

**T.C.  
IŞIK UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

**MASTER THESIS  
DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS PROGRAM**

**Tarik EL MAKRINI**

**TUNISIA DURING THE ARAB SPRING:  
MILITARY NEUTRALITY  
AND ITS REFLECTION ON THE PUBLIC OPINION**

**SUPERVISOR  
Prof. Dr. Seda DEMIRALP**

**İSTANBUL, May 2024**

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## ÖZET

### ARAP BAHARI SIRASINDA TUNUS: ASKERİ TARAFSIZLIK VE HALK GÖRÜŞÜ ÜZERİNDEKİ YANSIMALARI

Bu tez, Arap Baharı sırasında Tunus'taki askeri tarafsızlığın rolünü incelemekte ve Başkanlar Habib Burgiba ile Zine El Abidine Ben Ali'nin darbe önleme stratejilerine odaklanmaktadır. Araştırma, askeri tarafsızlığın yalnızca profesyonelizm ve kurumsallaşma temelinde açıklanmasını eleştirerek, kasıtlı siyasi marjinalleştirme, küçültme ve bütçe kesintilerinin de önemli bir rol oynadığını savunmaktadır. Burgiba ve Ben Ali rejimlerinin sivil-asker ilişkilerinin ayrıntılı tarihsel analizi, bu liderlerin darbeleri önlemek amacıyla orduyu nasıl sistematik olarak marjinalleştirdiklerini göstermektedir. Barakat Sahil olayı gibi, askeri subayların işkenceye uğradığı ve marjinalleştirildiği olaylar, ordu içinde derin hoşnutsuzluk yaratmış ve bu durum, Arap Baharı sırasında ordunun tarafsız kalmasını etkilemiştir.

Ayrıca, Dünya Değerler Araştırması (WVS) verileri, Arap Baharı sonrası dönemde halkın orduya olan yüksek güvenini ve ordunun siyasi işlerden çekilmesine yönelik güçlü bir desteği ortaya koymaktadır. Bu tez, Tunus Silahlı Kuvvetleri'nin davranışlarını şekillendiren faktörlerin kapsamlı bir şekilde anlaşılmasını sağlamak ve askeri tepkilerin siyasi krizlere karşı analizinde tarihsel ve kurumsal bağlamların önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bulgular, darbe önleme stratejilerinin askeri tarafsızlığı korumadaki ve geçiş toplumlarında demokratik geçişleri kolaylaştırmadaki rolü hakkında değerli bilgiler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arap Baharı, Demokrasi, Tunus Silahlı Kuvvetleri, Darbe Önleme, Askeri Tarafsızlık

## **ABSTRACT**

### **TUNISIA DURING THE ARAB SPRING: MILITARY NEUTRALITY AND ITS REFLECTION ON THE PUBLIC OPINION**

This thesis examines the role of military neutrality in Tunisia during the Arab Spring, focusing on the coup-proofing strategies implemented by Presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The research challenges the prevailing explanations of military neutrality primarily based on professionalism and institutionalization, arguing that deliberate political marginalization, downsizing, and budget reductions played a significant role. Through a detailed historical analysis of civil-military relations during Bourguiba's and Ben Ali's regimes, the study demonstrates how these leaders systematically marginalized the military to prevent coups. The Barakat Sahil affair, a pivotal event involving the torture and marginalization of military officers, further deepened the resentment within the TAF, influencing their neutral stance during the Arab Spring.

Additionally, data from the WVS reveals high public trust in the military post-Arab Spring and strong advocacy for its withdrawal from political affairs. This thesis provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shaped the TAF's behavior, emphasizing the importance of historical and institutional contexts in analyzing military responses to political crises. The findings offer valuable insights into the role of coup-proofing strategies in maintaining military neutrality and facilitating democratic transitions in transitional societies.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Democracy, Tunisian Armed Forces, Coup-proofing, Military Neutrality

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The last words of thanks go to my family. I thank my father and my brother for their patience and encouragement.

Tarik EL MAKRINI

## **DEDICATION**

To my mother, may Allah have mercy on her soul.

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## **ABBREVIATIONS LIST**

|             |                                 |
|-------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>TAF</b>  | : Tunisian Armed Forces         |
| <b>PSD</b>  | : Destourian Socialist Party    |
| <b>UGTT</b> | : Tunisian General Labour Union |
| <b>WVS</b>  | : World Value Survey            |

# CHAPTER 1

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 THE PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Early in 2011, large-scale protests shook the Arab world. Millions of demonstrators united against decades of autocratic rule, and the protests came to happen, demanding social justice, freedom, and necessities. They camped out in public places for weeks with the existence of the security and military forces while waiting to welcome the overthrow of their tyrants in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen (Gelvin, 2014). In Tunisia, President Ben Ali's regime came to an end and fell after weeks of unrest and protests. Tunisians had finally succeeded in embracing democracy after more than twenty years of repression and dictatorship (Brooks, 2013). No one could have predicted his escape would happen just a week ago. There was considerable enjoyment throughout the country upon his departure (Arieff, 2012). This incident is considered the first event in the contemporary history of the MENA region in which a public movement caused the overthrow of an autocrat (Gelvin, 2012). Ben Ali explicitly understood that the "Game is Over" and the time has come to "Go Away" (Saidin, 2018).

In Tunisia, the Arab Spring gave the Tunisians some essential momentum and a morale boost. It also increased pro-reform and anti-government sentiments throughout the Arab world. According to Arieff (2012), Tunisia inevitably was seen as a crucial test case for democratic transitions in other Middle East countries. The demonstrators' demands were simple and included the creation of job opportunities, political freedom, and decent living. The democratic shift in Tunisia was a gradual process that was sparked by many circumstances and acted upon by several players, namely, the Tunisian military (Ayeb, 2011).

During the Arab Spring, the armed forces played a significant role in determining the fate of the regimes. They reacted differently in the MENA region, some of them supported protest movements and others chose to back the ruling regime. All Arab regimes who faced challenging protests relied on their militaries to confront them. In Egypt and Tunisia however, political authorities eventually allowed the transition to democracy, and in Tunisia, such transition became most successful. The Tunisian military has been cited by academics as an important institution of the country's success in achieving democracy. It backed the country's revolution and subsequent shift to democracy, in contrast to most other militaries in the region. Following the president's exit in 2011, the Tunisian military kept on the war against the last-distance resistance of the previous government. The army fought severe fights against armed militias and gunmen loyal to Ben Ali in the days after his escape from Tunisia and exile to Saudi Arabia (BBC News, 2011).

In the case of Egypt, although Hosni Mubarak, Egypt's longtime leader, was finally overthrown by the public revolt there as well, the Egyptian military responded to the anti-regime movement slightly differently than it did in Tunisia. Mainly, they were less motivated to back the revolution against the government. On the other, the Egyptian one had an unclear stance toward the pro-reform movement, which is explicable by its ties to the government (El-Dine, 2016). The protesters that gathered steam in Egypt because of the Tunisian revolution encountered considerable resistance from the Egyptian military forces. Similar to Tunisia, Egypt's citizens progressed from requests for political and economic change to calls for the overthrow of Mubarak's regime. The Egyptian military acknowledged that the protestors' demands were reasonable and guaranteed to not open fire when they were sent to confront large demonstrations (El-Dine, 2016). The Egyptian military was warmly welcomed by the protesters, but it chose to stay neutral during the Arab Revolution, where no significant confrontations occurred between the military and the protesters demanding the overthrow of President Mubarak's regime (Elzoughby, 2011). Whereas in Libya, after months of clashes between Pro and Anti-Qaddafi troops, in mid-2011, the military balance started to shift in the

latter's favor. The rebels were successful in taking control of Tripoli including the Bab al-Aziziya facility, where the Qaddafi's primary military headquarters existed. Qaddafi's forces responded to pro-reform movements very violently until the regime's collapse due to the Libyan military high patrimonialism, as a result of the use of foreign soldiers which they have no ties to the Libyan society. The elite sections of the Libyan military forces exhibited no restraint in their attempts to suppress the public rebellion since they were closely connected to Qaddafi and his family, also they lacked credibility outside of the regime. Although the Libyan uprising, such as the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, was eventually successful in overthrowing the government, this came at a significantly higher cost in terms of human lives: while the casualty figures of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt were in the hundreds, the number of casualties in Libya have been at least 30,000, with 50,000 wounded (Black, 2013). Yemeni students and civil society activists led the uprisings asking for political and economic changes as well as the overthrow of the Saleh dictatorship. Although the rebellion was first organized by students, opposition parties, and tribal, and religious leaders, the Yemeni military backed by the security forces reacted to the public revolt aggressively (Al-Faqih, 2011). Early in March 2011, the army attacked the university campus in Sanaa where protesters had camped, killing at least one protester with a live shot. When there was a second large-scale protest in the middle of March, the military fired on the crowd, allegedly killing 46 Yemeni citizens and injuring hundreds more (Al-Faqih, 2011).

The Yemeni example is generally comparable to Libya's due to the similarity in the two nations' civil-military relations. When faced with an anti-regime revolt in both countries, where patrimonialism is dominant, it leads to a situation akin to civil war. In both instances, it appears that a strong patrimonialism and close connection between the military institution and society have contributed to the armed forces fragmenting.

In sum, Tunisia owns its peaceful democratic transition largely to the military's neutral stance and its abandoning of the autocratic regime which left the latter with little choice other than resigning and allowing a new democratic

chapter in Tunisia's history to take place. When the military announced its neutrality during the protests, this greatly undermined Ben Ali's position vis-a-vis the protesters and thus, enabled the democratic transition of government. The case of Tunisia highlighted the TAF played a critical role in transitions from authoritarian regimes.

## **1.2 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY**

This thesis is structured to provide a comprehensive exploration of military neutrality in Tunisia during the Arab Spring. It begins with an introductory chapter that sets the stage by outlining the relevance of the study, the research questions, and the hypotheses. The introduction also provides an overview of the political and historical context of Tunisia. The next section delves into the theoretical framework, critically examining existing literature on military neutrality and challenging the prevailing explanations that attribute it to professionalism and institutionalization.

Instead, it proposes that coup-proofing strategies played a more significant role. Following this, the core analysis is presented in a chapter that combines both historical and descriptive approaches. This chapter offers a detailed historical analysis of civil-military relations in Tunisia under Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali. It examines three main coup-proofing strategies: political marginalization, downsizing of the military, and budgetary constraints. Additionally, the chapter highlights key events such as the Barakat Sahil affair, demonstrating its impact on military neutrality. The chapter also includes a descriptive analysis of public perception about the military after the Arab Spring, using data from the WVS to assess public trust and support for the military's withdrawal from political affairs.

The final chapter summarizes the key findings, emphasizing the importance of coup-proofing strategies in maintaining military neutrality. This structured approach ensures a thorough and coherent analysis of the factors influencing military neutral stance in Tunisia, providing valuable insights into

the role of coup-proofing strategies in shaping civil-military relations during political crises.

### **1.3 POLITICS OF MILITARY NEUTRALITY: THE CASE OF TUNISIA**

The TAF played a pivotal role during the Arab Spring, a period marked by significant political upheaval and demands for change across the Middle East and North Africa. Understanding the factors that contributed to the TAF's neutrality is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it provides insights into the dynamics of civil-military relations in Tunisia, a country that successfully transitioned to democracy amidst widespread instability. Secondly, it sheds light on the broader implications of military behavior in transitional societies, offering valuable lessons for other nations undergoing similar transformations.

The TAF's neutrality during the Arab Spring can be attributed to a combination of political, economic, social, and strategic factors. Historically, the political marginalization of the military under the regimes of Bourguiba and Ali played a crucial role. Both leaders employed coup-proofing strategies, such as limiting military funding and maintaining the size of the military small, to ensure the military remained apolitical and could not challenge political leadership (Brooks, 2013; Taylor, 2014).

Additionally, Tunisia faced severe economic challenges leading up to the Arab Spring, including high unemployment rates, especially among the youth, widespread corruption, and economic disparities. These issues fueled public discontent and massive protests. The military, aware of these legitimate grievances, chose not to suppress the protests violently, understanding that the protesters' demands were justified and resonated with broader societal issues (Gelvin, 2014; Brooks, 2013).

Another critical factor was the anticipation of the regime's collapse. As the protests gained momentum, it became increasingly clear that Ben Ali's regime was losing its grip on power. Sources indicate that Ben Ali anticipated his potential exile to Saudi Arabia as the protests during the Arab Spring gained momentum. Recordings broadcasted by the BBC in 2011 revealed

conversations between Ben Ali and his officials, where he discussed the deteriorating situation and his plans to leave the country. These recordings suggest that he was considering his options and was aware of the possibility of seeking exile (Africanews, 2022). The TAF likely considered that supporting a collapsing regime would not be in its best interest, thus opting to remain neutral and avoid confrontation with the protesters (Arieff, 2012; Saidin, 2018).

In the weeks leading up to the Arab Spring, Ben Ali made several promises of reforms and changes aimed at addressing the growing public discontent. On January 13, 2011, he appeared on national television and announced that he would not seek re-election in 2014. He also expressed regret over the deaths of protesters, vowed to stop the use of live ammunition by the police except in self-defense, promised to reduce food prices, and proposed loosening restrictions on Internet use. Despite these promises, they were perceived as too little, too late, and failed to quell the protests that ultimately led to his ousting (Université de Sherbrooke, 2011). These attempts at media and public communication played a role in shaping public opinion but were insufficient to stop the protests, further weakening his regime's position and making his departure seem inevitable (BBC News, 2011). The military therefore, observing the deteriorating situation and the growing public dissent, chose not to intervene due to the anticipation of the regime's collapse (Nassif, 2015).

This study aims to make a contribution by examining the role of military neutrality during transitions from authoritarianism in the Middle East, a relatively understudied topic. While acknowledging the broader political, economic, social, and strategic factors that contributed to the neutrality of the TAF, this thesis, through a historical analysis, specifically focuses on key factors that contributed to the neutrality of the TAF: low allocation of the defense budget, curbing military size, political marginalization, and significant incidents such as the Barakat al-Sahil affair, where numerous officers were arrested and tortured, leading to deep-seated resentment within the military. Additionally, this paper uses descriptive analysis to address Tunisians' attitudes towards and expectations of the TAF in the period following the Arab Spring.

While most studies analyze the role of the army during the revolution, they use military professionalism backed up by institutionalized norms and practices to explain the neutrality decision of the TAF. According to these analyses, the claimed professionalism of the armed forces during Ben Ali's rule explains the refusal to use violence on demonstrators and disengage in repression. These literatures were, at least partly, disproved once it became clear in the analysis of the institutional history of the TAF in this paper exhibits that they do not fulfill the characteristics of a professional army nor are marked by institutional performance, leading this thesis to find other ways to analyze what paved the way to the army's behavior than the professionalism theory.

This thesis claims that the neutrality of the Tunisian army can be explained, at least to some extent, by the coup-proofing strategies embraced by Tunisian governments in the past. This thesis diverts from the views that explain the neutrality of the Tunisian military with its high level of professionalism. Instead, it argues the Tunisian military was deliberately excluded from politics, which played a crucial role in its neutral stance during the Arab Spring, which followed with the dismantling of Ben Ali's government and the transition to democracy. This study also draws attention to the fact that Tunisians appreciate a neutral military and have a high sense of confidence in their armed services in the years after the Arab Spring.

For authoritarian regimes, the armed forces can be regarded as a double-edged sword. As evidenced by the high frequency of coups in authoritarian governments, militaries can intervene to suppress political tensions between rulers and the citizenry, yet form autocratic governments themselves or assist autocratic rulers in suppressing social unrest (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006; Bhav & Kingston, 2010). However, militaries can also create risks to the survival of the regime if they choose to line up with the protesters, as happened in the case of Tunisia during the Arab revolution (Albrecht, Croissant, & Lawson, 2016).

Ultimately, the military's stance can significantly shape the trajectory of political transformations, either reinforcing authoritarianism or facilitating democratization. Therefore, understanding the factors influencing military

loyalty and neutrality is crucial for predicting the outcomes of political uprisings in authoritarian contexts.

#### **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

To better understand the military neutrality observed in Tunisia during the Arab Spring, this thesis will delve into the impact of three significant coup-proofing strategies: the political marginalization of the military, the downsizing of the military, and the systematic reduction of military funds. These strategies, meticulously implemented by the regimes of Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, played a crucial role in shaping the neutral stance of the TAF during the pivotal moments of the Arab Spring. In addition, this paper will also examine the expectations and perceptions of the Tunisian populace towards the military in the post-uprising period, providing a comprehensive analysis of the evolving civil-military relations in Tunisia.

Answering these questions necessitates a thorough exploration of the TAF's institutional history, which is indispensable for understanding the nuanced civil-military relations experienced under the rule of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. This historical analysis will highlight how both presidents employed deliberate strategies to marginalize the military politically, restrict its budget, and limit its size, thereby preventing it from becoming a potent political force. Furthermore, the interactions between the military and society during these periods will be scrutinized to reveal how these strategies influenced public perception and trust in the military institution.

This thesis diverges from the existing analyses of scholars such as Bellin (2012) and Lutterbeck (2011), who attribute the neutrality of the TAF to their professionalization and high level of institutionalization. Bellin's (2012) and Lutterbeck's (2011) arguments suggest that the TAF's refusal to intervene violently during the protests was a result of its institutional characteristics and professional norms. However, this paper contends that the neutrality observed in the TAF during the Arab Spring can be more accurately explained by the highlighted coup-proofing strategies. These strategies, designed to prevent the

military from gaining political power, inadvertently fostered a culture of neutrality within the TAF. By focusing on these factors, this thesis aims to provide a more grounded and historically contextualized understanding of the military's behavior during the Arab Spring, challenging the prevailing narratives of professionalism and institutionalization.

Additionally, a pivotal event known as the Barakat Sahil affair will be examined to further illustrate the deep-rooted resentment within the military towards Ben Ali's regime. The Barakat Sahil affair, a false coup attempt orchestrated by domestic intelligence services, led to the arrest, torture, and marginalization of numerous military officers. This incident not only consolidated Ben Ali's power but also significantly impacted the morale and loyalty of the TAF. Interviews with retired military personnel reveal the profound effect of this affair on the officers' perceptions of the regime. For instance, Retired Colonel Munsif Zughlami, among others, discussed how the torture and humiliation experienced during the Barakat Sahil affair created long-lasting animosity towards the regime, further alienating the military from Ben Ali's government. These interviews underscore the personal and institutional grievances that contributed to the military's decision to remain neutral during the Arab Spring.

Through a detailed historical analysis and empirical examination, this research will uncover how the systematic marginalization, budgetary constraints, and downsizing implemented by Bourguiba and Ben Ali not only shaped the TAF's organizational structure but also influenced its political behavior. Additionally, this study will analyze data from the WVS to understand the public's perception of the military in the post-Arab Spring period, thereby providing insights into the evolving role and societal expectations of the Tunisian Armed Forces in a democratic context.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **2. GENERAL INFORMATION**

#### **2.1 THEORETICAL APPROACH**

This dissertation investigates the observed neutrality of the Tunisian military in the Arab revolution, it seeks to find out that the neutral stance of the Tunisian armed forces can be explained by three factors of coup-proofing: political marginalization, low allocation of defense budget, and limited military size. The academic community, however, maintains that the Tunisian military welcomed the pro-reform movement because of its high institutional degree and professionalization to assess such an assertion. Scholars and theorists such as Bellin (2012) and Lutterbeck (2011) overwhelmingly focused on the role of military professionalism and institutionalization to claim if an army would welcome a pro-reform movement or instead would choose to back up the regime.

To situate the thesis argument of the three mentioned factors within the literature, this chapter will provide an analysis of Bellin's (2012) and Lutterbeck's (2011) arguments to challenge their assumptions that professionalism and institutionalization can be factors to explain the neutrality of the Tunisian Armed forces during the Arab spring. The chapter begins by presenting an overview of the existing literature on the work of Bellin (2012) and Lutterbeck (2011). The chapter then proceeds to discuss the disagreement with their framework, highlighting the limitations and shortcomings of their analysis using historical events and practices of the TAF during the tenure of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Subsequently, the chapter proposes an alternative explanation for the military's neutrality, stressing the coup-proofing strategies that were used by the two presidents and drawing on a comparative analysis. Finally, it concludes with a general summary, emphasizing the significance of

the proposed explanation and its implications for understanding the TAF's neutrality during the Arab Spring.

In her article<sup>1</sup>, Bellin's (2012) analysis is regarded as a worthy contribution to understanding coercive the apparatus's role in the Arab Spring. She refers to the coercive apparatus as a state institution that can maintain order and security or repress on different occasions, she labeled the military, police, and intelligence as an instance. Bellin (2012) argues that the coercive apparatus's capacity to repress democratic initiatives coming for society in the Middle East is typically measured by four key features. She argues one of the features that shape the thinking of military soldiers about using lethal interventions against civilians is the structural character of the military, or in other words, the degree to which the military is institutionalized (Bellin, 2012).

Bellin (2012) addresses military institutionalization as where the recruitment and promotion is based on performance rather than nepotism, and where the merit-based hierarchy happens rather than cronyism. On the other hand, according to her definition of patrimonialism, it is a situation in which political loyalty and cronyism are dominant rather than merit, the line between public and private life is blurred, and economic corruption and cronyism are prevalent. As a result, the interests and fate of the military leadership are linked to the regime's permanence (Bellin, 2012). In the case of Tunisia, Eva claims that the Tunisian army is regarded as professional which was small and removed from politics. Moreover, she adds the Tunisian military was not the beneficiary of economic cronyism with the regime. According to her arguments, Tunisia's military's institutionalization and professionalization led to its ultimate refusal to fire on protesters and therefore chose to be neutral in determining the fate of the revolution. In the same vein, Lutterbeck (2011) in his book<sup>2</sup>, undertakes the same claim when he mentions the Tunisian military can be characterized as highly institutionalized due to its depoliticization

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<sup>1</sup> Bellin, Eva. "Reconsidering the Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring." *Comparative Politics* 44, no. 2 (2012): 127–49. <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041512798838021>.

<sup>2</sup> Lutterbeck, D. (2011). *Arab uprisings and armed forces: Between openness and resistance* (p. 69). Ubiquity Press.

(Lutterbeck, 2011). According to him, the Tunisian military remained sidelined during Ben Ali's rule and continues to operate as a primarily meritocratic and apolitical institution with weak ties to the regime. Lutterbeck (2011) argues that the Tunisian armed forces have from the beginning shown support for the Tunisians against the regime in 2010.

This thesis challenges the outcome stressed by Bellin (2012) and Lutterbeck (2011), wherein professionalization and institutionalization of the Tunisian army are regarded as a pivotal factor contributing to its neutrality in the Arab Spring. While the coup proofing theory strategies during the tenure of Bourguiba and Ben Ali serve as an alternative explanation in this case as a direct reason for the Tunisian army's neutrality. To begin with, going through certain historical records of the TAF will reveal that they lack the notion of a highly institutionalized and professionalized army. The incidents exhibit that the TAF engaged on several occasions in opening fire against their citizens which challenges the authors' claim of a neutral and professionalized military institution. In 1978 during Bourguiba's rule, where his regime and the unions clashed, known as Black Thursday, the army intervened vehemently to suppress labor union-led protests. This marked a negative turning point, the Tunisian military for the first time turned its firearms on its citizens, resulting in at least 100 fatalities (Vandewalle, 2014). The military's willingness to suppress Tunisians was further demonstrated in 1983 during the Bread Riots, where over half a million Tunisians protested against the high imposed prices on essential goods such as bread. In response to these demonstrations, the army once again intervened with brutal force, which resulted in the tragic loss of over 100 lives and 1,500 individuals wounded (Dakhli, 2021). These incidents stress the Tunisian military's clear willingness to use force and suppression in response to popular protests. Moreover, in 2008, under the authoritarian rule of President Ben Ali, the mining town of Gafsa<sup>3</sup> erupted in protests due to high unemployment rates and economic despair. The government's response was

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<sup>3</sup> Gafsa is the capital of the southwest of Tunisia and is both a historical oasis and home to the mining industry of Tunisia. The city had 111,170 inhabitants at the 2014 census. The city lies 369 km by road southwest of Tunis.

brutal through using deadly force by the military and security forces, whereas human rights organizations documented at least 13 fatalities and hundreds of injuries. Despite official denials, Amnesty International reported that the TAF used live ammunition against the protesters, which is a violation of human rights and a testament to the Ben Ali regime's desperation to maintain its grip on power (Amnesty International, 2018).

Secondly, the recruitment practices of the Tunisian military have been based on political loyalty and regional origins rather than merit or competence. Upon the TAF's formation following independence, the selection of general staff members and senior commanders was meticulously based on their party loyalty (Reese, 1970). Furthermore, senior officers within the general staff were selected from the society's economically dominant groups. For years, these officers exercised strict control over promotions and appointments, ensuring that individuals considered anti-regime did not gain powerful positions within the military forces (Nelson, 1986). This emphasis on loyalty and control within the TAF structure served to safeguard the newly independent nation against potential military coups or challenges to civilian authority. Under Ben Ali's leadership, cronyism flourished to an unprecedented degree. The marginalization theory does not hold for those in the upper classes of the military hierarchy, who were rewarded for their loyalty to Ben Ali with beneficial positions such as military attaché posts abroad and governmental positions. Furthermore, the advantages and connections gained by some individuals during Ben Ali's time in power were a result of the policies and favoritism that took place during Bourguiba's rule. Most of these privileged

individuals trace their roots to the coastal regions of Sahel<sup>4</sup> and Tunis<sup>5</sup>, including Ben Ali himself, who was born in Sousse<sup>6</sup>.

In contrast to the emphasis on professionalization and institutionalization by Bellin (2012) and Lutterbeck (2011), the coup proofing theory is suggested to offer a more compelling explanation for the Tunisian military's neutrality during the Arab Spring. As stated by Belkin and Schofer (2003) and Powell (2012), coup-proofing methods create institutional barriers that prevent military officers from effectively coordinating against political leaders. Studies conducted previously indicate that a political leader can use tactics known as "coup-proofing" to reduce the military's capacity to successfully orchestrate the overthrow of the leader through a coup (Quinlivan, 1999). Furthermore, according to Pilster and Bohmelt (2012), autocracies are more likely to carry out coup-proofing tactics since they are prone to a coup d'état. In the case of Tunisia, Bourguiba and Ben Ali sought to reduce the likelihood of military coups by implementing coup-proofing tactics such as marginalizing the military politically, allocating a low defense budget, and limiting its size. The Tunisian military's political marginalization and limited involvement in decision-making processes have diminished its ability to exert political influence. This marginalization, backed by the military's relatively small size and constrained budget, has effectively prevented it from posing a serious threat to Ben Ali's and Bourguiba's regimes.

The analysis presented in this chapter, which serves as a theoretical framework, demonstrates that the neutrality of the TAF during the Arab Spring was significantly influenced by coup-proofing strategies implemented by Bourguiba and Ben Ali. These strategies included political marginalization,

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<sup>4</sup> The Tunisian Sahel, also known as the Central East Tunisia, is an area of central eastern Tunisia that stretches along the eastern shore, from Hammamet in the north to Mahdia in the south, including the governorates of Monastir, Mahdia, Sfax, and Sousse.

<https://www.insightguides.com/destinations/africa-middle-east/tunisia/the-sahel>

<sup>5</sup> The Tunis region in Tunisia, also known as Tunis Governorate, is located in the north-eastern part of the country, on the Lake of Tunis. It is connected to the Gulf of Tunis, which is part of the Mediterranean Sea, by a canal. [https://pe.usps.com/text/imm/tz\\_010.htm](https://pe.usps.com/text/imm/tz_010.htm)

<sup>6</sup> The Sousse region in Tunisia, also known as the Sousse Governorate, is located in the north-eastern part of the country, on the Gulf of Hammamet, which is a part of the Mediterranean Sea.

limited budget allocations, and restricted involvement in political affairs, which collectively minimized the TAF's ability to challenge the regime.

The chapter critically evaluates existing literature, particularly the works of Bellin (2012) and Lutterbeck (2011), which argue that military professionalism and institutionalization were key to the TAF's neutrality. However, historical events such as the violent suppressions during Black Thursday, the Bread Riots, and the Gafsa protests illustrate the military's willingness to use force under regime directives, directly contradicting the claims of inherent military professionalism and institutionalization. These incidents reveal that the TAF was far from being a purely professional and institutionalized body; instead, it was deeply enmeshed in the political machinations of the regime, responding to orders that prioritized regime survival over ethical military conduct.

Moreover, the political loyalty and cronyism that characterized military recruitment and promotions further underscore the limitations of attributing the TAF's neutrality solely to professionalization and institutionalization. From its formation, the TAF's leadership structure was shaped by political loyalty and regional biases, ensuring that those in power within the military were aligned with the regime's interests. This alignment was crucial for the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, who used such strategies to maintain a tight grip on power, thereby reducing the risk of military-led coups.

This chapter, thus, sets the theoretical groundwork for understanding the complex interplay between political strategies and military behavior. Challenging the dominant narratives of professionalism and institutionalization opens up a more nuanced discussion about the factors that influence military neutrality in politically volatile contexts.

In the next chapter, the thesis will analyze historical data to evaluate the coup-proofing strategies of Bourguiba and Ben Ali and their impact on the Tunisian military's neutrality. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, it will examine policies, budget allocations, personnel decisions, and socio-political contexts shaping civil-military relations in Tunisia. Through military directives, official communications, and archival records, the thesis will

identify patterns showing how marginalization and administrative controls maintained military neutrality. Insights from secondary research, interviews, and comparative data will validate the findings, offering a robust explanation of the historical factors influencing the military's behavior during pivotal moments like the Arab Spring.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **3. THESIS STUDY (METHODOLOGY)**

The methodology of this study is structured to cover both historical and descriptive analyses, providing a comprehensive understanding of civil-military relations in Tunisia and public perceptions in the post-Arab Spring. The first section, Historical Analysis, outlines the broad context and methodologies used to examine the historical evolution of civil-military relations in Tunisia. This involves a detailed examination of the coup-proofing strategies of Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, and how these strategies influenced the military's stance of neutrality during pivotal events like the Arab Spring. The descriptive analysis is focused on examining Tunisian individuals' thoughts and beliefs about their country's military in the years following the Arab Spring, specifically in 2013 and 2019.

The second subsection, Materials Used for Historical Analysis, lists the diverse range of sources employed for historical analysis, including official reports, archival records, and secondary research from scholarly articles and books. For the Materials Used for Descriptive analysis, it details the primary data sources obtained from the WVS conducted in 2013 and 2019. These materials collectively provide a robust foundation for understanding both the historical context and contemporary societal attitudes toward the military.

The final section, Analysis Conducted, presents a detailed examination of the data gathered from these materials. The historical analysis, includes both qualitative and quantitative analysis of historical documents, budgetary allocations, and personnel records, alongside comparative tools to visualize differences and trends over time. The descriptive analysis involves a rigorous examination of the WVS data, employing descriptive statistical methods to identify trends and correlations, and using visual tools such as charts to illustrate the findings. This comprehensive approach ensures that the

conclusions drawn are well-supported by diverse and triangulated sources, offering a robust explanation of the historical factors influencing the Tunisian military's behavior and its contemporary perception by the public.

Then the chapter concludes with a comprehensive summary of the findings, integrating insights from both the historical and descriptive analyses to provide a cohesive understanding of the civil-military relations in Tunisia and their implications for the present and future.

### **3.1 HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**

Historical analysis is a method that involves examining past events to understand current phenomena and predict future trends. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the subject by analyzing the context, events, and developments over time (Tosh, 2015). By investigating the sequence of events and the circumstances surrounding them, historical analysis enables researchers to identify underlying causes and long-term impacts that may not be immediately apparent. This method not only helps in understanding how and why certain phenomena have occurred but also allows for the assessment of their implications for the present and future (Girgin & Krausmann, 2016). It provides a framework for examining the interconnectedness of various factors, such as political, social, economic, and cultural influences, that shape historical developments. Furthermore, historical analysis often involves a critical evaluation of primary and secondary sources, which can reveal biases, inconsistencies, and gaps in the existing literature.

By situating contemporary issues within their historical context, this method facilitates a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play (Bhat, Rajan, & Gamage, 2023). In this thesis, historical analysis is employed to argue that the coup-proofing strategies of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, played a significant and contributing role in explaining the Tunisian military's neutrality.

Using historical analysis allows for a detailed investigation into the civil-military relations during the reigns of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. This research

uncovers patterns, strategies, and policies that have shaped the military's neutrality by examining historical events. According to Thelen (2003), historical research offers insights into continuity and change over time, revealing how past decisions and actions influence current outcomes. This longitudinal perspective is crucial for understanding how the deliberate marginalization of the military by Bourguiba and Ben Ali contributed to the neutral stance of the TAF during the Arab Spring.

Moreover, historical analysis allows for the triangulation of various data sources, enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings. Cross-referencing different historical documents, reports, and secondary sources builds a comprehensive picture of the civil-military relations during the specified periods. This approach supports evidence from multiple sources, helping to identify biases and gaps in the existing literature (Johnson & Reynolds, 2012).

### **3.2 MATERIALS FOR HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**

The materials used for historical analysis in this thesis include a diverse range of reports, documents, and secondary research sources. These materials are selected to comprehensively examine the coup-proofing strategies and their impact on military neutrality.

The analysis first relies on official reports and documents. These include government documents, military records, and official statements from the Bourguiba and Ben Ali regimes. Primary sources such as defense budget reports, military directives, and official communications provide direct evidence of the policies and strategies implemented to control the military. For instance, budget allocations and personnel records illustrate how financial and administrative restrictions were used to marginalize the military.

Secondly, historical records and archives are employed. Archival materials, such as speeches offer insights into the personal motivations and intentions of the leaders. These records help to understand the broader context of the decisions made by Bourguiba and Ben Ali. For example, Bourguiba's

speech and Ben Ali's political strategies, as documented in archival records, shed light on their strategies to maintain control over the military.

The analysis will also make significant use of secondary research, including scholarly articles, books, and dissertations on Tunisian civil-military relations to provide a contextual background for the understanding of the coup-proofing strategies' broader implications.

Overall, the historical analysis employs various analytical tools, including comparative tables and bar charts, to analyze and compare the data. These tools help to visualize the differences and similarities between the periods of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, highlighting key trends and patterns. For instance, comparative tables and bar charts illustrate the defense budgets and military sizes across different countries, providing a clear picture of the marginalization strategies.

The analysis will make use of both quantitative and qualitative analytical tools. Quantitative data from sources such as the World Bank is used to analyze military expenditures and personnel numbers. This data provides an empirical basis for comparing the military sizes and budgets of Tunisia and other countries in the region, reinforcing the argument that financial and administrative restrictions contributed to the military's neutrality.

In addition, interviews with military personnel provide qualitative insights into the effects of coup-proofing strategies on military culture and behavior. These perspectives add depth to the quantitative data and help to validate the findings. For example, interviews with former military officers about their experiences and perceptions of political marginalization provide accounts that support the historical analysis.

By using these materials, this thesis conducts a thorough historical analysis that not only challenges existing explanations of military neutrality but also provides a nuanced understanding of the role of coup-proofing strategies. This method offers a comprehensive and reliable examination of the factors that have shaped the military's neutrality in Tunisia.

### **3.3 ANALYSIS CONDUCTED**

In this subsection, the focus is on the detailed analysis conducted using the historical data and materials previously discussed. The analysis aims to systematically evaluate the coup-proofing strategies employed by Bourguiba and Ben Ali and their impact on the Tunisian military's stance of neutrality. By employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, this research delves into the specific policies, budget allocations, personnel decisions, and broader socio-political contexts that shaped civil-military relations in Tunisia. Through a critical examination of military directives, official communications, and archival records, this analysis identifies key patterns and trends that illustrate how deliberate marginalization and administrative controls contributed to maintaining the military's neutrality. Additionally, the study incorporates insights from secondary research, interviews, and comparative data analysis to validate findings and provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between political leadership and military structure during the specified periods. This comprehensive approach ensures that the conclusions drawn are well-supported by diverse and triangulated sources, offering a robust explanation of the historical factors influencing the Tunisian military's behavior during pivotal moments such as the Arab Spring.

#### **3.3.1 An Overview of the Tunisian Armed Forces' History**

Under Bourguiba's leadership, the military was deliberately kept small, underfunded, and politically marginalized to prevent it from threatening the civilian government. The strategies and decisions made during Bourguiba's period laid the foundation for the military's role and structure in modern Tunisia. During Ben Ali's rule from 1987 to 2011, the Tunisian military was further marginalized to prevent it from posing a political threat, inheriting the same civil-military relations established by his predecessor Bourguiba. This period saw a reduction in the military's budget and size, along with a deliberate effort to keep it out of political affairs. This thesis reveals that the military's choice to stay neutral during the Arab Spring was impacted by various factors,

including coup-proofing measures and personal experiences such as the traumatic events of the Barakat al-Sahil affair under Ben Ali's regime. This affair, where numerous officers were arrested and tortured, led to a collective decision within the military to not intervene in the political unrest during the Arab Spring. Through a series of interviews analyzed in this chapter, retired officers have expressed that the armed forces were hesitant to risk their lives for a regime that consistently marginalized them and offered nothing in return. They also viewed the fall of Ben Ali as a form of retribution for the years of neglect and humiliation they had endured. Therefore, the military's neutrality during the Arab Spring can be seen as a result of long-standing grievances and strategic coup-proofing tactics.

### **3.3.1.1 The Tunisian Military Under Bourguiba's Rule**

Understanding the democratic wave in Tunisia requires first casting light on the historical role of the military and the civil-military relations imposed by the country's first post-independence leader, Bourguiba, known as "Combattant Suprême" (Supreme Combatant) (Bourguiba, n.d.). In 1934, Bourguiba with a group of young people, founded the "Le Parti du Neo-Destour" Neo-Destour party. The proclamation of independence on March 20, 1956, seems to have been hastened by the determination of Bourguiba. Following that, Bourguiba became the Prime Minister of Tunisia and afterward, the President in 1957, marking the beginning of his three-decade rule (Camau & Geisser, 2004). Throughout his presidency; the military had no role in the founding of the new state. Tunisians who had previously served in the Beylical Guard<sup>7</sup> and the French Army were recruited into the army in 1956 (Jebnoun 2014). As James Gelvin asserts (2014), "The Tunisian military came after the independence, therefore it did not fight for it." This sets the Tunisian Republic

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<sup>7</sup> The Beylical Guard (French: Garde beylicale) was an elite military unit established in Tunisia in the 17th century by the Husseinite dynasty. While not playing a major role in the 1956 independence movement itself, the Beylical Guard served as a source of recruitment for the newly formed Tunisian National Army. Many former members of the Guard, along with those who had served in the French Army, were integrated into the ranks of the new national force. This helped to establish a foundation of military experience and expertise for the young nation.

apart from previous republics in the area like Egypt, where the military staged a coup and installed the Free Officers, and Algeria, where the military played a huge role in the independence (Albrecht et al., 2016).

Migdal (1989) claims, “When independent leaders face a weak state at the outset of colonialism and society with powerful social groupings and political elites, their will to survive will overcome their desire to establish sound institutions. They are more likely to marginalize and undermine the state or produce fewer effective institutions so that no one group can grow strong enough to oppose them” This explains why Bourguiba, the country’s first president, believed that the military institution should have little influence on politics in the state.

During the tenure of Bourguiba, the TAF had been submissive to their oppressive ruler’s orders, in return, the army showed no mercy toward the protesters on two separate occasions when internal protests erupted notably between the 1970s and 1980s.

On the first occasion, when the domestic security forces could not halt the unrest, the Tunisian military obeyed the president’s orders to confront the Tunisians during the Black Thursday on January 26, 1978. Tunisia witnessed bloody events where the army and security forces opened fire on thousands of people from UGTT. They protested against the deteriorating political and economic conditions, hundreds of them were killed, and hundreds of others were arrested and tortured (Bouaziz, 2018). On the day of the protests, many demonstrators were killed and injured, and hundreds of UGTT members, including its leadership under Habib Achour, were arrested (Kerrou, 2015). The demonstrations led to bloody clashes with security forces, and the incident is still remembered as a significant event in Tunisian history.

In December 1983, the TAF once again followed the president’s order to open fire in the Bread Riots incident after doubling the bread’s price overnight (Ayari, 2011). The riots began in the market of the city of Douz, and quickly spread across the country which lasted barely ten days (Chabbi, 1999). The protests were violent, and over one hundred people lost their lives (Dakhli, 2021).

### **3.3.1.2 The Tunisian Military Under Ben Ali's Rule**

In November 1987, Ben Ali, wielding his position as Prime Minister, executed a well-planned, bloodless coup d'état (Hughes, 2011) that ousted President Bourguiba. Often dubbed the "Medical Coup" (Miller, 2014), this move bypassed armed confrontation and instead exploited legal and political loopholes. Ben Ali strategically used Article 57 of the Tunisian Constitution, which stipulated the President's removal in cases of "death, illness, or incapacity" (Constitution of Tunisia, 1959). A group of seven doctors, reportedly close to Ben Ali, provided a controversial medical report declaring Bourguiba is mentally unfit to govern due to advanced age and erratic behavior (Miller, 2014). This document, questioned by some for its objectivity (Hughes, 2011), served as the legal justification for Ben Ali's move.

Politically, Ben Ali had secured the backing of key figures within the ruling Destour Socialist Party and the military (Guelff, 2013). This ensured minimal resistance while he effectively controlled the media, framing the removal as a necessary step for national stability (M'heni, 2012). On November 7, 1987, Ben Ali formally announced Bourguiba's removal and assumed the presidency himself. While initial protests emerged, they were swiftly suppressed by the pre-prepared military (Guelff, 2013). Ben Ali kept the military's focus on foreign defense, infrastructure maintenance, and dealing with natural disasters (Blagojevic, 2021). To improve Tunisia's standing abroad, President Ali also made heavy use of the military for United Nations-led peacekeeping missions and humanitarian aid (Albrecht et al., 2016).

In border control, the army worked with the National Guard, a paramilitary organization under the Interior Ministry's command, as well as on its own in the southern regions of the country. The military's equipment was still outdated, and its training was inadequate. Most of Tunisia's troops, according to some foreign observers said that "The Tunisian military could not function successfully for any length of time" (Taylor, 2014).

President Ben Ali carried over the civil-military relations put in place by his predecessor, and the military continued to receive inadequate funding and

be intentionally kept out of political affairs to determine if any coup attempt could overthrow him, as he had done with former President Bourguiba.

### **3.3.2 The Factors that Contributed to TAF's Neutrality**

This section explores the various factors that led to the neutrality of the TAF during the Arab Spring. It sheds light on the coup-proofing strategies employed by Bourguiba and Ben Ali during their reigns.

#### **3.3.2.1 Political Marginalization Under Bourguiba's Rule**

The TAF can be described as an institution devoted only to defending the integrity of the country against all adversaries, both domestically and internationally. It most closely resembles the French army of the Third Republic in terms of its dedication to duty, God, and nation and is certainly both a supporter of and a subordinate to Bourguiba's values, he viewed the Tunisian military as an instrument not just for national security but also for development and modernization (Cooper, 2013). He envisioned the military as a "Force Vive", a dynamic force capable of driving progress on multiple fronts (Miller, 2014). This stemmed from several factors such as the Military's organizational capacity, with its hierarchical structure and disciplined workforce, offered a ready-made framework for mobilizing resources and manpower (Guellff, 2013). Bourguiba saw this as an advantage when tackling large-scale infrastructure projects such as dam construction or road development (M'heni, 2012). Moreover, the military, particularly through its engineering corps, possessed valuable technical skills and expertise crucial for infrastructure development (Hughes, 2011). This allowed them to contribute directly to building modern infrastructure and tackling logistical challenges. Finally, Bourguiba believed the military could inculcate positive values like discipline, hard work, and national pride within the broader population (Miller, 2014). He saw military service as a potential tool for social mobilization and civic education, promoting desired values to build a modern Tunisian society.

In a speech delivered in the Jordanian town of Jericho on March 3, 1965, Bourguiba emphasized his deliberate intention to marginalize the military to

prevent it from gaining political power. He stated, “The Tunisian people managed, at the end of twenty-five years of fighting, to create a solid and modern State on a Muslim land, free of any Co-sovereignty and any form of political or military domination” (Hamdi, 2023). This declaration was part of his broader vision to ensure that the military remained an instrument of national defense rather than a tool for political maneuvering. By publicly asserting this stance during his visit to the West Bank, Bourguiba aimed to solidify his commitment to a civilian-led government and to reassure both domestic and international audiences of his intentions to keep the military out of politics.

Bourguiba’s approach to coup-proofing involved several key measures to restrict the military’s influence and maintain strict civilian control. One significant strategy was limiting the military’s connections with political parties, including the dominant PSD. His efforts were part of a broader strategy to maintain control over the political landscape and prevent the military from becoming a potential source of political instability (Ware, L. B., 1985). Due to likely political threats, Bourguiba became increasingly wary of it conceivable to challenge his political power (Hughes, 2011; Miller, 2014). He established measures to prevent military interference in politics, restricting their involvement in domestic affairs and maintaining strict civilian control. Haunted by the fear of any potential coup attempt, Bourguiba was committed to maintaining stability and preventing the military from becoming a source of political coups. This was particularly relevant in the context of the region, where some neighboring countries experienced periods of political turmoil and military interventions (Jebnoun, 2014). Furthermore, Bourguiba, as the leader of the Neo Destour party (later renamed the Socialist Destourian Party), sought to consolidate political power within the party and maintain control over the state apparatus. Marginalizing the military was one way to ensure that the armed forces did not emerge as a political force that could challenge his leadership (Nassif, 2018).

Bourguiba’s underlying mistrust of the military was only increased by a 1962 coup plot involving many officers, which made him more determined to

keep the military purposefully out of political activities. He established several police and security agencies to serve as the state's coercive apparatus to keep this marginal role (Gaub, 2014). The coup attempt aimed to overthrow President Bourguiba and his regime, led by fighters of the Battle of Bizerte, were Tunisian civilians who had volunteered to fight alongside the Tunisian armed forces. After one of the most intense battles between France, the third military power in the world at the time, and Tunisia, which had a small number of untrained fighters in addition to civilian volunteers who gave their lives to defend their nation, the War broke out in July 1961. French planes, artillery, and missiles flattened the Tunisian city of Bizerte, filling the streets with thousands of corpses and destruction (Belkhodja, 1998). Since Bourguiba had begun a diplomatic agreement with Charles de Gaulle (Former President of France) a few months previously that called for the French soldiers to be evacuated from Bizerte, the war was seen as a pointless sacrifice that served solely to restore Bourguiba's reputation. One of the primary causes of opposition to the regime at the time was how Bourguiba handled the problem leading to a terrible loss of his people (Belkhodja, 1998).

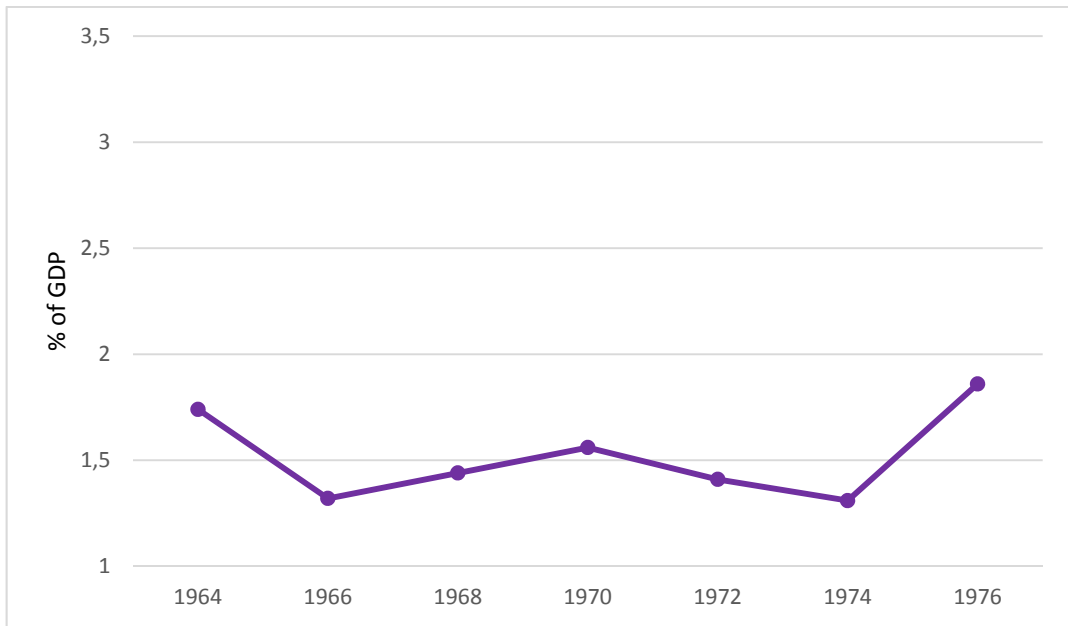
Following that, the notion of carrying out a conspiracy against Bourguiba relying on the armed forces began to emerge. Beginning in September 1962, networks of resistance fighters and links inside the military were formed to carry out armed action against the president (Boursali, 2006). In the following month of December, the coup attempt came into fail and had a dramatic outcome including, the execution of several of the conspirators in the army by order of the regime. Throughout his presidency, Bourguiba maintained tight control over the TAF, ensuring their unwavering obedience to his directives (Al-Bakuri, 2012).

In summary, Bourguiba's tenure as Tunisia's first post-independence leader was marked by his deliberate strategy to marginalize the military's influence in political affairs. This approach stemmed from his desire to establish a civilian-led government, free from political and military entanglements. Bourguiba's mistrust of the military was heightened by historical events such as the 1962 coup attempt, which further cemented his

resolve to maintain strict civilian control and prevent any potential threats to his authority. His vision for the TAF was to serve as an instrument for national defense and development, rather than a political entity. These marginalization policies had some harmful consequences such as weakening the institutional coherence and professionalism of the military. In the following section, this thesis explores how Bourguiba's strategies materialized through the deliberate limitation of the military's size and a consistently low defense budget in comparison to other countries in the MENA region, which further ensures the TAF's marginal role during his reign.

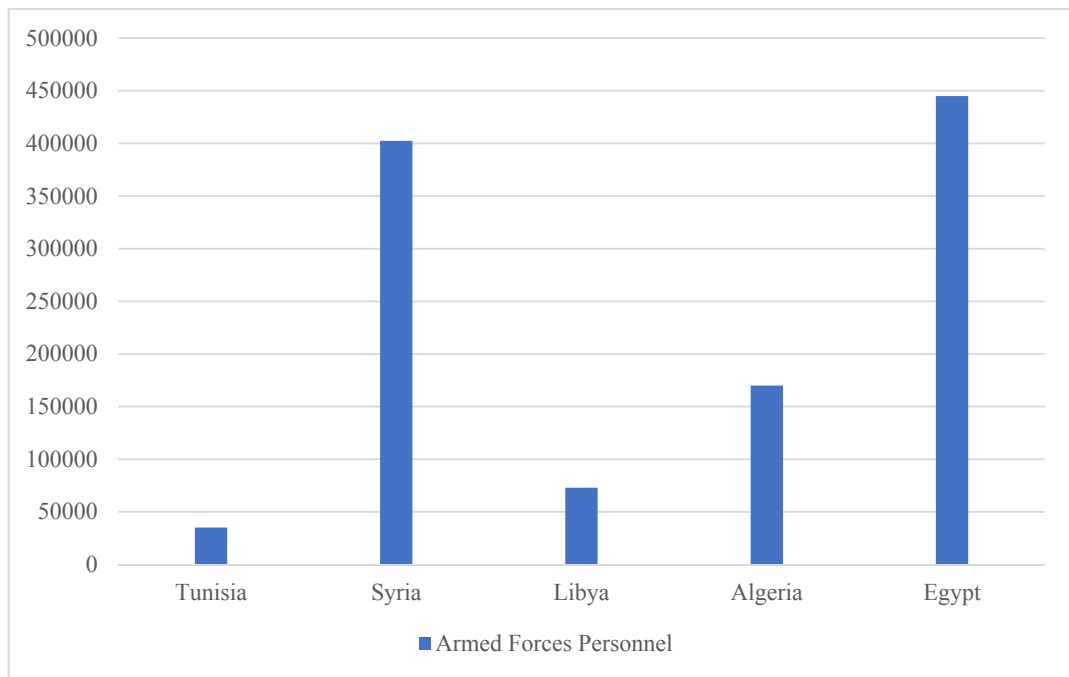
### **3.3.2.2 Limitation of the Military's Size and Low Defense Budget Under Bourguiba's Rule**

Janowitz (1988), asserts that political isolation and the small size of the military can significantly impact the allocation of the defense budget. In essence, the smaller the size of the military institution and the more it is marginalized from participating in political activities, the less the government will allocate from the GDP to the defense budget.



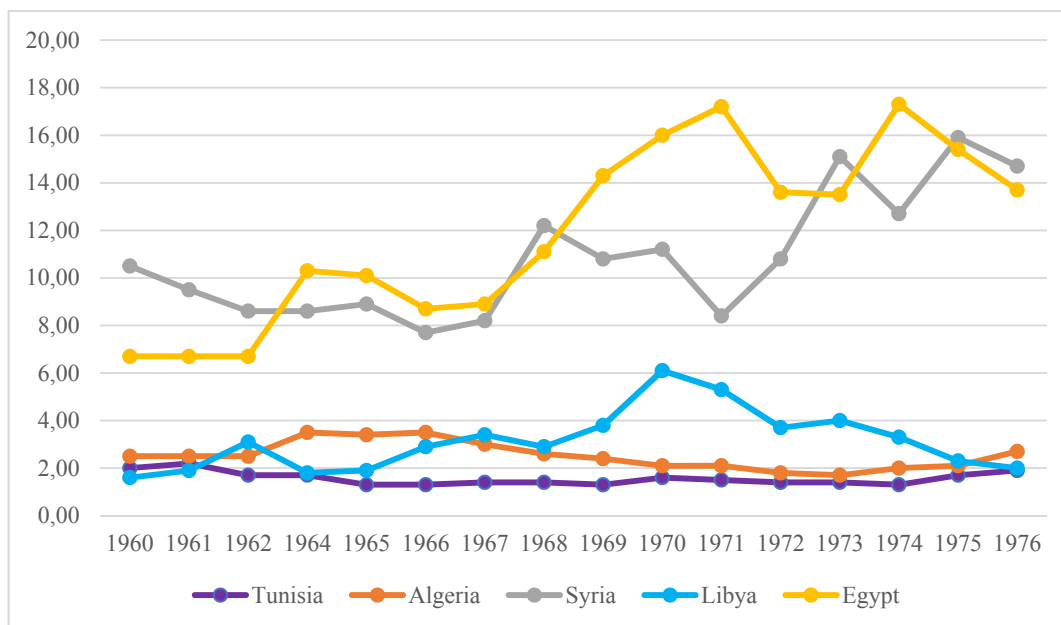
**Figure 3. 1** Tunisia Military Spending/Defense Budget from 1963 to 1976

During his 1963-1976 reign, President Bourguiba prioritized economic development and diplomatic moderation. This manifested in a consistently low defense budget, never exceeding 2% of Tunisia's GDP. World Bank data further reveals a deliberate cap on the military size, never exceeding 35,100 personnel between 1970 and 1987.



**Figure 3. 2** Tunisia’s Military Size in Comparison to Other Countries in the MENA Region

The comparison above is drawn to extrapolate the small size of the Tunisian military compared to the other countries of Syria, Libya, Algeria, and Egypt, highlighting significant variations among these countries. Tunisia has the smallest military with approximately 35,100 personnel. In contrast, Syria’s military size is significantly larger at around 402,500 personnel. Libya’s military, with approximately 73,000 personnel, is larger than Tunisia’s but smaller than those of Syria, Algeria, and Egypt. Algeria, with around 170,000 personnel, has a substantial military size that aligns with its significant defense budget of \$10 billion. Finally, Egypt’s military is the largest among the compared countries, with approximately 445,000 personnel.



**Figure 3. 3** Military Expenditure (% of GDP) –Tunisia, Algeria, Syria, Libya, and Egypt 1960-1976

Compared to Algeria during the same period, Tunisia under Bourguiba displayed a markedly lower defense budget allocation. While Algeria averaged a significant 2.38% of GDP, Tunisia’s average was 1.56%, consistently remaining below 2% throughout the data frame. This stark contrast aligns with Bourguiba’s strategy of marginalizing the military. In contrast to Syria during the same period, Tunisia under Bourguiba displayed significantly lower defense budget allocation. Syria maintained a higher average military expenditure, often exceeding 10% of GDP, with notable peaks such as 12.2% in 1968 and 15.1% in 1973. This high level of spending contrasts sharply with Tunisia’s average of 1.56%, highlighting Bourguiba’s consistent approach to keeping military expenditure low as part of his strategy to marginalize the military.

Libya, like Syria, also had a much higher and more variable military expenditure compared to Tunisia. Starting from a low of 1.6% in 1960, Libya’s spending saw significant peaks, reaching as high as 15.9% in 1975. This considerable fluctuation, with peaks like 15.1% in 1973, suggests periods of intense military investment which were absent in Tunisia’s more stable and

lower spending. This again underscores Bourguiba's deliberate effort to limit military influence by restricting its financial resources.

Egypt's military expenditure was consistently the highest among the countries compared. Beginning at 6.7% in 1962, Egypt's spending rapidly increased, peaking at 17.3% in 1974. Egypt maintained high levels of military expenditure throughout the period, reflecting a strong emphasis on military readiness and influence. In stark contrast, Tunisia's spending remained below 2% of GDP, reflecting a strategic choice by Bourguiba to keep the military subordinate and less influential in political affairs.

To sum up, as the size of the military increases and is deeply involved in politics, it is expected that the share of allocations to the armed forces is also likely to increase. President Bourguiba chose to marginalize the military from taking part in political activities, as well as cut its size and share of allocations following the conspiracy attempt that took place in 1962.

Bourguiba's political maneuvering effectively neutralized the Tunisian military as a coup threat, employing a well-planned approach that minimized their size, resources, and political influence. This strategy proved effective in shielding his regime from military intervention for decades. However, the Black Thursday and Bread Riot riots cast a dark shadow over this success, exhibiting a mark of violence and unprofessionalism within the institution Bourguiba sought to marginalize. This irony underscores the enduring tension between regime security and institutional legitimacy. While Bourguiba's tactics kept the military sidelined, they arguably failed to foster a truly professional and accountable armed forces, one capable of upholding democratic values.

Surprisingly, Tunisia's coup-proof strategies became the very instrument for its leader's overthrow. In 1987, President Bourguiba's ambitious Prime Minister, Ben Ali, succeeded in a bloodless "medical coup" despite the president's careful use of coup-proofing strategies to sideline the army. Ben Ali took advantage of Bourguiba's deteriorating health and growing general discontent to organize important military members into his circle, therefore, using Tunisia's constitution drafted and adopted by Bourguiba himself to declare him unfit for government. As a result, the organization Bourguiba

aimed to undermine paradoxically contributed to his unanticipated departure, exposing the flaws in the most applied coup-proofing tactics.

During Ben Ali's rule from 1987 to 2011, the Tunisian military was systematically marginalized to prevent it from posing a political threat, inheriting the same civil-military relations established by his predecessor Bourguiba. This period saw a reduction in the military's budget and size, along with a deliberate effort to keep it out of political affairs. Understanding these strategies is essential for comprehending the TAF's neutral behavior during the Arab Spring. The following section examines the policies and their impact on the military's role during this critical era.

### **3.3.2.3 Political Marginalization Under Ben Ali's Rule**

Ben Ali for twenty-three years, ruled Tunisia with an iron fist and with the fear that any military coup attempt could take place. Ben Ali carefully planned to marginalize the military to remain in power. (Ware, 1988) He kept the armed forces small and underfunded, effectively limiting their potential influence. Ben Ali planned to disallow military officers from reaching key government positions and political decision-making processes, further isolating them from political circles (Nassif, 2015). Within the military, promotions were based on absolute loyalty rather than skill, guaranteeing that his presidency would be followed without question rather than as a threat (Taylor, 2014). Ben Ali strengthened his position by giving the Ministry of Interior and intelligence services more authority, which effectively created a strong check on the military's potential influence (Nassif, 2015). Although this strategy effectively offset the military's potential for a coup, it planted the seeds for unfavorable long-term effects which eventually will be exhibited in the Arab Spring revolution. Under the two articles of the 1959 Tunisian constitution, Ben Ali was able to control the Tunisian armed forces and appoint high military officials as the president of the Tunisian republic.

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*Article 44 of the Tunisian Constitution*

*“The President of the Republic is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.”*

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*Article 55 of the Tunisian Constitution*

*“The President of the Republic appoints high civilian and military officials, on the recommendation of the Government.”*

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Article 44 of the Tunisian Constitution gave the president the power to be the commander-in-chief of the Tunisian armed forces. By using this constitutional provision, Ben Ali was able to maintain control over the military and prevent it from becoming too powerful. Besides, article 55 of the Tunisian Constitution stipulated that the President of the Republic has the power to appoint high-ranking military and civilian personnel at the government’s recommendation. This article gives the President considerable authority in the nomination of important officials, especially military leaders (Constitution of Tunisia, 1959). Additionally, President Ben Ali was able to appoint notable officers to ministerial and diplomatic positions that, under Bourguiba, had traditionally been held by civilians. However, most of the military personnel whom Ben Ali selected for civilian positions belonged to his circle of friends; In other words, he rewarded his loyalists, not the military institution (Nassif, 2015).

Interviews with military experts reveal the marginalization of the military and its impact on the TAF intervention during the Arab Spring. In private interviews with Nassif (2015), a retired chief of staff of the navy highlighted widespread dissatisfaction within the officer corps, attributing their reluctance to intervene against protesters to the regime’s consistent marginalization and neglect of the military. Similarly, retired Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad

Ahmed emphasized deep resentment within the military due to their exclusion from key government positions and political decision-making processes, fostering a sense of personal marginalization (Nassif, 2015).

A significant incident in 1991, known as the Barakat Sahil affair, reveals the deep resentment within the military corps, which predictably influenced their stance against Ben Ali's regime during the Arab Spring. The Barakat al-Sahil affair was a pivotal political event in Tunisia that involved a false coup attempt orchestrated by domestic intelligence services to consolidate power and curry favor with President Ben Ali. This incident led to the marginalization of the military in favor of the security establishment, profoundly impacting the balance of power within Tunisia's political and military institutions (Stramer-Smith, 2018). Ben Ali used this affair as part of a broader strategy to root out Islamist factions within the army, particularly targeting the al-Nahda party (Nassif, 2015). Analysis of interinstitutional rivalry during Ben Ali's tenure reveals the strategic manipulation of the military and the police to maintain control (Buehler & Ibraheem, 2017). Additionally, the affair exemplified how domestic intelligence operations were used to win political favor and solidify the regime's dominance (Volpi, 2018).

Retired Colonel Munsif Zughlami discussed how the torture and humiliation experienced during the Barakat Sahil affair created long-lasting animosity towards the regime, further alienating the military from Ben Ali's government (Nassif, 2015). Another anonymous retired colonel corroborated these sentiments, highlighting the pervasive distrust and animosity towards both the regime and the police force, which were seen as oppressive and corrupt (Nassif, 2015). Retired Colonel Bashir bin 'Aissa noted the lack of personal relations between Ben Ali and the officers, which led to deep-seated distrust and reluctance to support the regime during the uprising (Nassif, 2015). The experience of retired Colonel-Major Hasin Bzaniyya also underlined the impact of the Barakat Sahil affair on the military's morale and loyalty, as officers felt betrayed by the regime they were supposed to serve (Nassif, 2015). These interviews collectively illustrate how the political marginalization and mistreatment of the Tunisian armed forces under Ben Ali's regime fostered a

climate of resentment and non-cooperation, ultimately leading to their decision to refrain from intervening and staying neutral during the Arab Spring uprising.

To conclude, the marginalization of the Tunisian military during Ben Ali's rule from 1987 to 2011 played a crucial role in shaping the military's response during the Arab Spring. Ben Ali's deliberate strategies, inherited from his predecessor Bourguiba, keeping it out of political affairs, and ensuring promotions were based on loyalty rather than merit. This systematic sidelining was designed to prevent any potential military coup, effectively limiting the military's influence in political matters.

The Barakat Sahil affair in 1991 further exacerbated the military's resentment towards Ben Ali's regime. This incident, involving a false coup attempt orchestrated by domestic intelligence to consolidate Ben Ali's power, highlighted the deep distrust and animosity within the military. The affair's manipulation and the subsequent marginalization of the military in favor of the security establishment profoundly impacted the balance of power within Tunisia's political and military institutions.

Interviews with retired military personnel, including high-ranking officers, reveal a sense of dissatisfaction and betrayal within the armed forces. The consistent exclusion of military officers from key government positions and political decision-making processes fostered a feeling of personal and institutional marginalization. These factors collectively contributed to the military's unwillingness to intervene against protesters during the Arab Spring, ultimately leading to their decision to remain neutral.

The analysis of Ben Ali's tenure underscores the long-term consequences of his strategies, which, while successful in preventing a military coup, planted the seeds for unfavorable outcomes during the Arab Spring. The political marginalization and mistreatment of the TAF under Ben Ali's regime created a climate of resentment and non-cooperation, significantly influencing the military's behavior during this critical period in Tunisia's history.

The following subsection examines how this marginalization involved significantly limiting the defense budget and the size of the armed forces.

Compared to its regional counterparts, Tunisia’s military was the smallest and least funded, with only 1.5% of the GDP allocated to defense.

### **3.3.2.4 Limitation of the Military’s Size and Low Defense Budget Under Ben Ali’s Rule**

Even though Libya has a population that is less than half that of Tunisia, its armed forces are more than twice as large. The Tunisian military continues to be the smallest and least funded among its regional counterparts. Under the rule of Ben Ali, the defense budget for Tunisia was significantly constrained, accounting for only 1.5% of the GDP. This limited allocation of resources ensured that the military remained relatively small and underfunded, with a total military expenditure of only \$0.57 billion and a force size of 35,000 personnel. This strategic marginalization was part of a broader coup-proofing strategy aimed at maintaining the military’s focus on national defense rather than internal political affairs, thereby minimizing its potential as a threat to Ben Ali’s regime (Lutterbeck, 2011).

**Table 3. 1** Tunisia’s Military Under Ben Ali

|                             |                                      |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Country</b>              | Tunisia                              |
| <b>President</b>            | Zine El Abidine Ben Ali              |
| <b>In office</b>            | 7 November 1987 –<br>14 January 2011 |
| <b>Population</b>           | 10.8M                                |
| <b>Size of the Military</b> | 35,000                               |
| <b>Military expenditure</b> | \$0.57B                              |
| <b>Percentage of GDP</b>    | 1.5%                                 |

The three coup-proofing strategies employed by Tunisian leaders Bourguiba and Ben Ali: political marginalization, maintaining a small military size, and restricting the military budget played a crucial role in ensuring the TAF remained neutral during anti-government protests such as the Arab Spring. Political marginalization involved the exclusion of the military from political decision-making processes and key government positions, thereby preventing it from gaining significant influence or forming political alliances that could threaten the regime (Nassif, 2015). By keeping the military small and underfunded, both Bourguiba and Ben Ali ensured that the armed forces lacked the capacity and resources to challenge their reigns. However, Bourguiba was ousted in a bloodless coup in 1987 due to his deteriorating health and alleged senility, led by his Prime Minister Ben Ali.

With the TAF's size never exceeding 35,100 personnel and the defense budget consistently below 2% of GDP (World Bank, 2023), this deliberate underfunding and marginalization fostered resentment and dissatisfaction within the military ranks, particularly highlighted by the Barakat al-Sahil affair, where numerous officers were arrested and tortured, deepening the military's mistrust of the regime (Nassif, 2015). During the Arab Spring, these accumulated grievances led to the TAF's decision to remain neutral, seeing no benefit in defending a regime that had consistently marginalized and neglected them. This strategic neutrality can be understood as a culmination of long-term coup-proofing tactics that effectively disempowered the military, ensuring it posed no threat to the regime but also leaving it disinclined to intervene in defense of the government during times of political upheaval (Lutterbeck, 2011; Blagojevic, 2021).

To further reinforce the notion that the coup-proofing strategies provide a more reasonable explanation for the Tunisian military's neutrality during the Arab Spring, a comparative analysis has been gathered of TAF and other militaries in the MENA region.

**Table 3. 2** Military Neutrality in the Arab Spring: Comparative Analysis of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Algeria

| Country | Defense budget (IN USD) | Political marginalization  | Size of military (Personnel) | Alignment During Arab Spring                         |
|---------|-------------------------|--|------------------------------|--|
| Tunisia | \$550 million           | High - Limited political involvement; sidelined from decision-making                             | 35.000                       | Stayed Neutral                                       |
| Egypt   | \$4.3 billion           | Low - Significant political influence; military-led governance                                   | 468.500                      | Mixed (backed regime and maintained some neutrality) |
| Syria   | \$1.8 billion           | Low - Integrated into political sphere; key regime supporter                                     | 295.000                      | Backed up the regime                                 |
| Libya   | \$1.0 billion           | Low - Military intertwined with regime security apparatus  | 76.000                       | Backed up the regime                                 |
| Algeria | \$10 billion            | Medium - Military has political influence but remains somewhat distinct from civilian governance | 130.000                      | Mixed (backed regime and maintained some neutrality) |

In the case of the Tunisian military, the defense budget was relatively low, its size was small, and it was largely excluded from the political sphere. This exclusion contributed to the Tunisian military’s neutrality during the Arab revolution. In stark contrast, the Syrian military’s response was fatal and deadly, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of civilians (Taylor, 2014). The Syrian army’s loyalty to President Bashar al-Assad’s regime explains its high level of politicization, medium-sized force, and substantial defense budget. Similarly, the Libyan military supported its regime during the Arab Spring due to the strong connection between the two institutions (Black, 2013). Libya’s high defense budget and medium-sized military, coupled with its deep involvement in politics, led to a lack of neutrality during the uprisings. The Egyptian military presents an interesting case. With a high defense budget and a large force, the military initially maintained neutrality during the Arab Spring. It allowed the Egyptian people to protest without significant confrontations between the armed forces and protesters demanding the

overthrow of Mubarak's regime. However, following Mubarak's departure, the Egyptian armed forces took control of the regime and led the transitional phase (Nepstad, 2013).

In Algeria, the military played a crucial role in maintaining regime stability and overseeing the political transition, resulting in a medium level of neutrality compared to the Tunisian military. With a substantial defense budget of \$10 billion and a force of 130,000 personnel, the Algerian military acted as a stabilizing force by managing unrest through political concessions, increased public spending, and a strong security presence (Volpi, 2013). While the Algerian military did not remain completely neutral, its involvement was characterized by a strategic balance between maintaining order and avoiding confrontation with protesters. Unlike in Tunisia, the Algerian military managed protests through a combination of political concessions and increased public spending to quell unrest. The regime, backed by the military, promised reforms and subsidies to appease protesters, avoiding the large-scale violence seen in other Arab Spring countries like Syria and Libya (Volpi, 2013; Nassif, 2015).

The comprehensive analysis presented in this historical analysis elucidates the pivotal role of coup-proofing strategies in shaping the TAF's stance on neutrality during the Arab Spring. By marginalizing the military through political exclusion, limited budget allocations, and restricted involvement in political affairs, both Bourguiba and Ben Ali effectively minimized the military's capacity to challenge their regimes. This deliberate marginalization backed up with traumatic incidents like the Barakat al-Sahil affair, fostered a deep-seated resentment within the military ranks. This thesis argues the TAF's decision to remain neutral during the Arab Spring was not merely attributed to a combination of political, economic, social, and strategic factors, but a combination of long-standing grievances and strategic coup-proofing measures. This analysis underscores the intricate interplay between historical policies and contemporary military behavior, offering a nuanced understanding of the factors that contributed to the military's non-interventionist stance during a period of significant political upheaval in Tunisia.

The historical analysis has provided a comprehensive understanding of the strategic decisions and coup-proofing measures implemented by Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali. These coup-proofing tactics, including political marginalization, limited budget allocations, and restricted military involvement in political affairs, were pivotal in shaping the military's stance during the Arab Spring. This historical context sets the stage for examining the reflection of the TAF's neutrality on public perceptions. Moving from the examination of past events and policies, the descriptive analysis will delve into the contemporary reflections and sentiments of the Tunisian people regarding their military stance. By analyzing data from the World Values Survey collected in 2013 and 2019, the descriptive analysis offers insights into how the military's neutrality, a result of historical strategies and events, has shaped public opinion and trust in the post-Arab Spring period. This transition from historical factors to present-day perceptions allows for a thorough understanding of the military's role and its impact on Tunisian society, highlighting the enduring effects of past policies on current public attitudes.

### **3.4 DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS**

This study employed descriptive analysis to examine Tunisian individuals' thoughts and beliefs about their country's military in the years following the Arab Spring, namely in 2013 and 2019. The goal was to determine the influence of TAF's neutrality on the sentiments and perceptions of Tunisians. The current inquiry was especially well-suited to a secondary examination of data from the WVS. The statistics from the WVS projects were a reliable and thorough compilation of raw data regarding the Tunisian public's perceptions of the military institution in the post-Arab Spring period. These data were publicly available and downloadable in a sizable collection of data tables organized by data gathering wave and particular survey items. Since most of the data was available online, gathering the information involved obtaining the necessary raw data, sorting it, and performing the analysis. The usage of this data adheres to the guidelines provided by the WVS, which allow

for academic and research purposes without requiring additional permissions, as the data is openly accessible to the public.

In this study, two questionnaire items from two WVS data-collecting waves of individual respondents related to the trust of the Tunisian people in the military institution and their perspective of whether the military should be involved in politics or not were investigated. While conducting interviews for the WVS studies, the WVS researchers arranged subject responses using a range of numerical scales rather than verbally recording the participants' answers to open-ended questions. Since qualitative methodology often analyzes participants' comments to build themes whereas quantitative methodology utilizes statistics to identify correlations between variables, this data-gathering approach suited itself more to quantitative analytic methodology than qualitative methodology (Neuman, 2011). Quantitative analysis is more suitable than qualitative analysis for the research topic in the current study since it requires the examination of published data to make inferences about the correlations between the variables.

For secondary analysis, the present raw data were in the form of numerical answers to two individual questionnaire items from the WVS website. To address Tunisians' perception of the armed forces in terms of their trust degree scale and the idea of depoliticization of the military from two WVS data collection waves, this study used the quantitative method. Furthermore, this study is made to compare the individuals' responses to two questionnaire items through two data-collecting waves. The population and time covered by WVS are the only ones available online for this paper.

### **3.5 MATERIALS FOR DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS**

The materials used for descriptive analysis in this thesis include a variety of data sources primarily obtained from the WVS. These materials were selected to comprehensively examine Tunisian individuals' thoughts and beliefs about their country's military in the years following the Arab Spring, specifically in 2013 and 2019. The primary data for the descriptive analysis

comes from the WVS waves conducted in 2013 and 2019. The WVS is a reputable global research project that provides a comprehensive collection of raw data regarding public perceptions on various social, political, and economic issues (WVS, n.d.). For this study, two specific questionnaire items from the WVS were analyzed: the public’s confidence in the Armed Forces and their views on the military’s involvement in politics. The data was collected through face-to-face interviews with a random sample of Tunisian nationals aged 18 to 65, representing both urban and rural areas. The specific questionnaire items used in this study include the public’s opinion on having the army rule and their confidence in the TAF, with responses quantified using Likert scales and other numerical scales.

**Table 3. 3** Questionnaire Items

| <b>Questionnaire Items</b> |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1.                         | Political system: Having the army rule. |
| 2.                         | Confidence in the Armed Forces.         |

The sample for the WVS data collection included 1205 participants in 2013 and 1208 participants in 2019, totaling 2413 respondents. The demographic information collected alongside the survey responses included marital status, number of children, household size, level of education, and employment status. This demographic data helped ensure a representative sample of the Tunisian population (WVS, n.d.). Data collection was carried out by trained interviewers from the WVS project who conducted face-to-face interviews with selected participants from various regions and population sizes. The interviews were conducted daily from 8:00 am to 9:00 pm, including weekends, to maximize the diversity and availability of respondents. The WVS researchers ensured rigorous data collection procedures, maintaining high standards for validity and reliability. The data were publicly available and downloadable in a sizable collection of data tables organized by data gathering

wave and particular survey items. Since most of the data was available online, gathering the information involved obtaining the necessary raw data, sorting it, and performing the analysis. The usage of this data adheres to the guidelines provided by the WVS, which allow for academic and research purposes without requiring additional permissions, as the data is openly accessible to the public (WVS ,n.d.).

**Table 3. 4** Data collection waves for the WVS 2010-2014 and 2017-2022

|                | <b>2010-2014</b> | <b>2017-2022</b> |
|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| <b>Country</b> | WVS              | WVS              |
| <b>Tunisia</b> | 2013             | 2019             |

**Table 3. 5** Sample Size (Percent) and Data Collection Wave

| <b>Waves</b>         | <b>Wave 6 (2010-14)</b> | <b>Wave 7 (2017-22)</b> |         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------|
| <b>Country</b>       | WVS                     | WVS                     |         |
| <b>Tunisia</b>       | 1205                    | 1208                    | 2413    |
| <b>Total by Wave</b> | (≈50%)                  | (≈50%)                  | (≈100%) |

**Table 3. 6** WVS Data Collection: Item Numbering and Order Across Two Waves

| <b>Questionnaire items</b> |  | <b>2010-2014</b> | <b>2017-2022</b> |
|----------------------------|--|------------------|------------------|
|                            |  | <b>WVS</b>       | <b>WVS</b>       |
| 1.                         | Political system: having the army rule | V129             | Q237             |
| 2.                         | Confidence in the armed forces         | V109             | Q65              |

The raw data from the WVS was sorted and analyzed using quantitative methods to identify correlations and trends between the variables. Descriptive statistics were used to compare the responses from the two survey waves,

highlighting changes in public opinion over time. Visual tools such as charts were employed to illustrate the findings, providing a clear and accessible representation of the data. By utilizing these materials, the descriptive analysis in this thesis provides valuable insights into how the neutrality of the TAF as a contributing factor has influenced public sentiment in the post-Arab Spring period. The comprehensive data from the WVS enables a thorough examination of the relationship between historical strategies and contemporary public perceptions, offering a nuanced understanding of the military's role in Tunisian society (WVS, n.d.).

### **3.6 ANALYSIS CONDUCTED**

In this subsection, the focus is on the detailed analysis conducted using the descriptive data and materials previously discussed. The analysis aims to evaluate public perceptions of the TAF following the Arab Spring, particularly in 2013 and 2019. By employing quantitative methods, this research delves into the specific attitudes of Tunisian citizens toward military rule and their confidence in the armed forces. Through an examination of data from the WVS, this analysis identifies key trends and shifts in public opinion, illustrating how the TAF's neutrality during the Arab Spring influenced contemporary societal attitudes. Additionally, the study incorporates insights from demographic variables to validate findings and provide an understanding of the relationship between the military's stance of neutrality and public trust.

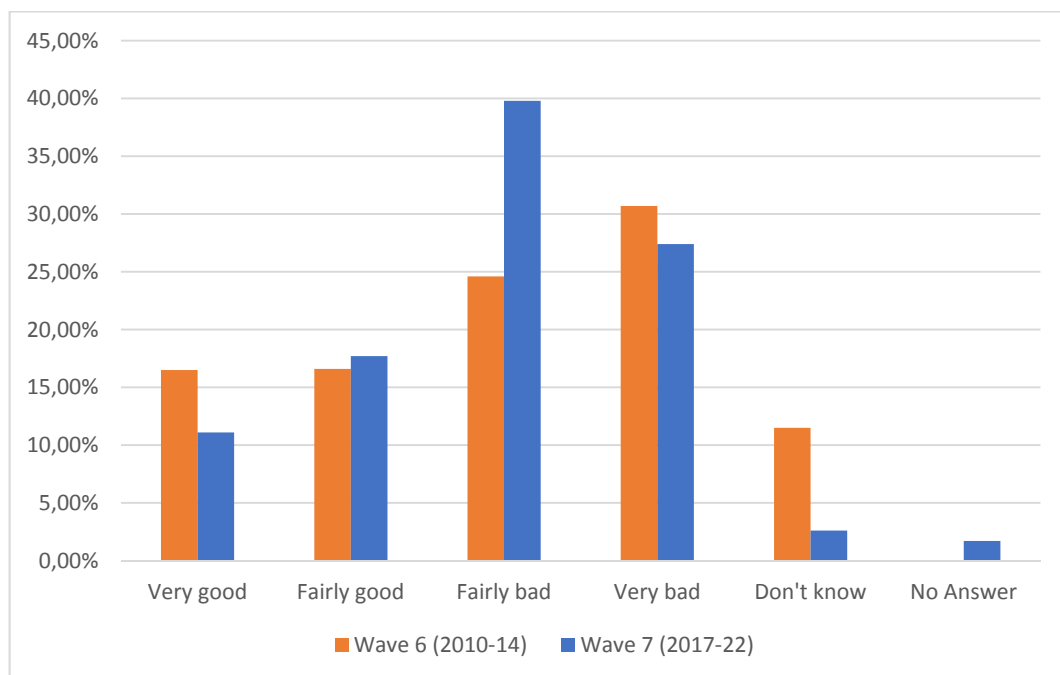
#### **3.6.1 Having the Army Ruling**

In the 2013 survey that contains 1205 respondents, 16.5% of participants considered the idea of military rule as "Very Good", while an equal percentage of 16.5% considered it "Fairly Good". On the other hand, 24.6% of respondents deemed it as "Fairly Bad", and the largest proportion, 30.7%, considered it as "Very Bad". Additionally, approximately 5% of respondents were uncertain "Don't know", and about 1% provided no answer.

In the 2019 survey, there was a tangible shift in opinions. The percentage of Tunisians who deemed military rule as “Very Good” dropped to 11.1%, marking a decrease in support. Similarly, those endorsing it as “Fairly Good” slightly increased to 17.5%. Intriguingly, the disapproval rates surged significantly, with 39.8% expressing that military rule was “Fairly Bad” and 27.7% asserting it was “Very Bad”. The uncertainty “Don’t know” decreased to about 2%, and the proportion of respondents providing no answer remained consistent at around 1%

(Figure 3.4).

The stark changes in these responses over the six years from 2013 to 2019 underscore a noteworthy transformation in the Tunisian public sentiment toward military involvement. The decline in the proportion of respondents expressing strong support, combined with a substantial increase in those opposing military rule, suggests a significant shift in public opinion. This shift is further emphasized by the decreased uncertainty and consistent rate of non-responses, indicating that opinions on military rule have become more defined and opposition has grown stronger over time.



**Figure 3. 4** Having the Army Ruling

### **3.6.2 Confidence in the Armed Forces**

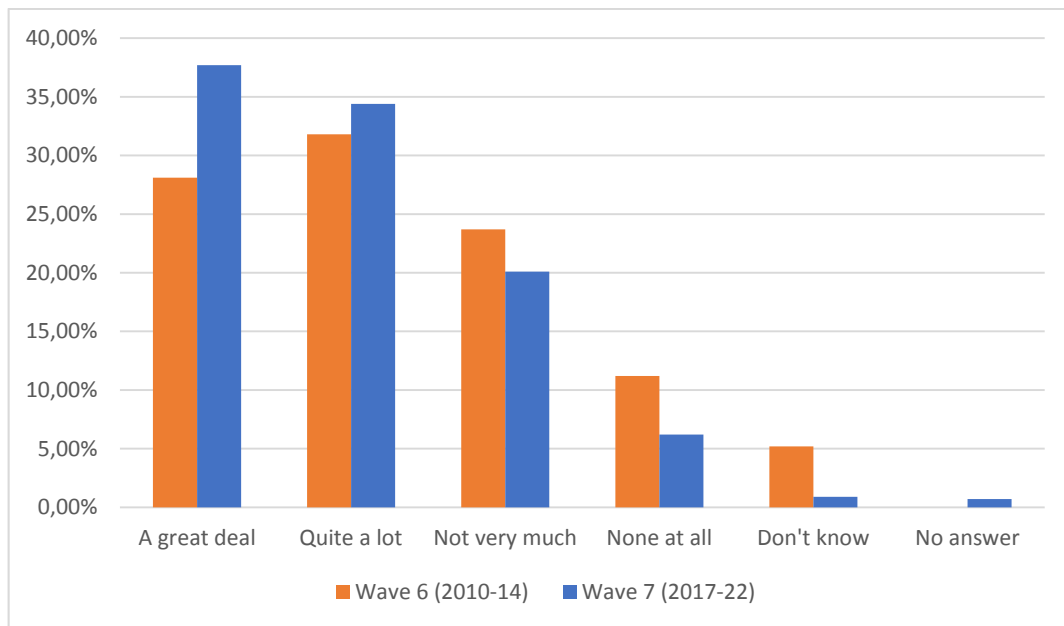
In the same 2013 survey, the data on confidence levels in the Armed Forces shows that 28.1% of participants had “A Great Deal” of confidence, while a slightly higher percentage, 31.8%, expressed having “Quite a Lot” of confidence. Moreover, 23.7% of respondents indicated “Not Very Much” confidence and 11.2% reported having “None at All.” Additionally, approximately 4% of respondents were uncertain “Don’t Know”, and about 1% provided no answer.

Moving to the 2019 survey, maintaining the same sample size, a distinct shift in attitudes toward the Armed Forces became evident. The proportion of individuals expressing “A Great Deal” of confidence increased to 37.7%, signifying a noteworthy surge in trust. Similarly, those endorsing “Quite a Lot” of confidence remained relatively high at 34.4%. Conversely, the percentages of respondents expressing “Not Very Much” and “None at All” confidence experienced a decline to 20.1% and 6.2%, respectively. The uncertainty “Don’t Know” decreased to about 1%, and the proportion of respondents providing no answer remained consistent at around 0.5%.

These changes over the six years from 2013 to 2019 indicate a significant transformation in the Tunisian public's confidence in the Armed Forces. The increase in the proportion of respondents expressing high confidence, coupled with a decline in those with low confidence, suggests a growing trust in the military institution over time. This shift is further emphasized by the decreased uncertainty and consistent rate of non-responses, indicating that opinions on the Armed Forces have become more positive and defined. (Figure 3.5).

The observed changes in confidence levels from 2013 to 2019 suggest an overall increase in Tunisians’ trust in the Armed Forces, with a substantial rise in the percentage of individuals expressing a great deal of confidence. This shift reflects evolving perceptions of the military’s role during and after the Arab Spring. Several factors contribute to this heightened trust. During the Arab Spring, the military maintained a neutral stance by refusing to fire on

protesters and abstaining from political power struggles, thus positioning itself as a protector of the people (Brooks, 2013). In the post-revolution period, the government significantly increased the military's budget and capabilities, enhancing its effectiveness in addressing security threats and reassuring the public of its competence in safeguarding national security (World Bank, 2019). Additionally, retired military officers' active engagement in civil society and public discourse on defense policies helped foster a positive image and bolster public trust (Grewal, 2016). The state's acknowledgment of past injustices against military officers and the provision of reparations further demonstrated a commitment to justice and fairness, enhancing the military's reputation as an institution committed to democratic principles (Grewal, 2016). The military's effective counter-terrorism efforts, particularly in response to the 2015 terrorist attacks, further solidified public confidence in its reliability and capability (Grewal, 2016). Furthermore, the military's adherence to the constitutional framework and support for democratic processes, including the peaceful conduct of elections in 2014 and 2019, reinforced its image as a stabilizing and non-partisan force (Grewal, 2016). These factors collectively underscore the military's crucial role in maintaining stability and public confidence in post-revolution Tunisia, highlighting how its duty to the nation continues to shape positive public perceptions.



**Figure 3. 5** Confidence in the Armed Forces

The descriptive analysis indicates that the Tunisian military’s neutral position aligns with the expectations of the Tunisian people and has garnered public support, as evidenced by public opinion surveys conducted in the years following the Arab Spring revolution. The majority of Tunisians believe it is safer to keep the military out of politics. Through the analysis of the WVS database of 2013 and 2019, the data explains how the neutrality of the armed forces that was exhibited in 2011 has a reflection on the opinion of Tunisians about the military in the post-Arab Spring period. This research finds there was a relationship between the military’s neutrality during the Arab Spring and the positive perception that the Tunisians held about the armed forces. The analysis of the data revealed Tunisians do not wish to see the army ruling the country and therefore they wish to see them depoliticized, with the majority considering it as a fairly to really bad idea from both WVS surveys. Second, respondents projected a strong trust in the military institution, as measured in 2013 and 2019.

The results confirmed the positive perception which the Tunisians hold regarding the military institution and its neutrality. In addressing the research problem, using the two WVS data collection waves in 2013 and 2019, this

research finds: (a) Tunisians refuse to see the army ruling the country, thus, supporting the idea of depoliticization of the military institution; and (b) Tunisian people show a strong degree of confidence about the armed forces.

### **3.7 CONCLUSION**

This chapter begins with a historical analysis, revealing the strategic measures undertaken by Tunisian leaders, particularly Bourguiba and Ben Ali, to ensure the military's political marginalization, thereby preserving their regimes. Bourguiba's approach involved deliberately keeping the military small, underfunded, and excluded from political affairs to prevent it from becoming a threat. This strategic marginalization laid the groundwork for the TAF's neutral stance during significant events such as the Arab Spring. Ben Ali inherited and intensified these strategies, maintaining a low defense budget and promoting military loyalty over competence to prevent any potential coup.

The historical analysis reveals that these coup-proofing strategies fostered deep-seated resentment within the military, as evidenced by incidents such as the Barakat al-Sahil affair, which left many officers disillusioned and alienated. This marginalization culminated in the military's decision to remain neutral during the Arab Spring, refusing to support a regime that had consistently marginalized them.

Moving from this historical perspective, the descriptive analysis relied on data from the WVS to examine contemporary public perceptions of the military's role. The analysis of WVS data from 2013 and 2019 reveals a significant shift in public opinion, with increasing trust in the military and a strong preference for its depoliticization. Therefore, this descriptive analysis underscores how military neutrality influenced public sentiment.

To conclude, the combined historical and descriptive analyses provide a comprehensive understanding of the Tunisian military's political marginalization and its consequences. The strategic measures implemented by Bourguiba and Ben Ali, aimed at minimizing the military's influence, successfully prevented potential coups but also engendered significant internal

resentment. This discontent, backed up by the regime's persistent marginalization, ultimately led to the military's neutral stance during the Arab Spring, reflecting its disaffection with the ruling authorities. Furthermore, contemporary public perceptions, as evidenced by WVS data, highlight a growing trust in the military and a preference for its continued depoliticization. These findings underscore the intricate relationship between military strategies and public opinion, revealing how historical policies have shaped current attitudes toward the military's role in society.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The military forces in the MENA region responded in different ways during the Arab Spring revolution, from responsiveness to and even support for protest groups to domestic fracture or solid support for the regime in power. All Arab rulers who faced threats from pro-democracy movements asked their militaries to confront these revolutions. Tunisia has been a special case that not only achieved a peaceful transition from authoritarianism but also founded a democratic state and eventually earned “Free” status from Freedom House in 2018 (Joffé, 2013). Since the TAF supported the nation’s revolution and participated in the subsequent transition to democracy, they are largely acknowledged by scholars as an important factor in the nation’s achievement in establishing democracy.

This thesis was designed to provide an academic contribution to civil-military relations studies, shedding light on the Tunisian military’s neutrality during the Arab Spring and its reflection on public opinion. In this vein, the thesis benefited from and contributed to studies on civil-military relations, relying on the case of Tunisia. While acknowledging the broader political, economic, social, and strategic factors that contributed to the neutrality of the TAF, this thesis specifically chooses to focus on the three key factors of coup-proofing strategies.

This thesis challenges the prevailing explanations for the Tunisian military’s neutrality during the Arab Spring, which emphasizes professionalism and institutionalization. Instead, it argues that the coup-proofing strategies employed by Tunisia’s previous autocrats, Bourguiba and Ben Ali, played a more significant role in leading to its neutrality.

Through a detailed historical analysis and empirical examination, this study has provided a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influenced the TAF decision to remain neutral during a critical period of political upheaval. The analysis revealed that the TAF’s neutrality during the Arab Spring can be attributed to three main coup-proofing strategies: political

marginalization, downsizing of the military, and systematic reduction of military funds. These strategies were meticulously implemented by both Bourguiba and Ben Ali to prevent the military from gaining political power and to ensure the stability of their respective regimes. Political marginalization involved deliberate measures to keep the military out of political affairs, ensuring its loyalty to the civilian government. The size of the TAF was intentionally kept small to minimize its capacity to challenge the regime, and the allocation of a limited defense budget ensured that the TAF remained underfunded and technologically inferior. Additionally, the Barakat Sahil affair emerged as a pivotal event that deepened the military's resentment towards Ben Ali's regime, significantly impacting the morale and loyalty of the TAF.

Interviews with retired military personnel highlighted the long-lasting animosity towards the regime, contributing to the military's decision to remain neutral during the Arab Spring. The analysis of data from the WVS provided insights into the public perception of the TAF in the post-Arab Spring period, indicating a high degree of trust in the military and strong public advocacy for its withdrawal from political affairs. This positive perception can be attributed to the military's neutral stance during the uprisings, which contrasted sharply with the violent responses of other regional militaries.

The study's findings have significant implications for understanding civil-military relations in transitional societies. The Tunisian case demonstrates that deliberate coup-proofing strategies, while effective in preventing military coups, can also foster a culture of neutrality within the armed forces, playing a crucial role in facilitating democratic transitions. In conclusion, this thesis has provided a comprehensive analysis of the factors that contributed to the neutrality of the Tunisian Armed Forces during the Arab Spring. By examining the coup-proofing strategies of Bourguiba and Ben Ali, as well as the public's perception of the military, the study has shed light on the complex interplay between political strategies and military behavior. The findings underscore the importance of understanding historical and institutional contexts in analyzing military responses to political crises. As Tunisia continues its democratic

journey, the lessons learned from its experience can offer valuable insights for other nations navigating similar transitions.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE