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

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Abstract

In 1987, Tunisia’s Zine al-ʿAbidine Ben ‘Ali seized power from an ailing Habib Bourguiba. Less well-known is that Ben ‘Ali’s coup on November 7 had pre-empted an Islamist-led coup planned for November 8. This article recounts the story of the November 8th Group, a coalition of about 200 individuals in the military, security forces, and Islamic Tendency Movement who had plotted to oust Bourguiba. Drawing on recently published memoirs and original interviews with the coup-plotters, this article explores the plotters’ motivations, post-takeover plans, and ultimate failure. It highlights how Bourguiba’s coup-proofing strategies shaped the nature and outcome of the coup plot, and concludes with the lasting impact of the foiled coup on Tunisian civil-military relations.

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Introduction

“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.”

- L. B. Ware

“Unlike most other North African armies, Tunisia’s had never even attempted a coup.”

- Zoltan Barany

The Tunisian military has long been characterized as a professional and apolitical force. Observers claim that it has never staged a coup, even viewing coups as “anathema to its institutional culture.” This professional ethos is often traced back to Tunisia’s founding father, Habib Bourguiba, who banned the military from

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political activity and sent officers for training almost exclusively in Western democracies.\(^5\)

While many Tunisian officers are indeed averse to coups, newly released material suggest that this account may need qualification. Tunisian military officers have helped plot at least two coups since the military’s founding in 1956: the first in 1962 alongside supporters of Bourguiba’s rival, Salah ben Youssef,\(^6\) and the second in 1987 alongside Islamists affiliated with the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI). While both plots failed, they challenge the existing 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 (*majmuʿa al-inqād al-watānī*), and alternatively known as the Group of 87, the November 8\(^{th}\) Group, or the Security Group (*al-majmuʿa al-amnīa*). Drawing on original interviews with the coup-plotters as well as recent memoirs, this article describes the plotters’


motivations, post-taking 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 organization and eventual failure of the plot? 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 Sheikh 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 top ranks, while the second was to counterbalance the military with the national guard and police. 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. As others have noted,⁷ 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.

Methods

The existence of an Islamist plot for November 8, 1987 has been confirmed in the literature,⁸ though details are sparse. To discover the motivations and plans of the November 8th group, I conducted interviews with five of its members (see Table 1). Each interview lasted 1-2 hours and went in-depth into each plotter’s role, why they joined, what they believed to be the plan for November 8th and beyond, the cause of their failure, and its aftermath.

⁷ Barany 2011; Brooks 2013; Nassif 2015.

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 were retired military associations, including the Association of Justice for Military Veterans (INSAF) and the Association Tunisienne des Anciens Militaires et para Militaires. Though INSAF was formed in 2011 primarily to lobby on behalf of military personnel purged in the 1991 Barraket Essahel affair,9 one of the co-founders, Elmy Khadhri, was part of the November 8th group. The second entry point was through the Ennahda headquarters, through whom I met one of the leaders of the group, Said Ferjani, and another member who is now politically active within Ennahda.

Table 1: Interviews with November 7th and November 8th Coup-Plotters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Plot</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Interview Location</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elmy Khadhri</td>
<td>Nov 8</td>
<td>Staff Sergeant, Army</td>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>Nov 2, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Nov 8, 1st Circle</td>
<td>Staff Sergeant, Army</td>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>Nov 24, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Nov 8</td>
<td>Captain, Army</td>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>Nov 25, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymous</td>
<td>Nov 8</td>
<td>Officer, Army</td>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>Jan 27, 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said Ferjani</td>
<td>Nov 8, 1st Circle</td>
<td>Ex-Sergeant, Air Force</td>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>Feb 2, 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habib ‘Ammar</td>
<td>Nov 7</td>
<td>Commander, National</td>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>Jul 13, 2018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9 In 1991, 244 military personnel were arrested, tortured, and expelled from the military on false charges of meeting with Ennahda 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, 2016, p. 4 and footnote 15.
Guard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mohamed Mahmoudi</td>
<td>Nov 7</td>
<td>Commander, National Guard Special Unit</td>
<td>Bouficha</td>
<td>Jul 16, 2018</td>
</tr>
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All the November 8th coup-plotters interviewed were part of the military, whereas military personnel made up no more than 1/3 of the group. This is an important bias in my interview sample that should be kept in mind, though can be justified on two fronts. First, as we will see, the inner circle of the November 8th group were also predominantly military officers. Second, the military is the focus of this article, which seeks to explain how a professional military could come to plot a coup.

In addition to these interviews, I drew upon published accounts of four other members of the group: Salah Karkar, interviewed by Francois Burgat10; Moncef Ben Salem, through his auto-biography11; Sahbi Amri, in his seminar at the Temimi Foundation12; and Tayeb Boudiaf, quoted by Nouri Bousha‘ala.13

10 Burgat 1993, pp. 224-228.
12 “Séminaire avec Docteur Sahbi Amri: la branche sécurité armée de la tendance islamique” [Seminar with Doctor Sahbi Amri: The armed security branch of the Islamic Tendency], Institut Tunisien des Relations Internationales, May 17, 2016,
I also interviewed the key players in Ben ‘Ali’s November 7th coup, to determine both how much they knew about the November 8th plot, and how they planned and executed their own. I interviewed Brigadier General Habib ‘Ammar, at the time commander of the National Guard, and drew upon his autobiography.14 I spoke also with Colonel Mohamed Mahmoudi, the commander of the National Guard Special Unit.

Both sides are 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 adjudicate among these competing views, presenting the less plausible counter-narrative in a footnote. If equally plausible, I present both narratives in the text.

Context

https://tunisitri.wordpress.com/2016/05/17/seminaire-avec-docteur-sahbi-amri-la-branche-securitaire-armee-de-la-tendance-islamique/.

13 Nouri Bousha’ala, Qabas min al- Dhākira: Mudhakkarāt ḍabīt amn [Vault of Memory: Memoirs of a Security Officer], Palestine Liberation Organization Research Center, September 2015, p. 399-417, https://www.prc.ps/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9.pdf.

Understanding these coups and their plotters’ motivations requires placing them in their political context. Tunisia’s founding father, Habib Bourguiba, had served as its leader upon independence in 1956. After twenty years of economic growth and little domestic opposition, President Bourguiba’s hold on power grew tenuous in the late 1970s and 1980s. A number of factors, including a deteriorating economy, a growing Islamist opposition, and Bourguiba’s waning mental capacity, combined to threaten and ultimately terminate his rule.

Economic frustrations had led Tunisians to rise up against Bourguiba. The first shock to the system was the January 1978 general strike by the *Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail* (UGTT). While the strike was repressed, Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi attempted to re-kindle the popular insurrection by sending commandos to attack army outposts in Gafsa on the strike’s anniversary in 1980. The most threatening blow then came in January 1984, when a massive bread riot [*intifādat al-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 co-founded the *Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique* (MTI), later re-named Ennahdha, which began to agitate and proselytize on university campuses and civil society. A number of smaller Islamist groups, including *Hizb al-Tahrir* and the Islamic Jihad, also emerged and pursued more violent tactics. For instance, the Islamic Jihad, some of whose leaders broke away

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15 The primary political opposition during this time came from the left, particularly the *Perspectives Tunisiennes* movement. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.
from the MTI in 1984,\textsuperscript{16} claimed responsibility for bombings at four hotels in Sousse and Monastir on August 2, 1987.

Compounding these domestic threats was Bourguiba’s ailing mental health. As early as 1971, doctors had diagnosed Bourguiba with “involutional depression and ‘mild but definite arterial brain damage.’”\textsuperscript{17} 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.”\textsuperscript{18}

In this state, and fueled by a paranoia of Islamists, Bourguiba attempted to pin Islamic Jihad’s August 1987 bombings on Ghannouchi and the MTI. He ordered the arrest and trial of 90 MTI members, including Ghannouchi, urging the death penalty for all. On September 27, however, judges sentenced only 7 to death, granting Ghannouchi life imprisonment.\textsuperscript{19} Furious at the ‘lenient’ sentence, Bourguiba – against the advice of Prime Minister Ben ‘Ali – ordered a retrial, and

\textsuperscript{16} Wolf 2017, p. 64.


demanded 12-15 executions by November 15. That retrial was set to begin Monday, November 9.

**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, President Salah Karkar and Vice-President Mohamed Chammam, agreed, and looked for ways to defuse the crisis:

“In a phase like this, what could be done?” asked Karkar. “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 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.”

Given this assessment, three young MTI activists – Said Ferjani, Moncef ben Salem, and Belgacem Ferchichi – began plotting to remove Bourguiba from office.

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20 Delany 1987.

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 talk to the people that we knew within the army, the security forces, and the civilian population, to facilitate a coup d’état on the 8th of November,” the day before the retrial was to begin. Unbeknownst to Ghannouchi but with the blessing of Karkar and Chammam, the three young activists assembled a team of 219 individuals, including 66 in the military and 62 in the Ministry of Interior.

22 Said Ferjani, “The ‘End of Islamism’ and the Future of Tunisia,” Hudson Institute, April 26, 2016. https://www.hudson.org/research/12349-the-end-of-islamism-and-the-future-of-tunisia. Wolf (2017) is skeptical that the coup could have been plotted in just four weeks, and suggests the plotting had begun much earlier. Yet, the October 1987 date for the first meeting was confirmed by an army staff sergeant in the group’s first circle (interview with author, Tunis, November 24, 2015). 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.


24 Interview with Said Ferjani, Tunis, February 2, 2018. Sahbi Amri and Moncef Ben Salem claim 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, claims that an additional 60 or so individuals evaded arrest, whether by fleeing the country or remaining underground. In his letter to Ahmed Manai, Ben Salem also notes that “many elements of the Group have fled
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,²⁵ Karkar claims 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.”²⁶


²⁶ Burgat 1993, p. 225
Taoufik Majri, and National Guard sergeant Bashir Ben Ahmed. The identities of 103 of the 219 coup-plotters were revealed in 2016 by a civilian member, doctor Sahbi Amri.

Why would members of a relatively professional and apolitical military join this coup plot? Asked about his motivations, one staff sergeant (‘arif awwal or sergent-chef) from Kairouan 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 penalties [for MTI leaders] would lead to civil war.”

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28 See Sahbi Amri’s 2016 post on his Facebook page: https://mobile.facebook.com/3am.ali.ben.salem/photos/a.311782738922076.55865.311767918923558/815698731863805/?type=3& ft =top_level_post_id.815698731863805%3Athid.311767918923558%3A306061129499414%3A69%3A0%3A1470034799%3A7299931625471397771.

29 Interview with expelled Staff Sergeant who did not wish to be named, Tunis, November 24, 2015.
“Tunisia was on the brink of civil war,” claimed another army coup-plotter. “Our goal was the same as our name: the salvation of the nation. We needed to save the country from bloodshed.”  

Each of the military coup-plotters interviewed pointed to the potential executions as their primary motivation. From a national security perspective, they disagreed with this decision, fearing it would lead to civil war. Though they were not official members of the MTI, many were also pious themselves, and sympathized with the Islamist movement.

Most plotters interviewed also highlighted Bourguiba’s increasingly senile and autocratic rule. Several recounted Bourguiba’s oft-cited response to a journalist’s question about the system he had set up in Tunisia: “The system? What system? I am the system!” While stated in the early 1960s, 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.”

For instance, Elmy Khadhri, a staff sergeant from Kasserine, explained:

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30 Interview with expelled army personnel who did not wish to be named, Tunis, January 27, 2017.


“I had feelings for the country. Senegal and Mauritania were advancing more and more, and we were going backwards! 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 thirty 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! Prime Minister [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?”

In sum, the military 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 coup-plotters did not accept that the civilian president had “a right to be wrong,” 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.

33 Interview with expelled Staff Sergeant Elmy Khadhri, Tunis, November 2, 2015.

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 Tunisia, coup-plotters must take steps to limit the possibility of detection.

The coup-plotters pursued two tactics in this regard. The first was to selectively recruit the minimum number of individuals needed to carry out the coup. As each additional person increases the risk of detection, the plotters focused on two criteria: 1) known sympathy with the Islamist movement, signaled for instance through mosque attendance or familial relations, and 2) “added value” to the coup, 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 3-4 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 Ferjani, even among the three MTI leaders – Ferjani, Ben Salem, and Ferchichi – no one of them knew all 219 names.36


However, the coup-plotters also suffered from two specific coup-proofing strategies employed by Bourguiba. These served to increase the size of the requisite coup-coalition, 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. While these areas accounted for just 33 percent of Tunisia’s population, they claimed 71 percent of the top military positions under Bourguiba. Bourguiba, who himself hailed from Monastir, tended to personally know these officers. 


38 Data collected from an internal ministry of defense publication, “Registry of Retired Officers: Commanders and Senior Officers,” produced in 2009. Coastal areas refers to Tunisia’s northeast coast, including Bizerte, Tunis, 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.
officers (or their families), and otherwise perceived them as more secular and therefore loyal to the regime.\textsuperscript{39}

Because of this discrimination 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 (\textit{ra`id/commandant}) Mohamed Mansouri (and similarly only one Major in the MOI, Ahmed Aouadi). Most were Captains, Lieutenants, and Sergeants. While successful junior officer-coups are not unheard of, they are far more difficult than senior-officer ones, succeeding only 42 percent of the time compared to 68 percent for senior officers.\textsuperscript{40} Senior officers can rely on their legitimacy and “soft power […] to manipulate the beliefs and

\textsuperscript{39} A former 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 a brother, friend, or even neighbor being a known Islamist. Interview with retired brigadier general who did not wish to be named, Tunis, October 21, 2015. See also: Sharan Grewal, “Military Defection during Localized Protests: The Case of Tataouine,” \textit{International Studies Quarterly}, 2019, p. 4.

expectations”41 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.42 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 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.43 For a junior officer coup “to stand a chance, a large number of [personnel], not just a few powerful actors, will have to join.”44 Junior officer coups, therefore, require much larger coup coalitions, increasing the risk of detection. The late Moncef Ben Salem, one of the three coup leaders, 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 lead the operations and to issue orders, which made us

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42 As one of the coup-plotters asked me rhetorically, “would Tunisians really follow a Major?” Interview, Tunis, January 27, 2017.

43 Because of this focus on hard power, junior officer coups also tend to be more violent than senior officer ones. See Erica de Bruin, “Will there be blood? Explaining violence during coups d’etat,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Firstview, 2019.

44 Singh 2014, p. 151.
build our plan horizontally, i.e. relying on the base, which increases the chance of exposure.”

The second coup-proofing strategy Bourguiba pursued, which similarly served to increase the size of the needed coup coalition, was counterbalancing. Since independence, Bourguiba had set up the police and national guard (placed in the Ministry of Interior) to offset 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 the Aouina barracks in Tunis, 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.”

While the national guard may not be as numerous or as heavily armed as the military, any resistance could foil a coup plot. As Singh (2014) has observed, officers often bandwagon towards whoever appears to be winning during a coup attempt. Even minor resistance could undermine the coup-plotters’ projection of dominance and fracture the coup coalition. Moreover, any bloodshed could tarnish the image of the coup even if it were to succeed.

45 Ben Salem, 2013, p. 45.

46 Interview with Ennahda leader Said Ferjani, Tunis, February 2, 2018. The placement of the national guard immediately next to the military is only the case in the Aouina barracks, as the capital is the most important site for a coup.

47 De Bruin, 2019, p. 4.
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 coup-plotters could only recruit junior officers, the coup became a game of numbers and hard power. “The coup d’état was not a bureaucratic or technical affair,” Ferjani explained. “It was about power.” Accordingly, their goal for November 8th was to mobilize as many Islamist members of the security forces as possible, while simultaneously immobilizing those who would challenge the coup. “We counted the elements that might oppose us,” observed Ben Salem, “and prepared a plan to neutralize them without endangering their lives.”

The plan, according to Ferjani, was to strike between 1:30 and 2 am on November 8th. “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.”

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48 Ben Salem, 2013, p. 44.

The next step was to mobilize their supporters to descend upon the presidential palace.\textsuperscript{50} Since the coup-plotters were only able to recruit 2-3 individuals in the presidential guard,\textsuperscript{51} here they hoped to overpower the remaining defenses, estimating 600 casualties.\textsuperscript{52} Moncef Ben Salem claims that the coup-plotters had assembled nearly 5,000 tear gas pistols from abroad, and would secure firearms, tanks, and aircraft from military bases,\textsuperscript{53} particularly Sidi Ahmed air base in Bizerte.\textsuperscript{54} Sergeant First Class (\textit{wakil/adjudant}) Sadok Ghodhbane, of the National Guard Special Unit (commandos) would lead the storming of the presidential palace.

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\textsuperscript{50} Originally, Major Mansouri had proposed to send a telegram with instructions to all units, but such an official order would have been questioned from above. Instead Major Mansouri – who was the highest-ranking military officer – was actually not slated to play an active role during the coup; others would communicate and mobilize the units through more covert and informal channels. Interview with Ennahdha leader Said Ferjani, Tunis, February 2, 2018.

\textsuperscript{51} These included Abdelraouf al-Ra’isi and Hasan Hanāshi. See Nadhif 2017, p. 186.

\textsuperscript{52} Wolf 2017, p. 65.

\textsuperscript{53} Ben Salem 2013, p. 44; Wolf 2017, p. 65.

\textsuperscript{54} Amami 1992, p. 273. Amami suggests that the group had already begun stockpiling weapons from Germany in the summer of 1986, storing them in the houses of Army Captain Ahmed Slaymi, Army Staff Sergeant Salah Abdi, police officer Youssef Hammami, and customs officer Borni Ouertani (p. 266).
\end{flushleft}
and capture Bourguiba. Subsequently, a helicopter pilot named Ibrahim al-ʿAmouri, would fly Bourguiba to Mornag prison. Each of the coup-plotters interviewed insisted that Bourguiba would not have been hurt.

According to Ferjani, the next step was to announce the removal of Bourguiba on TV and mobilize popular rallies in support of the coup. A National Salvation Committee would then be formed, composed of six individuals, three Islamist and three secular: Rached Ghannouchi, Abdelfattah Mourou, Abdelkarim Harouni, Mohamed Mzali, Ahmed Ben Salah, and Ahmed Mestiri. The six of them – none of whom were informed of the coup ahead of time – would then shepherd the country to democratic elections within six months. “It was a Sudanese-style scenario,” claimed Karkar, referring to the Sudanese military's removal of Gaafar Nimeiry in 1985 and overseeing of elections in 1986.

While one army coup-plotter confirmed this account, another was more skeptical that democracy would emerge from the barrel of a gun: “Since when do

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

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.”

A Coup Preempted

The question of what would have come after the Group of 87’s coup will forever remain a mystery, as the coup 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 Omrane, Tunis, near the Mechtel Hotel. Chammam was knowledgeable of the plot, though it is unclear what details if any he revealed to the authorities. Amami (1992) suggests

57 Interview with expelled army personnel who did not wish to be named, Tunis, January 27, 2017.

58 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 POB officer’s arrest, but it is that second arrest that appears to have triggered BenʿAli and HabibʿAmmar to begin plotting in earnest on November 5.
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 [of Chammam...] Even this arrest did not confuse the group, and a spirit of trust and confidence prevailed.”

The second and ultimately more fatal error came from Bachir Faidi, a “naïve” and “indiscreet” officer in the Public Order Brigade (POB) at the Bouchoucha barracks in Tunis. A member of the “third circle” (one of the last and lowest recruits into the plot), he was tasked with “sabotaging some vehicles at the barracks of the Public Order Brigade” with three of his colleagues. 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 (wakil awwal or adjudant-chef) 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 police officer, extracting the

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60 Amami 1992, p. 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 Karkar, rather than from Chammam (p. 269).

61 Nadhif (2017, p. 185) is the first to name this police officer, though he does not provide a source.

62 Ben Salem 2013, p. 45.
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 7th is up for debate. Ferjani and Ben Salem insisted that Ben ‘Ali only learned of that one cell, and did not realize that the Islamists had devised a nation-wide scheme. They claim that Ben Ali was going to take power that weekend anyway, as it was rumored that he would be fired on November 9th for having opposed the retrial of MTI leaders.

The regime’s account, however, is 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, claims 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.”64

Ben ‘Ali and Habib ‘Ammar, both former military officers, had already been planning a coup since October 26. That day, they had discussed how “it was particularly sad to see the deterioration of the health status of the old leader [Bourguiba] 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 the Algerian president Chedly Ben Jedid, 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.”65

As a ‘coup from the top,’ Ben ‘Ali and Habib ‘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 POB cell was discovered, they approached Hedi Baccouche, Minister of Social Affairs, to draft the November 7th declaration invoking Article 57 of the constitution, legitimizing the coup on the basis of Bourguiba’s medical inability to rule. Habib Ammar then ordered Colonel Mohamed Mahmoudi, head of the National Guard Special Unit, to send his commandos from Bir Bouregba to the Aouina barracks on November 5, claiming there was a possible terrorist threat.66

64 ‘Ammar, 2016, p. 94.
65 Ibid, p. 93.
At 8pm on November 6th, Ben ‘Ali summoned into his office Defense Minister Slahedine Baly, Army Chief of Staff Youssef Barakat, and Director of Military Security Youssef Ben Slimane to inform them of his plans, but also to prevent them from simultaneously issuing orders to stop the coup. Air Force Chief of Staff Ahmed No‘aman Bouzgarrou, who as Bourguiba’s son-in-law would likely have opposed the coup, “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.”67

With potential resistance from the military immobilized, Habib ‘Ammar was then sent to surround the presidential palace with 80 National Guard Special Unit commandos to prevent Bourguiba from contesting the coup. 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 of the national guard and police. ‘Ammar describes 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 Carthage-la Marsa telephone line 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 pm. 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 Aouina barracks, where my [National Guard Special Intervention] units were ready for departure. Around 1:30 am, the Convoy that I directed left the Barracks and took the direction of the palace of Carthage.

“Arriving at the scene, I installed my units and charged Colonel Hédi Ben Salah, the Armored Commandant, to place his craft around the palace and to cut the road between 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 guards and policemen, and replace them by the Commandos of the National Guard. 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 [emphasis added].

“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 of the National Guard [emphasis added]. 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.”

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 am, ‘Ammar returned to Aouina to oversee the capture of a number of high-level ministers and officials, including Bourguiba confidant and Minister Mansour Skhiri, to prevent them from publicly condemning the takeover.

Meanwhile, around 2 am, Ben ‘Ali and Hedi Baccouche summoned to the Interior Ministry the Health Minister, Souad Ya‘acoubi, and seven doctors that had previously treated Bourguiba. As described by the neuropsychiatrist Ezzedine Gueddiche, the seven doctors were instructed, without being able to see Bourguiba, to write and sign a statement declaring “that [Bourguiba’s] 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.\textsuperscript{69}

With the medical statement signed at 6 am, Ben ‘Ali declared a “constitutional” succession on the radio at 6:30, and hours later was sworn in as Tunisia’s second president by the parliament. 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.

Upon assuming the presidency on November 7\textsuperscript{th}, one of Ben ‘Ali’s first actions was to call off the retrial of MTI leaders, ensuring Ghannouchi would not be executed. The Islamist coup-plotters had already assembled in a Bardo villa 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 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 \textit{mufsideen} (the corrupted ones), Ezzeddine Gueddiche, “\textit{Tout sur ‘Le coup d’État médical’ contre Bourguiba: le témoignage du Pr Ezzeddine Gueddiche} [All about ‘the medical coup’ against Bourguiba: the testimony of Professor Ezzeddine Gueddiche], \textit{Leaders}, November 7, 2017, \url{http://www.leaders.com.tn/article/16755-temoignage-de-pr-ezzeddine-guddiche-sur-le-limogeage-de-bourguiba}.\textsuperscript{69}
ʿAmmar 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.”⁷⁰

Over the course of the following weeks, Ben ʿAli attempted to arrest as many of the Islamist coup-plotters 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, becoming the first victim of the Ben ʿAli regime.⁷¹ Ferjani, meanwhile, was kept in the ‘roasted chicken’ position and had his back fractured with an iron rod.⁷² “The torture was terrible causing even death, paralysis, skull skinning, and threats to our wives,” observed Ben Salem in his memoir.

The arrests continued until January 1988, by which point 157 individuals had been detained. The remaining 62 of the 219-member plot had managed to flee the country or hide underground. The 157 arrested were then brought to a military court. Accused by military justice of plotting against Bourguiba, Ben Salem allegedly...

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⁷¹ The official announcement to all military barracks claimed Mansouri died of a heart attack.

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!”

The military trial never ran its course. In the summer of 1988, Ben ‘Ali began to negotiate with the MTI. As part of this deal, the coup-plotters were released in three waves: November 1988, March 1989, and April 1989. They 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 recalls 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.” 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.

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, Second Lieutenant Sifi Tlili was appointed delegate (‘mutamid or ‘délégué) of Sijoumi in Tunis and then Hebira in Mahdia, and Navy First Lieutenant Fathi al-Hafsi was appointed delegate of Bir Mcherga in Zaghouan and then Kondar in Sousse. Captain Sassi Bettayeb became head of the Ministry of Transportation’s

73 Ben Salem 2003.

74 Interview with expelled Staff Sergeant Elmy Khadhri, Tunis, November 2, 2015.
regional transport company in Medenine. Finally, Army Captain Abdessalem Khemari joined Ennahdha’s executive office and Shura council, while Air Force officer Djemaa Ouni became a financial and administrative advisor to the executive office.

For the majority of the plotters, however, the 2011 revolution brought only unmet expectations. Immediately after Ben ‘Ali’s departure, Khadhri co-founded the Association of Justice for Military Veterans (INSAF) 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 Barraket Essahel would be pardoned, the coup-plotters were not eligible to benefit from the 2011 amnesty, as they had never been formally convicted, and were anyway given an amnesty in 1989 – even though they were not given records of that amnesty nor were their names cleared from police lists.

Khadhri and his colleagues continue to lobby the authorities, holding a protest and writing a petition to Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali in January 2013. They criticize both INSAF and Ennahdha of not only not helping, but actively trying to avoid them. Many believe that Ennahdha does not want to lobby on behalf of the coup-plotters, as shining a light on the coup may reveal that MTI leaders Karkar and Chammam were cognizant of, if not directing, the plot.

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75 Bousha’ala, 2015, p. 413-4.
However, an army captain from Nabeul says there is 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.”76 He maintained that the 1989 amnesty granted the coup-plotters recognition and already declared them not guilty – there is nothing more than can 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?”77

Legacies

The foiled coup plot of 1987 had important legacies for Tunisia’s civil-military relations. The lesson Ben ‘Ali learned from this episode was that Bourguiba’s coup-proofing strategies had worked in stopping a regime-changing Islamist coup.78 The discrimination in promotions and counterbalancing of the military had forced the Islamist plotters to try to recruit a broad swath of low-

76 Interview with expelled Captain who did not wish to be named, Tunis, November 25, 2015.

77 Interview with expelled army personnel who did not wish to be named, Tunis, January 27, 2017.

78 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 67:3 (2015), 423-468.
ranking officers from across security apparatuses, a strategy that carried a high risk of detection – and ultimately, was detected.

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 coast’s percentage of 64 percent. 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. The military thus remained vertically fragmented, with the senior ranks dominated by secular, coastal officers, but the junior officers and soldiers more representative, especially of the interior regions.

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

Moreover, Ben ‘Ali took steps to make his own, November 7th-style, national guard-led coup more difficult. To prevent a future national guard commander like

79 Author’s calculations, using the same definitions of coast and top officers as in footnote 37.

80 Interview with retired Colonel Major Mahmoud Mezoughi, Tunis, July 10, 2018.

81 Nassif 2015.

Habib ‘Ammar from having control over parts of the presidential guard, Ben ‘Ali moved the presidential guard out of the Ministry of Interior and directly into the presidency.\textsuperscript{83} He “organized and trained them separately in their own barracks – they did not belong anymore to the national guard or police,” noted ‘Ammar.\textsuperscript{84} The presidential guard was also militarized and doubled in size, further counterbalancing the other forces.\textsuperscript{85}

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 Officers of the National Armed Forces (AAOAN). “It became a police state. Under Ben Ali, the police monitored everything, including the military.”\textsuperscript{86} The late armed forces chief of staff General Said 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.”\textsuperscript{87}

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[\textsuperscript{83}] See also, Noureddine Jebnoun, \textit{Tunisia’s National Intelligence: Why “Rogue Elephants” Fail to Reform} (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing & The Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 2017), p. 30.
\item[\textsuperscript{84}] Interview, Tunis, July 13, 2018.
\item[\textsuperscript{86}] Interview, Tunis, October 9, 2015.
\item[\textsuperscript{87}] Interview, Tunis, November 6, 2015.
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\end{footnotesize}
With much of the military feeling neglected and marginalized, they had little interest in defending Ben ʿAli when mass protests emerged against his rule in December 2010. As the former inspector general of the armed forces, Brigadier General Mohamed El Bekri, decried, “we were not going to harm the population for the good of a King!” Moreover, the lower ranks of the military, most of whom came from the interior regions, likely identified with the demands of their protesting brethren. While Ben ʿAli did not ask the military to fire, 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.

**Conclusion**

The existence of an Islamist coup planned for November 8, 1987 has long been hinted at, but details have been sparse. This article sought to reconstruct the facts of the plot, drawing on original interviews with the coup-plotters and recently-published memoirs. It examined, in particular, the plotters’ motivations for planning

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88 Interview, Tunis, November 28, 2015.


a coup, the structural conditions leading to their failure, and the lasting impacts of the plot on Tunisian civil-military relations.

The 1987 coup plot suggests that the narrative of the Tunisian military as professional and apolitical needs to be qualified. Over 60 military personnel joined the foiled coup, while the successful coup that preempted it was led by two former military officers – Ben ‘Ali and Habib ‘Ammar. 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. 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 Ben ‘Ali’s coup-proofing strategies and the resentment they produced, respectively.

This case study has also generated new hypotheses regarding the success and failure of coup plots. While counterbalancing has statistically been associated with failed coups, the mechanism offered is typically that the counterbalancing force violently defeats the military’s coup attempt after it begins. This article suggests

91 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.

92 Brooks 2013 and Nassif 2015 both contest the professionalism narrative in the context of the 2011 revolution.

93 Jonathan Powell, “Determinants of the Attempting and Outcome of Coups d’état,” Journal of Conflict Resolution 56:6 (2012), pp. 1017-1040; Erica de Bruin,
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 understudied 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 1987 foiled coup plot thus generates and exemplifies two new mechanisms by which coup-proofing strategies may indeed make coups more difficult.