, 37. See also Holger Albrecht and Ferdinand Eibl, "How to Keep Officers in the Barracks: Causes, Agents, and Types of Military Coups," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (June 2018): 315–28. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx085>.

41. As one of the coup-plotters asked me rhetorically, "would Tunisians really follow a major?" Interview, army officer B, Jan. 2017, Tunis.

42. Because of this focus on hard power, coups led by junior officers also tend to be more violent than senior officer-led ones. See Erica de Bruin, "Will There Be Blood? Explaining Violence during Coups d'État," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 6 (2019): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319839449>.

43. Singh, *Seizing Power*, 151.

lead the operations and to issue orders, which made us build our plan horizontally, i.e., relying on the base, which increases the chance of exposure.”⁴⁴

The second coup-proofing strategy Bourguiba pursued, which similarly served to increase the size of a coalition required for a viable coup, was counterbalancing. Since independence, Bourguiba relied on the police and National Guard to offset the power of the military. This counterbalancing was reflected not only in the strength of each force and in their separate chains of command but also in their geographic locations. In Tunis’s El ‘Aouina barracks, for instance, the National Guard and military bases are contiguous, allowing each to immediately detect any unauthorized movements in the other force. “The architecture or positioning of [the various forces] was strategic,” explained Ferjani. “Our military was structured in a way that prevents a coup rather than defends the country.”⁴⁵

While members of the National Guard may not have been as numerous or as heavily armed as the military, any resistance could foil a coup plot. As coup scholar Naunihal Singh observed, officers often gravitate toward whomever appears to be winning during a coup attempt.⁴⁶ Even minor resistance could undermine plotters’ projection of dominance and fracture the coup coalition. Moreover, any bloodshed could tarnish a coup’s image even if succeeds.⁴⁷

Given this counterbalancing environment, therefore, the Islamist coup-plotters attempted to recruit from all of the various forces, despite their rivalries and often-conflicting interests. They recruited primarily from the military, the National Guard, the Public Order Brigade, and the Anti-Terrorism Brigade, with a handful in the presidential guard, the border police, customs, and other police forces. Counterbalancing thus further increased the size of the necessary coup coalition and, with it, the possibility of detection.

THE PLAN

Given that the plotters only recruited junior officers, the planned coup became a game of numbers and hard power. “The coup d’état was not a bureaucratic or technical affair,” Said Ferjani explained, “it was about power.”⁴⁸ Accordingly, their goal for November 8 was to mobilize as many like-minded members of the security forces as possible, while simultaneously immobilizing those who would challenge the coup. “We counted the elements that might oppose us,” Moncef Ben Salem recounted, “and prepared a plan to neutralize them without endangering their lives.”⁴⁹

The plan, according to Ferjani, was to strike between 1:30 and 2:00 a.m. on November 8. “In each [military or National Guard] base, we had people among the staff who serve the personnel. We bought stuff for them to put in the coffee that would knock out [the anti-Islamist personnel] for a couple hours,” immobilizing them “until they woke up to another reality.”⁵⁰

44. Ben Salem, مذكرات [Memoirs], 45.

45. Interview, Ferjani, Feb. 2018, 2018. The placement of the National Guard immediately next to the military is only the case in the El ‘Aouina barracks, as the capital is the most important site for a coup.

46. Singh, *Seizing Power*.

47. De Bruin, “Will There Be Blood?” 4.

48. Interview, Ferjani, Feb. 2018, Tunis.

49. Ben Salem, مذكرات [Memoirs], 44.

50. Interview, Ferjani, Feb. 2018, Tunis.

The next step was to mobilize supporters to descend upon the presidential palace.⁵¹ Since the coup-plotters were only able to recruit two or three individuals in the presidential guard,⁵² they had hoped to overpower the remaining defenses, estimating 600 casualties. Ben Salem would claim that the coup-plotters had assembled nearly 5,000 tear-gas pistols from abroad and would secure firearms, tanks, and aircraft from military bases,⁵³ particularly the Sidi Ahmed Air Base in the northern coastal city of Bizerte.⁵⁴ Sergeant First Class Sadok Ghodhbane would lead National Guard Special Unit commandos in storming the presidential palace to capture Habib Bourguiba.⁵⁵ Subsequently, an air force officer would fly the president in a helicopter to Mornag Prison, southeast of the capital. Each of the coup-plotters I interviewed insisted that Bourguiba would not have been hurt.

According to Ferjani, the next steps were to announce the removal of Bourguiba on television and to mobilize popular rallies in support of the coup. A national salvation committee would then be formed, composed of six individuals, three Islamists (Rached Ghannouchi, Abdelfattah Mourou, and 'Abdelkrim Harouni) and three secular figures (former prime minister Mohamed Mzali, former UGTT chief Ahmed Ben Salah, and former minister Ahmed Mestiri). The six of them — none of whom were informed of the plot ahead of time — would then shepherd the country to democratic elections within six months. "It was a Sudanese-style scenario," claimed Salah Karker, referring to the Sudanese military's removal of President Ja'far al-Numayri in 1985 and overseeing of elections the following year.⁵⁶

Another coup-plotter I interviewed was more skeptical that democracy would emerge from the barrel of a gun:

Since when do militaries have this type of thinking? The only time this has happened was in Sudan, but that was a joke. Whenever the military takes power, they do not leave it — even if there are elections and civil society is strong — until there is another coup. The goal of the coup was Islamist rule.⁵⁷

51. Originally, Major Mansouri had proposed he send a telegram with instructions to all units, but such an official order would have been questioned from above. Instead Mansouri, who was the highest-ranking military officer involved, was actually not slated to play an active role during the coup; others were supposed to communicate and mobilize the units through more covert and informal channels. Interview, Ferjani, Feb. 2018, Tunis.

52. Nadhif, *المجموعة الأمنية* [The Security Group], 186.

53. Ben Salem, *مذكرات* [Memoirs], 44; Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*, 65.

54. 'Amami, *تنظيمات الإرهاب* [Terrorist organizations], 273. 'Amami also suggested that the group had already begun stockpiling weapons from Germany in the summer of 1986, storing them in the houses of officers from the army, police, and customs, see p. 266).

55. As a member of the National Guard Special Unit, Ghodhbane was also involved in Ben 'Ali's coup. However, both General Habib 'Ammar and Colonel Mohamed Mahmoudi claimed they already knew about his pro-Islamist sympathies (though not his actual involvement in the Islamist plot) and therefore chose not to involve him in any important task during their coup. Mahmoudi added that there had been two officers within the Special Unit whose main task was to monitor Ghodhbane. Interviews by the author with 'Ammar, July 13, 2018, Tunis; with Mohamed Mahmoudi, July 16, 2018, Bouficha.

56. Burgat, *Islamic Movement in North Africa*, 224.

57. Interview, army officer B, Jan. 2017, Tunis.

A COUP PREEMPTED

The question of what would have come after the November 8 coup will forever remain a mystery, as the plot was foiled just 24 hours before it was to begin. With an enlarged coup coalition, the risk of human error and subsequent detection had increased.

The first mistake occurred on October 27, when MTI vice president Mohamed Chammam was arrested during a routine police check in the El 'Omrane neighborhood of Tunis, near the Mechtel Hotel.⁵⁸ Chammam knew of the plot, though it is unclear what details (if any) he revealed to the authorities.⁵⁹ In his 1992 book on *Ennahdha*, 'Abdallah 'Amami suggested that the plot was unaffected, as the MTI had successfully infiltrated the relevant intelligence apparatus. "Intelligence officer 'Abdullah Griss and his group were steadfast in their positions, providing the organization with information and informing them of the progress of the investigation . . . Even [Chammam's] arrest did not confuse the group, and a spirit of trust and confidence prevailed."⁶⁰

The second and ultimately more fatal error came from a "naive" and "indiscreet" officer in the Public Order Brigade at the Bouchoucha barracks in Tunis.⁶¹ As a member of the "third circle," and thus one of the last and lowest recruits into the plot, this officer was tasked with "sabotaging some vehicles at the barracks of the Public Order Brigade" with three of his colleagues.⁶² Worried he may not return, he wrote a will and left it for his wife on November 5. The wife mentioned it to her father, a master sergeant in the police. The father, suspicious, confronted his son-in-law, who revealed his mission. The father then informed his superiors, who arrested and tortured the officer, extracting the names of the other members of his cell, including the police officer who recruited him, 'Abderrazak Ounifi.⁶³

How much Prime Minister Ben 'Ali found out about the plot before staging his coup on November 7 is up for debate. Said Ferjani and Moncef Ben Salem insisted that Ben 'Ali only learned of that one cell and had not realized that the Islamists had devised a nationwide scheme. They claimed that Ben 'Ali was going to take power that weekend anyway, as it was rumored that he was going to be fired on November 9 for having opposed the retrial of MTI leaders.⁶⁴

58. 'Amami, *تنظيمات الإرهاب* [Terrorist organizations], 266. I thank an anonymous reviewer for bringing this arrest to my attention.

59. If Chammam had revealed the plot or any names, we would have expected additional arrests prior to November 5, when the officer in the Public Order Brigade gave away his cell. It is possible that Chammam's arrest raised suspicions which were then confirmed by the officer's arrest, but it was that second arrest that appears to have triggered Ben 'Ali and 'Ammar to begin plotting in earnest on November 5.

60. 'Amami, *تنظيمات الإرهاب* [Terrorist organizations], 267. The primary impact of Chammam's arrest, according to 'Amami, was that Said Ferjani had to travel to London on October 30 to obtain a fatwa from Karker, rather than from Chammam (p. 269).

61. A 2017 book on the November 8th Group identified the officer as Bachir Faidi, but it did not cite any sources, see Nadhif, *المجموعة الأمنية* [The Security Group], 185.

62. Ben Salem, *مذكرات* [Memoirs], 45.

63. Interview, Ferjani, Feb. 2018, Tunis. Ounifi was tortured for three days at a police station in Tunis and subsequently for four months in the Ministry of Interior. See International Commission of Jurists, "Illusory Justice, Prevailing Impunity: Lack of Effective Remedies and Reparation for Victims of Human Rights Violations in Tunisia," (May 2016): 80.

64. Interview, Ferjani, Feb. 2018, Tunis; Ben Salem, *مذكرات* [Memoirs], 45.

Ben 'Ali's supporters' account, however, was that they gained word of the entire coup plot and were thus forced to move up a coup they had already been planning. General Habib 'Ammar, the commander of the National Guard who led Ben 'Ali's coup, claimed in his autobiography that:

Ben 'Ali had learned from his secret services that an attempted coup was being planned at the instigation of the Islamists for November 8. . . . We took it very seriously, especially after the attacks perpetrated in Sousse and Monastir in August. . . . As a result, we decided to execute our project on November 7. . . . We were subject to a real race against the clock.⁶⁵

Ben 'Ali and 'Ammar, both former military officers, had already been planning a coup since October 26. That day they had discussed Bourguiba and how "it was particularly sad to see the deterioration of the old leader's health status and his inability to lead the country lucidly." 'Ammar

reminded [Ben 'Ali] that, on his hospital bed a few years ago, Bourguiba, very weak, had asked Algerian president [Chadli Bendjedid], who had come to inquire about his health, to take care of Tunisia, . . . as if Tunisia did not have its own sons to defend it. The idea of "change" began to germinate in our minds at this meeting.⁶⁶

Leading a "coup from the top," Ben 'Ali and 'Ammar could rely on their ability to give orders to their subordinates and only had to inform a few individuals of their plans. On November 5, the day the Public Order Brigade cell was discovered, they approached Minister of Social Affairs Hédi Baccouche to draft a declaration invoking Article 57 of the Constitution, legitimizing the coup on the basis of Bourguiba's medical inability to rule. 'Ammar then ordered Colonel Mohamed Mahmoudi, head of the National Guard Special Unit, to send his commandos from Bir Bouregba to the El 'Aouina barracks on November 5, claiming there was a possible terrorist threat.⁶⁷

At 8 p.m. the following day, Ben 'Ali summoned Defense Minister Slaheddine Baly, army chief of staff Youssef Barakat, and Director of Military Security Youssef Ben Slimane into his office to inform them of his plans and to prevent them from simultaneously issuing orders to stop the coup. Air force chief of staff Ahmad Nu'man Bouzgarrou, who would likely have opposed the coup being Bourguiba's son-in-law, "was not called to the meeting but, rather, physically assaulted and restrained at his home by members of the National Guard's Special Intervention Unit . . . to prevent the officer from mobilizing the Air Force and attempting to abort the coup."⁶⁸

With potential resistance from the military immobilized, 'Ammar was then sent to surround the presidential palace with 80 National Guard Special Unit commandos to prevent Bourguiba from resisting. This endeavor, replacing the presidential guard with the National Guard commandos, was facilitated by the fact that the presidential guard was at the time part of the Ministry of Interior, with its agents still officially members

65. Ammar, *Parcours d'un soldat* [A soldier's journey], 94.

66. Ammar, *Parcours d'un soldat* [A soldier's journey], 93.

67. Interview, 'Ammar, July 2018, Tunis; interview, Mahmoudi, July 2018, Bouficha.

68. Jebnoun, "In the Shadow of Power," 300.

of the National Guard and the police. ‘Ammar described this mission in detail in his autobiography, which I reproduce in full to illustrate the advantages senior officers have in issuing orders during coups:

I had to wait until the telephone line between [the presidential palace in] Carthage and [the coastal suburb of] La Marsa was cut by a National Security Officer, Mr. ‘Abdelkrim Ghouma, a faithful of Ben ‘Ali, to go to the Ministry of the Interior at 11.30 p.m. On my arrival Ben ‘Ali introduced me to Rafik Chelly, director of the presidential guard, in order to accompany me and proceed with me to the relief of the palace guard. I subsequently left the Ministry of the Interior with two commandos and accompanied by Chelly in my car. We first went to the El ‘Aouina barracks, where my [National Guard] units were ready for departure. Around 1:30 a.m. the convoy that I directed left the barracks and took the direction of Carthage Palace.

Arriving at the scene, I installed my units and charged Colonel Hédi Ben Salah, the armored corps commandant, to place his craft around the palace and to cut the road between La Marsa and Carthage. I also proceeded, on the maritime side, to the installation of a surveillance headliner commanded by Captain Faouzi Zaatir, with whom I was in radio contact. Subsequently I began the succession of the guard framed by two armed commandos, Captain Bougrine and Colonel Mahmoudi.

Succession was not an easy operation. It required a lot of calm and authority in order to be convincing and to avoid a slippage, because a single shot could have caused the whole plan to fail. It was to take the arms of the presidential guard, composed of National Guard members and policemen, and replace them with the National Guard commandos. It was therefore necessary to present to them, with much calm, serenity and persuasive justifications for everything to happen without any incident. *The main argument we were making was that President Bourguiba was in danger and that a terrorist attack was underway and aimed at the palace.*

The first two shifts of guards on duty went smoothly. The third was a National Guard officer who, agitated and nervous, refused categorically to hand over his weapon, charged it, and threatened to shoot us. My men immediately responded by pointing their machine guns. I nevertheless took the risk of moving calmly towards the interested person *presenting myself as his superior within the National Guard.* He was in a state of extreme nervousness, but I continued to advance by ordering him and my men to immediately lower their weapons. It was at this point that he finally resigned to hand me his rifle. We succeeded the succession within the court of the palace when another officer had also resisted. As a member of the police, it was Rafik Chelly who convinced him to hand over his weapon.⁶⁹

In short, as senior officers, ‘Ammar and Chelly were able to draw upon their positions and “soft power” to order the presidential guard to lay down their arms. They first manipulated information, claiming there was a terrorist attack, and on the occasions when that failed, invoked their seniority. After securing the presidential palace around 3:30 a.m., ‘Ammar returned to El ‘Aouina to oversee the capture of a number of high-level ministers and officials — including Mansour Skhiri, the minister of transport, equipment, and housing as well as a confidant of Bourguiba’s — to prevent them from publicly condemning the takeover.

69. Ammar, *Parcours d'un soldat* [A soldier's journey], 97–98. Emphases added.

Meanwhile, around 2 a.m., Ben 'Ali and Social Affairs Minister Baccouche summoned Health Minister Souad Ya'acoubi to the Health Ministry, along with seven doctors that had previously treated Bourguiba. As one of the doctors, neuropsychiatrist 'Ezzedine Gueddiche, later described, the seven were instructed, without being able to see Bourguiba, to write and sign a statement declaring that his "state of health no longer allows him to perform the functions inherent to his office." Gueddiche, who was told to be the first to sign, was threatened by Baccouche that, if he did not, "tomorrow will be a bloodbath in Tunis, and you will be held as solely responsible," in reference to the Islamist plot.⁷⁰

With the medical statement signed at 6 a.m., Ben 'Ali declared a "constitutional" succession on the radio at 6:30 and was sworn in by the parliament as Tunisia's second president hours later. The invoking of Article 57 granted the takeover procedural legitimacy, with it being described as a "constitutional," "medical," or "soft" coup, despite the use of the National Guard.⁷¹

Upon assuming the presidency on November 7, one of Ben 'Ali's first actions was to call off the retrial of the MTI leaders, ensuring Rached Ghannouchi would not be executed. The Islamist coup-plotters had already assembled in a villa in the city of Bardo, outside Tunis, to prepare the final touches of their coup when they received the news of Ben 'Ali's takeover and the annulment of the retrial. The Islamists then called off their coup, as their primary goals had been achieved: Bourguiba had been removed and the retrial suspended.

AFTERMATH

On November 18 Habib 'Ammar, who was now interior minister, revealed the Islamist plot at a press conference. Calling them "the gang of the corrupt" (*'isabat al-mufsidin*),⁷² 'Ammar announced that "seventy-three people were implicated in a plot to smuggle arms into the country, assassinate key state officials, and attack civilian and military installations."⁷³

Over the course of the following weeks, President Zine al-'Abidine Ben 'Ali attempted to have as many of the Islamist coup-plotters arrested as he could. They were in turn subject to torture in the hopes of attaining more names. Major Mohamed Mansouri, the highest-ranking military officer in the plot, was tortured to death on December 1, likely the first victim of the Ben 'Ali regime.⁷⁴ Said Ferjani, meanwhile, was kept

70. "Tout sur 'Le coup d'Etat [sic] médical' contre Bourguiba: Le témoignage du Pr Ezzedine Gueddiche" ["All about 'the medical coup' against Bourguiba: The testimony of Professor Ezzedine Gueddiche"], *Leaders*, November 7, 2017, www.leaders.com.tn/article/16755-temoignage-de-pr-ezzeddine-gueddiche-sur-le-limogeage-de-bourguiba.

71. For examples, see L. B. Ware, "Ben Ali's Constitutional Coup in Tunisia," *The Middle East Journal* 42, no. 4 (Autumn 1988): 587–601. www.jstor.org/stable/4327834; "Tout sur 'Le coup d'Etat médical' contre Bourguiba" ["All about 'the medical coup' against Bourguiba"]; Grewal, "A Quiet Revolution," 3.

72. Kamal bin Sa'd al-Dayf, "عصابة المفسدين « الحقيقية » واتضحت للجميع" ["Today the truth was revealed and the real 'gang of the corrupt' became clear"], *Assabah*, March 13, 2011, available on the aggregator site *Turess* at www.turess.com/assabah/50777.

73. Ware, "Ben Ali's Constitutional Coup," 595.

74. The official announcement to all military barracks claimed Mansouri had died of a heart attack. Interview, Khadhri, Nov. 2015, Tunis.

in the “roasted chicken” position and had his back fractured with an iron rod.⁷⁵ “The torture was terrible, causing even death, paralysis, skull skinning, and threats to our wives,” Moncef Ben Salem later observed.⁷⁶

The arrests continued until January, by which point 157 individuals had been detained. The remaining 62 of the 219-member plot had managed to go into hiding or flee the country. The 157 arrested were then brought to a military court. Accused by military justice of plotting against Bourguiba, Ben Salem allegedly replied: “Exactly, as your President Ben ‘Ali did. If we are to be tried, we [should] be tried together with Ben ‘Ali and his team.”⁷⁷

The military trial never ran its course. In the summer of 1988, Ben ‘Ali began to negotiate with the MTI. As part of their deal, the coup-plotters were released in three waves: November 1988, March 1989, and April 1989, the last of which was timed with a broader amnesty for political prisoners. The plotters were also compensated for the wages they would have received during those 1.5 years in prison. Some were also integrated into administrative jobs.

The regime, however, continued to monitor the coup-plotters. ‘Elmy Khadhri recalled being “stopped every other week and taken to the police station. I could not travel inside the country without their authorization and always had to inform the police each time I arrived home in Kasserine.”⁷⁸ Many of the coup-plotters struggled to find work as their names remained on police lists. Some were then re-imprisoned during the crackdown on Islamists in the 1990s.

THE 2011 REVOLUTION

Some of the high-level members of the group saw their fortunes improve after the 2011 revolution. After Ennahdha’s victory in the 2011 elections, Moncef Ben Salem became minister of education and Said Ferjani an advisor to the minister of justice. Army captain Mohamed Sidhom was appointed governor of Jendouba and then Kasserine, while other members were appointed as delegates (*mu’tamidun* or *délégués*, referring to the head of a second-level administrative division under a governorate). Others filled roles in public offices like local public transport companies or within the Ennahdha executive.⁷⁹

For the majority of the plotters, however, the revolution failed to meet expectations. Immediately after Ben ‘Ali’s departure, ‘Elmy Khadhri cofounded Insaf (the Association of Justice for Military Veterans) alongside the officers unjustly accused in the 1991 Barraket Essahel affair, where the Ben ‘Ali regime purged the military by falsely charging 244 military officers and soldiers with another coup plot. In February 2011 Insaf met with the Ministry of Defense to clear their names and demand compensation. The ministry told Insaf that, while the officers caught up in the 1991 affair would be

75. Anthony Shadid, “Islamists’ Ideas on Democracy and Faith Face Test in Tunisia,” *New York Times*, February 17, 2012, <https://nyti.ms/z7czYG>.

76. Letter from Ben Salem to Manai, “Le Group Sécuritaire” [“The Security Group”].

77. Letter from Ben Salem to Manai, “Le Group Sécuritaire” [“The Security Group”].

78. Interview, Khadhri, Nov. 2015, Tunis.

79. For a detailed list, see ‘Amri, “هل يستقيم الظل والعود أعوج؟؟؟” [“Is the shadow straight and the stick crooked???”].

pardoned, the coup-plotters of 1987 would not be eligible to benefit from the amnesty, as they had never been formally convicted and had been given an amnesty in 1989 — even though they were neither given records of their pardons nor were their names cleared from police lists.

Khadhri and his colleagues continued to lobby the authorities, holding a protest and writing a petition to Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali in January 2013.⁸⁰ They criticize both Insaf and Ennahdha of not only not helping but actively trying to avoid them. Many of the coup-plotters believe that Ennahdha does not want to lobby on behalf of their behalf, as shining a light on the 1987 coup attempt may reveal that MTI leaders Salah Karker and Mohamed Chamam had been cognizant of, if not directing, the plot.⁸¹

However, an army captain who was part of the plot said there was little Ennahdha can do. “We were never brought to court. Moreover, after 1.5 years in prison, we left and received the salaries from that 1.5 years. And then we got jobs in the administration.”⁸² He maintained that the 1989 amnesty granted the coup-plotters recognition and already declared them not guilty — there was nothing left to be done.

Others were resigned to their fate. Asked if he was lobbying for his rights, one army officer replied: “What rights? We plotted a coup, how can we be pardoned?”⁸³

LEGACIES

The foiled coup plot of November 8, 1987, had important legacies for Tunisia’s civil-military relations. The lesson President Zine al-‘Abidine Ben ‘Ali learned from this episode was that his predecessor’s coup-proofing strategies had worked in stopping a regime-changing Islamist-led coup.⁸⁴ The discrimination in promotions and counterbalancing of the military had forced the Islamist plotters to try to recruit a broad swath of low-ranking officers from across security apparatuses, a strategy that carried a high risk of detection.

Accordingly, Ben ‘Ali doubled down on these strategies in his presidency. He continued to favor officers from the coastal regions in promotions to the top ranks, maintaining the same portion of coastal officers.⁸⁵ He also closed the mosques within military barracks and purged alleged religious officers, especially in the 1991 Barraket Essahel affair. Bans on Islamists entering the military academies were more stringently enforced, though conscripts were not vetted in the same manner due to their short time in service.⁸⁶ The military thus remained vertically fragmented, with the senior ranks dominated by secular, coastal officers and with junior officers and soldiers more representative of the interior regions.

80. Bouchaala, *قيس من الذاكرة* [Memory vault], 413–14.

81. Interview, Khadhri, Nov. 2015, Tunis.

82. Interview with army captain D, who did not wish to be named, November 25, 2015, Tunis.

83. Interview, army officer B, Jan. 2017, Tunis.

84. For an important distinction between regime-changing and leader-reshuffling coups, see Deniz Aksoy, David B. Carter, and Joseph Wright, “Terrorism and the Fate of Dictators,” *World Politics* 67, no. 3 (July 2015): 423–68. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887115000118>.

85. Ministry of Defense, “سجل الضباط القدامى” [“Registry of retired officers”].

86. Interview by the author with retired colonel major Mahmoud Mezoughi, July 10, 2018, Tunis.

Ben ‘Ali also reinforced the strategy of counterbalancing the military with the Ministry of Interior. The police and the National Guard under Ben ‘Ali saw their budgets eclipse and then dwarf the military’s.⁸⁷ The president also redeployed the 32nd Armored Regiment from the town of Menzel Jemil, north of Tunis, to the countryside to make a military coup even more difficult.⁸⁸

Moreover, Ben ‘Ali took steps to make his own, November 7–style, National Guard–led coup more difficult. To prevent a future National Guard commander like Habib ‘Ammar from having control over parts of the presidential guard, Ben ‘Ali put the presidential guard directly under the control of the presidency.⁸⁹ ‘Ammar noted that Ben ‘Ali “organized and trained them separately in their own barracks — they did not belong anymore to the National Guard or the police.”⁹⁰ The presidential guard was also militarized and doubled in size, further counterbalancing the other forces.⁹¹

Ben ‘Ali’s doubling down on these coup-proofing strategies bred resentment within the military. “Our secondary role became even worse than under Bourguiba,” exclaimed retired colonel major Mahmoud Mezoughi, president of the Association of Former National Army Officers (*French Association des anciens officiers de l’Armée Nationale*). “It became a police state. Under Ben ‘Ali the police monitored everything, including the military.”⁹² The late armed forces chief of staff General Mohamed Saïd El Kateb concurred: “Under Ben ‘Ali the budget allocated to the police was higher than the military’s, the number of police officers increased dramatically. We could feel our marginalization.”⁹³

With much of the military feeling neglected and marginalized, they had little interest in defending Ben ‘Ali when mass protests emerged against his rule in December 2010. As former inspector-general of the armed forces Brigadier General Mohamed ‘Ali El Bekri, decried, “we were not going to harm the population for the good of a king!”⁹⁴ Moreover, the lower ranks of the military, most of whom came from interior regions, likely identified with the demands of their protesting compatriots.⁹⁵ While Ben ‘Ali did not ask the military to fire,⁹⁶ and thus we cannot know for sure, it is likely that his coup-proofing strategies had made the military unwilling to defend him in 2011.

87. Bou Nassif, “A Military Besieged,” 73–75.

88. Jebnoun, “In the Shadow of Power,” 302.

89. See also Nouredine Jebnoun, *Tunisia’s National Intelligence: Why “Rogue Elephants” Fail to Reform* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2017), 30.

90. Interview, ‘Ammar, July 2018, Tunis.

91. Derek Lutterbeck, “Tool of Rule: The Tunisian Police under Ben Ali,” *Journal of North African Studies* 20, no. 5 (2015): 823, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2015.1059324>.

92. Interview by the author, October 9, 2015, Tunis.

93. Interview by the author, November 6, 2015, Tunis.

94. Interview by the author, November 28, 2015, Tunis.

95. Sharan Grewal, “Why the Tunisian Military Ignored Orders and Sided with Protesters,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 2019, <https://wapo.st/38JobuM>.

96. Jebnoun, “In the Shadow of Power,” 305; Alejandro Pachon, “Loyalty and Defection: Misunderstanding Civil-Military Relations in Tunisia during the ‘Arab Spring,’” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 4 (2014): 508–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2013.847825>.

CONCLUSION

The existence of an Islamist coup planned for November 8, 1987, has long been hinted at, but details have been sparse. This article has sought to reconstruct the facts of the plot, drawing on original interviews with the plotters and published memoirs. It has examined, in particular, the plotters' motivations for planning a coup, the structural conditions leading to their failure, and the lasting impacts of the plot on Tunisian civil-military relations.

The November 8th coup plot suggests that the narrative of the Tunisian military as professional and apolitical needs to be qualified. More than 60 military personnel joined the foiled coup, while the successful coup that preempted it was led by two former military officers, Prime Minister Zine al-'Abidine Ben 'Ali and Brigadier General Habib 'Ammar of the National Guard. The episode thus demonstrates that, at least in crisis situations where poor national security decisions could risk civil war, even a professional and apolitical military may be pushed to intervene.⁹⁷ It moreover lends credence to the argument that the lack of coups against Ben 'Ali and the military's reluctance to support him in 2011 may not have been the result of the military's professionalism but rather the result of coup-proofing strategies and the resentment they produced, respectively.⁹⁸

This case study also has implications regarding the success and failure of coup plots. While the counterbalancing of security forces by regimes has statistically been associated with failed coups, it is typically held that a counterbalanced force will violently thwart a military's coup attempt after it begins.⁹⁹ This article suggests that counterbalancing may also contribute to coup failure through a second channel: the increased exposure that results from having to recruit across multiple security apparatuses. Future research could examine whether counterbalancing is statistically associated with larger coup coalitions and an increased rate of detection.

Finally this article is one of the first to theorize about the effects of discrimination in promotions, a common yet under-studied coup-proofing strategy. The case of Tunisia suggests that discrimination can also inhibit coups by limiting opposition groups to recruiting only from the lower ranks, which have a more difficult time staging coups. While senior officers can rely on their positions and legitimacy to command their subordinates, junior officers must rely on their numbers to convince their superiors not to resist. Junior officer coup coalitions thus need to be much larger, further increasing the risk of exposure. The case of Tunisia's foiled coup plot of November 8, 1987, thus generates and exemplifies two new mechanisms by which coup-proofing strategies may indeed make coups more difficult.

97. Admittedly, without complete data on the 66 military coup-plotters, it is difficult to conclude whether these officers were representative of the Tunisian military in terms of regiments and branches.

98. Risa Brooks and Hicham Bou Nassif both contested the professionalism narrative in the context of the 2011 revolution, see Brooks, "Abandoned at the Palace;" Bou Nassif, "A Military Besieged."

99. Jonathan Powell, "Determinants of the Attempting and Outcome of Coups d'État," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 6 (2012): 1,017–40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002712445732>; Erica de Bruin, "Preventing Coups d'État: How Counterbalancing Works," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 62, no. 7 (2018): 1,433–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002717692652>.

The Road Not Taken: The Amirav-Husayni Peace Initiative of 1987

Lior Lehrs

In the summer of 1987, Israeli citizens Moshe Amirav and David Ish Shalom initiated a secret unofficial negotiation channel with Palestinian leaders Faysal al-Husayni and Sari Nusseibeh, with the approval of the Palestine Liberation Organization leadership and the acknowledgment of senior members of Israel's ruling Likud party. But the attempt to turn the Amirav-Husayni initiative into official negotiations failed. This article analyzes the negotiations, examines the actors involved and the agreement, and discusses the historical importance of the initiative and the reasons for its failure.

In January 1993 two Israeli private citizens met with representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Oslo. This meeting marked the beginning of negotiations that eventually became an official back channel between Israel and the Palestinians that led to the signing of the Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements that September, known as Oslo I. More than five years before, in July 1987, two other Israeli private citizens initiated a similar effort to establish a negotiation channel with representatives of the Palestinian leadership. They drafted an agreement similar to the one that would later be drafted in Oslo and that was confirmed by the PLO leadership. Attempts to use this draft agreement as a basis for official negotiation failed. While much has been written about the 1993 Oslo talks, the 1987 Jerusalem talks have been consigned to the margins of history. Yet this attempt at negotiations had two unique and important qualities. First, its key figure, Moshe Amirav, came from the heart of the Israeli right and was close to the leaders of the ruling Likud party. Second, it occurred only a few months before the eruption of what became known as the First Intifada, the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that broke out without warning in December 1987.

In this article I analyze the Amirav-Husayni initiative, including the meetings of this negotiation channel and the agreement document that was drafted. I address the connections between the initiative and the official leadership on both sides — Israel and the PLO — and the debates that evolved around the initiative after it was made public. I then discuss the initiative's achievements and its unprecedented elements as well as its setbacks and ultimate failure. I based my research on reports and minutes, previously unpublished, of meetings and conversations through the negotiation channel. I also include interviews, memoirs, contemporary media reports, and historical studies, including sources in Hebrew and Arabic. Through these documents and

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sources I piece together the first comprehensive analysis of the 1987 negotiations. This article is intended to contribute to the historiography on diplomatic efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general as well as, more specifically, on the efforts to promote dialogue between Israel and the PLO prior to the Oslo Accords. It also aims to add to the existing body of work on unofficial or “track-two” diplomacy in the Israeli-Palestinian context.¹

I begin this article with some historical background while situating my research within the existing literature. I then present the establishment of the negotiation channel and developments during the talks before comparing the so-called Amirav-Husayni document with the West Bank and Gaza section of the 1978 Camp David Accords and Oslo I. Finally I conclude with a focus on the end of the Amirav-Husayni initiative and its exposure to the public before finally considering explanations for its failure and discussing its historical importance.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

After the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the Palestine Liberation Organization made significant steps in its quest for international recognition. The organization was recognized in 1974 by the Arab League as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people before obtaining observer status at the United Nations. But during the 1980s, the PLO faced a crisis. The group lost its last territorial holdings in Lebanon as a result of Israel’s invasion in 1982, which weakened it politically but allowed it to expand its maneuvering space. Efforts to renew cooperation with Jordan in a 1985 agreement failed, and the rift between the parties widened. The PLO sought to attain American recognition but failed to meet the preconditions that United States president Ronald Reagan presented: that the PLO accept UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which were passed after the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, respectively, outlining a framework for peace negotiations based on a “land-for-peace” formula; that it recognize Israel’s right to exist; and that it renounce terrorism.²

Within the Palestinian sphere, by 1987, the PLO was able to display organizational unity between its various, historically contentious factions. The organization’s status among the Palestinian public was strong, and the efforts by Israel and Jordan to create an alternative Palestinian leadership proved unsuccessful. But the “external” PLO leadership, exiled in Tunis, faced an increasingly strong “internal” PLO leadership in the West Bank. While the latter remained loyal to the former, the “internal” PLO also had an independent and separate approach. At the same time new actors were evolving in

1. Hussein Agha et al., *Track-II Diplomacy: Lessons from the Middle East* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003); Edy Kaufman, Walid Salem, and Juliette Verhoeven, eds., *Bridging the Divide: Peacebuilding in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006); Tom Najem et al., eds., *Track Two Diplomacy and Jerusalem: The Jerusalem Old City Initiative* (London: Routledge, 2017).

2. Helena Cobban, *The Palestinian Liberation Organization: People, Power and Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 215–41; Avraham Sela, “The PLO at Fifty: A Historical Perspective,” *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 1, no. 3 (2014), 305–9, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798914542326>; Yezid Sayigh, “Struggle Within, Struggle Without: The Transformation of PLO Politics since 1982,” *International Affairs* 65, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 247–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2622071>.

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