

# The Story of the Tunisian Revolution

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As the year 2010 was coming to a close, the world's gaze had shifted away from the Arabic-speaking world and its sorrows following a decade of close attention. In their absence, other world problems would take center stage, from the ramifications of the world economic crisis to American efforts to salvage diplomatic ties in the aftermath of WikiLeaks' embarrassing release of US diplomatic cables. For a moment, at least, it seemed that a region which had become reminiscent of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth, in capturing people's imaginations, had finally lost its allure. It certainly had for an American president elected two years earlier with a determination to end America's adventure in Iraq. After a speech in Cairo and a failed attempt to restart the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, he found the ills of the region had proven too daunting. The pivot to Asia was yet to be declared, but the underlying premises were already well established in the minds of the administration. To paraphrase the late senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Middle East would benefit from a period of benign neglect. If the troubles of the Middle East were at all remembered in the last days of 2010, outside the daily attacks in Iraq that had become routine, it was on a hopeful note, as the people of South Sudan would finally be able to vote for independence, thus ending the Sudanese civil war and giving birth to a new nation. Little did anyone notice that something was amiss in Tunisia.

In the particular case of Tunisia, the disregard was hardly new. The small former French colony with little strategic value in the larger game of nations had never been at the center of world attention, its affairs largely relegated to a French concern in US policy circles. Its place in the American public's imagination was limited to the imaginary Tatooine in George Lucas's *Star Wars*, a place with little to offer, a land to be abandoned. For more than two decades, Tunisia was ruled by the quintessential Arab strongman, Zein El Abedine Ben Ali. Keeping the country off the political radar, portraying an image of a modernizing and economically vibrant society open for business and tourism, the man and his country were an afterthought outside of the occasional condemnation of human rights abuses and the more frequent praise by international economic institutions.

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This essay and the author's analysis are based on the book *14 January: The Investigation*, by Abdelaziz Belkhdja and Tarek Cheikhrouhou (Tunis: Apollonia, 2014).



It was only during the second week of January that news stories began to appear of unusual protests in Tunisia. But before most news agencies could even dispatch a team to cover the unfolding events, Tunisia's dictator had fled to Saudi Arabia. In the following weeks, amid the initial chaos and celebrations in Tunisia and congratulations from across the world, stories of what had taken place began to emerge. The narrative held that a Tunisian street vendor in the city of Sidi Bouzid by the name of Mohamed Bouazizi had grown frustrated by the lack of opportunities and by harassment from local authorities and had set himself on fire. His desperate act quickly caught the attention of a nation sharing his frustrations, and Tunisians poured into the streets demanding change. An act of disobedience by the country's military, refusing to fire on the crowd, tipped the balance in favor of the protesters, and Ben Ali was history.

But as quickly as the Tunisian revolution's narrative had been written, serious gaps appeared, with the simple story raising more questions than answers. Who was this Mohamed Bouazizi really, and why did his act of desperation catch fire so quickly? Why did the Ben Ali regime fail to contain the protests? Why did a dictator who ruled a country with an iron fist for over two decades decide to abandon his realm in such haste without putting up a real fight? Who actually gave the military that order to shoot, and who in the military disobeyed? The more one examined the narrative, the more it appeared that additional information was needed. The questions were of course not solely about the past, but would rather have profound ramifications for understanding what the future entailed for the country.

Before any of these questions could be addressed, events across the region were quickly unfolding, pulling Washington and the world's attention away from Tunisia and its puzzling revolution. Washington's attention span, always short, was drawn elsewhere as the fire ignited by Bouazizi began to spread across the Arabic-speaking world. It seemed Tunisia's moment in the spotlight had passed before it had even started. Eleven days after Ben Ali left the country, the Egyptian revolution began. The world's gaze turned to Tahrir Square, where another fairy tale was being narrated, this time on live TV as young Egyptians took on their octogenarian dictator. It was there—in a land where the Arab mind's dreams and nightmares had often played out—that good confronted evil in a magical eighteen days. In the following weeks, other regimes began to crumble across the region. Darkness would soon consume the lands of the Arabs as the hopes of spring turned into the nightmare of endless sandstorms.

Nor did it seem Tunisia itself was interested in addressing those questions. In a sense, the simplistic narrative was suitable for everyone. Tunisians could take pride in bringing down a dictator, and many who served Ben Ali, especially the military, could distance themselves from his regime and emerge as the people's heroes. In all cases,

more important questions were at stake—or so everyone reasoned—as the country soon found itself struggling to confront the task of building a democratic polity amid a struggle over its identity and enormous economic and security challenges. Amid electoral campaigns, constitutional struggles, and the sight of Salafis raising their black flag on Manouba University, who would have the luxury of questioning how the story of the Tunisian revolution had unfolded? Tunisia had had a revolution, Egypt a military coup—so went the popular opinion in Washington.

We are fortunate, however, that two Tunisian journalists, Abdelaziz Belkhdja and Tarek Cheikhrouhou, undertook the colossal task of researching the events of the Tunisian revolution, leaving no stone unturned in their quest for the truth. The result of their meticulous work is an important book, *14 January: The Investigation* (2014), which takes us on a detailed, hour-by-hour journey of what transpired during the Tunisian revolution. The book is the result of a rigorous investigation, numerous interviews with the key players in those crucial last hours of the Ben Ali regime, and access to a number of military intelligence reports and official government meeting reports, making the product a serious work of investigative journalism, the likes of which the Arabic-speaking world has not seen in decades. Perhaps more important, all the accompanying documents and testimonials have been published by the two authors on a website dedicated to the book.

In the opening pages of their book, the authors describe their goal as informing Tunisians of the truth of what took place during their revolution. Like other Arab revolutions, the Tunisian one has been surrounded by a cloud of mystery and lies, they argue. Even the very name of the street vendor who set himself on fire has been wrongly reported. His name was Tarek, not Mohamed. The message discovered on Facebook from a Mohamed Bouazizi to his mother asking for her forgiveness, which circulated around the world, was actually the result of mistaken identity by a journalist. As a result of the absence of credible information, and the active attempt by many stakeholders to hide the truth, numerous conspiracy theories have grown regarding the role of foreign powers, with many claiming the Tunisian revolution to be nothing more than an orchestrated intelligence operation by Western governments. From the very beginning, most everything that we have been told about the story of the Tunisian revolution turns out to be false, the authors assert.

The story narrated in their small book (189 pages) is extraordinary, to say the least. The shocking details of what took place within the corridors of power as Tunisia's strongman confronted his people are astonishing, more suitable to a Hollywood caricature than actual history. Yet the book's details and evidence have not been challenged. Rather they have been seconded by an investigation undertaken by the



Al Arabiya television channel and published on the anniversary of Ben Ali's flight in 2012. Yet despite the book's importance and remarkable claims, it has received little attention in the English-speaking world. Although this is likely due to its publication in only Arabic and French, it is nonetheless shocking that no interest has been shown in examining its content and addressing the lingering open questions of the Tunisian revolution that it attempts to answer.

Before examining the book's investigation, a few words are necessary about its authors. Abdelaziz Belkhdja is a well-known journalist, author, and politician in Tunisia. Born in 1962 to a famed independence-era politician, he studied law and politics in France before finding his passion in the literary world. The heritage of Carthage has captivated him; he is the author of several books that aim to simplify Hannibal's story for Tunisian children. (We met in Tunis in October 2015 at his publishing house.) A secular critic of Ben Ali during his reign, Belkhdja established a political party after the revolution. Failing to win a seat in the first free Tunisian elections in 2011, he returned to his literary focus. His coauthor, Tarek Cheikhrouhou, hails from a family that has been active in Tunisian journalism and politics for decades. His grandfather, Al-Habib, was the founder of *Al-Sabah* newspaper; his father, Moncef, was a member of the first post-revolution Tunisian parliament. Cheikhrouhou is an independent journalist and media activist.

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For a man who was due to lose his throne in four weeks, Zein El Abedine Ben Ali showed little interest in the unfolding events in his country. A mediocre officer but one with a talent for discerning the direction of the political winds, he had convinced former Tunisian leader Habib Bourguiba in 1986 that the aged dictator needed a strongman of Ben Ali's qualities to run the country's security services, before choosing the right moment to remove his patron from power and replace him in Carthage Palace. Despite his limited qualities, Ben Ali's rule extended for twenty-three years as he mastered the art of Arab dictators, ruling his people with a combination of fear and political balancing of his opponents.

During the last weeks of December 2010, the ruling family's members were occupied with where they would spend the New Year's celebrations. A planned trip to Malaysia was canceled because the first lady, Leila Trabelsi, has just undergone plastic surgery. To compensate his frustrated six-year-old son, Ben Ali threw him a grand party before taking his family to Dubai. Such were the scenes in many an Arab palace as the year 2010 was about to come to a close.

It took nine days after Bouazizi set himself on fire for the minister of interior to inform Ben Ali on December 26 that there were protests in the country, despite the fact that the first case of a protester dying at the hands of the police had occurred two days earlier. A dismissive Ben Ali refused to return. His son's promised vacation would not be interrupted by such petty issues. He was an Arab strongman, not a political weakling. Two days later, as the protests continued, a reluctant Ben Ali cut short his vacation and returned to the country to be photographed posing next to the dying Bouazizi and giving his first speech to the nation. As the New Year approached, an uneasy calm overtook the country. The storm was gathering force; its strike would not be long awaited.

Serious protests resumed on January 6; by January 9, six protesters were dead, with demonstrations reaching the capital for the first time. But Ben Ali was still impervious. He admonished his ministers for forcing him to break his vacation. His next vacation would not be interrupted, he informed them. Little did he know the truth of his remark.

January 9 proved consequential. Alarmed by the protests, the country's key security officials held a meeting to discuss ways to contain them. Present were Minister of Interior Rafiq Belhaj Kacem, Minister of Defense Ridha Grira, Army chief of staff General Rachid Ammar, Head of Military Intelligence General Ahmed Choubir, Presidential Guard head General Ali Seriati, the ruling party's secretary general, and a host of other security officials. The meeting progressed as expected, with the attendees discussing ways to contain the protests, including deploying the military in the streets. Bourguiba, fearful of a military coup (as was customary in those Arab times), had made sure to keep the army small and out of politics, and Ben Ali had maintained that policy. Tunisians greeted the army's deployment with cheers. A rumor had spread a few days earlier that General Ammar had refused Ben Ali's orders to shoot at protesters. The source, an opposition website, later confirmed the rumor was a deliberate act of propaganda to sow mistrust within the regime. Similar tactics would be used in other Arabic-speaking countries, especially in Egypt, where the British newspaper the *Guardian* happily repeated the claim that President Hosni Mubarak's wealth amounted to \$70 billion. The propaganda mill even led Egyptians in London to demonstrate in front of an empty house, convinced that Mubarak's son, Gamal, had already escaped there. If the regimes had mastered Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels's art through their control of the media, their opponents now had a propaganda arm of their own: social media.

As the meeting was concluding, General Seriati asked the civilians present—the ministers of defense and interior and the ruling party's secretary general—to leave.



The remaining part of the meeting would focus on technical security matters and civilians had little to contribute to that discussion. But for Grira, minister of defense, the request raised alarm bells. Grira had been in his post for less than a year, and this was his first such security meeting. For him, Seriati's request and his apparent authority over the military officers present—he had been an instructor in the military academy many years ago—meant only one thing: Seriati was planning a coup. The paranoid Grira would call General Ammar later that day and tell him he was to follow no one's orders but his. Grira's suspicions would only deepen in the following days.

The next day, January 10, Ben Ali was finally beginning to realize that the protests were serious. Unsure of what to do, he began reaching out to old friends whose ties with him had been strained by his second marriage to Leila. Quickly, a plan was devised. Ben Ali made an address to the nation that day promising reforms and jobs. More important, he warned of unidentified terrorists utilizing the instability to attack peaceful Tunisians. The address was followed by an intensive campaign in state media with stories of such attacks on people's homes and the banks. A Fatimid caliph who had ruled Tunisia more than ten centuries earlier, Al Mu'izz li Din Allah, had confronted the reluctant *ulama* (group of scholars) of Egypt questioning his descent from the Prophet with a drawn sword and coffer of gold: "These are my forebears, these are my ancestors." The carrot and the stick—such were the ways of Arab rulers.

But the state's power to take and to give had lost its allure in the minds of many. As the protests continued, Ben Ali announced another government reshuffle two days later, sacking the interior minister and replacing him with Ahmed Friaa. A move intended to offer concessions to the protesters would prove consequential, as the new minister struggled to learn his job. (Mubarak of Egypt would commit a similar mistake as he faced his people's protests.)

Ben Ali may not have been scared by then, but the Trabelsi family certainly was. Leila, a hairdresser, had captured the Tunisian strongman's heart, forcing him to divorce his first wife in order to marry her. Her ten brothers and sisters and their children had risen to power with her. The family behaved like a mafia, with each brother or nephew building his own fiefdom as he monopolized a sector of the Tunisian economy. Frightened by the protests and the insults they were hearing from their neighbors for the first time, many a family member asked Leila for permission to move to the palace for protection. That same day, the head of the counterterrorism unit in the ministry of interior, Lieutenant Colonel Samir Tarhouni, was dispatched to protect the ministry's headquarters. He received a phone call from an old friend, Colonel Larbi Lakhal, congratulating him and informing him that he had been appointed as head of the

Specialized Unit of the National Guard. Two days later, Tarhouni's actions would change the history of the Arabic-speaking world.

On January 13, protests continued throughout the country. Frightened police officers, fearful of the prospect of their weapons falling into the wrong hands, handed their guns to the newly deployed army. For the paranoid minister of defense, Grira, this confirmed his suspicions that a coup was in the making. He frantically called Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi, the new minister of interior, and the head of military intelligence, relaying his suspicions to them. Ben Ali was forced to call his suspicious minister to reassure him. That night, Ben Ali gave what would prove to be his last speech to his people. His tone was conciliatory and emotional. He had not been told the truth, he told them, and now things would change. Political prisoners would be released and censorship of the Internet removed, and this would be his last presidential term. Artificial demonstrations were organized by the ruling party to show support. This tactic had been used before. In the aftermath of the 1967 war with Israel, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser gave a similarly emotional speech on June 9, announcing his resignation. Hundreds of thousands poured into the streets in demonstrations begging him to stay—which, of course, he did. But the Arab times had changed. In 1967 Egyptians had no alternative but to stick with their tragic hero at his, and their, moment of personal and national humiliation. But Ben Ali was no Nasser, and the Tunisians had seen their emperor naked. History would be made the next day.

On January 14, worried that the planned demonstrations would come close to the palace, General Seriati asked for a military helicopter to be flown above the capital to monitor the demonstrations' progress. The deeply suspicious Grira, fearing that Seriati might use the helicopter to shoot at the palace as part of his imagined coup, ordered an armed military officer to accompany the helicopter to make sure nothing went wrong. By noon, the copter was in the air. Landing for refueling at 3 o'clock, it went quickly back into the air to continue monitoring the demonstrations. The second mission would prove significant, as Seriati had not been informed that the helicopter had again been put in the air.

But Seriati already had his hands full. At 10:00 a.m., Ben Ali's twenty-two-year-old daughter, Halima, was having breakfast with her fiancé when she noticed all those strangers who had spent the night in the palace. Informed that these were her mother's distant relatives, who had taken shelter in the palace, Halima was enraged. The annoyed young princess called Seriati demanding he find a way to get rid of them. Members of the Trabelsi clan would soon make their way to the airport frantically searching for airline tickets to leave the country.





For Samir Tarhouni and his officers stationed in the Ministry of Interior, the moment of truth was fast approaching. As members of the country's elite counterterrorism unit, they were ill-equipped for the challenge they were facing. As demonstrations fast approached the ministry, Tarhouni realized he would soon be forced to make a choice: whether to fire on civilian protesters or allow them to storm the building and thus betray his duty and allow weapons stored in the building to fall into the wrong hands. As he contemplated what to do, he noticed a police radio report stating that demonstrators were close to the airport. Alarmed for the safety of his wife, who worked there in air traffic control, he called an old friend who served as a police officer in the airport. "What is this news of chaos in the airport?" he asked. His friend replied, "No worries, we were just trying to get the Trabelsis' tickets." Tarhouni was immediately fuming. Here he was with his men cornered in the ministry facing the prospect of shooting at civilians, and the much-hated Trabelsi family was escaping! What cowards! What traitors! Completely losing his self-control, he screamed at his men, "Soon we will be fighting each other as Tunisians. Ben Ali lied last night when he promised changes, and is having his family escape now. We will be forced to shoot and when things calm down they will return and we will be blamed for the killings. Oh, no! We will force them to stay with us and share our fate. Men, join me." Tarhouni called his airport friend and asked him to delay the Trabelsis' travel until he arrived.

Tarhouni's friend immediately went to work. Ben Ali's daughter, Cyrine, was suddenly not allowed to board a plane. She was informed her passport lacked an exit stamp. Her bewildered bodyguard called her husband, telling him something was amiss. On another plane about to depart, the pilot suddenly felt sick, and the departure was delayed. Back in the Ministry of Interior, Tarhouni pleaded with his shocked officers to join him. He took eleven soldiers with him and left for the airport, arriving there at 2:35 p.m. Finally overcoming their shock, the rest of the counterterrorism unit officers joined him at 3 o'clock with their soldiers. As his men stormed the airport in their ninja-like clothes, Tarhouni informed the shocked airport director, Zouheir Bayeti, that he had "orders from above" to arrest the Trabelsi family members. With the counterterrorism unit's clothes similar to those of the Presidential Guard, many would confuse them for the latter, allowing rumors to spread that the Presidential Guard was arresting the Trabelsi clan. Tarhouni was unwilling to fight Cyrine's bodyguards and realized that Ben Ali's daughter from his first marriage wasn't important, so Cyrine was allowed to board her plane. Informed by her bewildered driver of the scene in the airport, Cyrine's frightened husband rushed to the presidential palace to inform Tunisia's dictator.

At 3:00 p.m., Seriyati called the airport director to inquire why Cyrine had faced trouble in boarding her plane. The terrified man passed the phone to Tarhouni, who assured



Seriati he would handle the matter. After finishing the call, he pretended they were still talking and confirmed “the Trabelsi operation” was successful. His theatrical performance fooled many who were adamant later on that Seriati was the originator of the operation. Sitting at his desk, Seriati began to wonder why Tarhouni had answered him in the first place and what he was doing in the airport. He called the director of the interior ministry’s travel department and asked him to call the airport director and put the phone on speaker. Still pretending he had orders from above, Tarhouni informed the director that he had prevented the Trabelsi clan from leaving. Horrified, Seriati rushed to Ben Ali’s office.

As Seriati entered Ben Ali’s office, he found Cyrine’s husband and driver there informing Ben Ali of what the driver had seen. In a scene made for a future TV drama, Ben Ali lost his temper, drawing his pistol and pointing it in all directions looking for anyone to shoot. Curses freely flowed from his mouth. As the other men cooled him down, Ben Ali decided to sack his newly appointed minister of interior, given that the mutiny had taken place among his men, and to put the ministry under the command of the army. Calling his minister of defense, Grira, Ben Ali informed him of the hostage situation and declared a state of emergency. Grira, mistrustful of General Ammar because of what he perceived as his closeness to Seriati, dispatched him to the ministry to assume control and hence to keep him away from the army command. The head of military intelligence, General Ahmed Choubir, replaced him temporarily. Hearing the news that members of her family were taken hostage at the airport, Leila began to pack. A calmer Ben Ali decided to send his family to Saudi Arabia under the pretext that they would perform *umrah* (the lesser pilgrimage to Mecca). Ben Ali’s palace of cards was finally crumbling.

In the meantime, General Choubir had decided to send the military’s special forces to confront Tarhouni and his men. Realizing that he would soon be confronted with superior forces, Tarhouni remembered his conversation a few days earlier with his old friend Colonel Lakhel, the newly appointed head of the Specialized Unit of the National Guard. Calling him, he repeated his theatrical performance, informing Lakhel that he had received orders from above and that he had arrested the Trabelsis and needed backup help. Lakhel immediately sent him forty of his men who were nearby and promised to gather the rest and join him as fast as possible. Tarhouni repeated his tactic, calling Colonel Zouheir el-Ouafi, the head of the National Unit for Rapid Intervention. Tarhouni had headed the unit until 2006 and knew most of the officers there. “I will be there in ten minutes,” el-Ouafi replied.

Bayeti, the airport director, pressed Tarhouni to answer exactly who had sent him. Wanting to quiet Bayeti, Tarhouni replied, “God has sent me.” He repeated the same



line to Seriati's assistant when he called Tarhouni trying to gather information as to who had ordered him to act. For Seriati, whose military mind-set could not comprehend the possibility of mutiny, this could only mean one thing: Tarhouni was now working with the Islamists. At the same time, Seriati was informed that a helicopter was flying close to the presidential palace. Unaware that this was the same helicopter he had requested in the morning, Seriati began fearing a possible attack by the helicopter on the palace. As the man ultimately responsible for the president's life, he informed Ben Ali that the situation was getting very dangerous and that he could no longer guarantee his safety in the palace. It was better for Ben Ali to accompany his family members to the military base next to the airport from which they would fly, as it would be safer for him there. This was the final straw for Ben Ali, for whom the prospect of Islamists infiltrating his elite counterterrorism unit was a doomsday scenario. Again losing his temper, he called Grira and told him he would shoot down the helicopter. In his rage, he mistakenly told Grira the helicopter belonged to the counterterrorism unit. Calling the head of the air force, Grira ordered him to recall the counterterrorism helicopter, while the bewildered air force general insisted no such helicopter existed. For Grira, this imaginary helicopter was further proof that Seriati was trying to frighten Ben Ali in order to conduct his coup.

At 4:25 p.m., Ben Ali and his family left the presidential palace, accompanied by Seriati, heading to Louina military base and airport. Until that moment the president had had no intention of leaving the country himself. Mistrustful of his own people, the Presidential Guard's operation room was told that Ben Ali was heading to his private residence. Fifteen minutes later the third-ranking officer in the Presidential Guard, Sami Sik Salem, discovered Ben Ali had not reached the residence. Calling his boss, Adnene Hattab, he was told to find a place to hide. At that moment, Sik Salem found himself in the same position Tarhouni had been in nearly three hours earlier. Angered, feeling abandoned, and fearing he would be later blamed for shooting at protesters, he decided to call Prime Minister Ghannouchi, informing him that Ben Ali had fled the country and that Tunisia was now his responsibility. Nothing had prepared Ghannouchi—a second-rate bureaucrat who served Ben Ali faithfully—for this turn of events. He panicked. Refusing to go, he nonetheless asked for a constitutional expert to explain to him what should be done. Sik Salem then called General Ammar but was unable to reach him, due to his earlier transfer to the interior ministry. As an assistant of his called Parliament president Fouad Mebazaa to bring him over to the palace, Sik Salem realized his only option was to go on the air and share the news with the Tunisian people. He asked for a TV crew to be dispatched to the palace.

The scene of Ben Ali's arrival at the military airbase resembled a movie script. Distrusting Ben Ali's own military, not knowing who was part of the mutiny, his

Presidential Guard began aiming their guns at the bewildered military troops. A nephew of Leila's had arrived at the base and fell at Ben Ali's feet, begging him to take him along. Ben Ali's daughter, Halima, completely lost her temper and screamed for a pistol to shoot the Trabelsis. Lakhal had in the meantime reached the airport and joined Tarhouni, bringing the number of troops under his command to 170 of Tunisia's best security personnel. It was at this moment that Tarhouni finally admitted to his friends that he had not received any orders and that they were on their own. The officers had little option but to continue with the operation. The die had already been cast.

For Seriati, the participation of the Specialized Unit of the National Guard in the hostage situation was the final straw. The National Guard had a nearby base with more than three hundred men; such a force could prevent the presidential plane from departing, therefore making it unsafe for Ben Ali to remain at the base. Ben Ali, who like his subordinate feared the worst, decided to accompany his family to Saudi Arabia and then return. He called Grira and informed him of his decision, adding that Seriati would accompany him. At the last minute, as he was boarding the plane, he asked Seriati to stay behind to make sure that his remaining daughter, Ghazwa, found a plane out of the country.

As Ben Ali's plane was about to depart, his prime minister was still trying to figure out what to do. Calling Grira, he was told Ben Ali had only left temporarily, while he in turn informed Grira of what Sik Salem had told him. This was the final straw for the paranoid Grira, who could not imagine that Sik Salem, a low-ranking officer, had acted on his own without receiving orders, like Tarhouni before him. If someone from the Presidential Guard had called Ghannouchi, this could only mean that Seriati was planning the whole thing. Only one thing puzzled him. How would Seriati conduct the coup if he was with Ben Ali on the plane? Discovering a few minutes later that Seriati had not departed, Grira ordered his arrest for treason.

With utter confusion reigning supreme among Tunisian officials, it was only a matter of time before Grira's paranoia would become contagious. It was now Seriati's turn to believe a coup was under way, as a subordinate informed him that the prime minister and Parliament president were in the palace. As a professional officer, Seriati concluded this would only be possible if the military were behind it. Wishing to avoid bloodshed, he ordered his guards back to the palace and surrendered to the military officers Grira had sent to arrest him, as he resigned himself to his fate. Finally, informed of the hostage situation in the airport, Sik Salem was similarly convinced that a military coup was under way.



At 6:44 p.m., less than an hour after Ben Ali's plane had departed, and after Parliament president Mebazaa felt sick and refused to read the statement, the recorded tape of the reluctant prime minister informing Tunisians that he had temporarily assumed the powers of the presidency was aired on Tunisian national television. Eleven minutes later, Ben Ali called Ghannouchi from his plane to curse him. "I am your loyal servant," the frightened prime minister replied. "Come back whenever you want, Mr. President. It is your Presidential Guard who forced us to do this and we will never betray you." Ghannouchi would later request a denial to be recorded of his own statement to the nation, but the Presidential Guard officers refused. A few minutes later, the complete disarray among Tunisian officials led a shaken Ghannouchi to call Tarhouni, asking if he was planning to become president. Half an hour later, Tarhouni handed over his hostages to the military in front of the TV cameras. Less than an hour later, he was arrested by the military, which—still loyal to Ben Ali—was planning to release the Trabelsis and help them get out of the country. They were only stopped by the videos showing the whole operation, which quickly appeared on social media, uploaded by Tarhouni's men.

With everyone confused as to who exactly was conducting a coup, Grira called General Ammar asking him if he was loyal to Grira. It was now Ammar's turn to lose his temper, angrily telling his minister to leave him alone. Ben Ali in turn called Grira and Ammar, both of whom informed him that the situation was unclear.

At 10:55 p.m., Ben Ali's plane landed in Jeddah. Determined to return as quickly as possible to Tunisia, he ordered the pilot to quickly refuel and prepare for their return trip. But the pilot, on seeing a television screen, discovered for the first time what had taken place. He decided he would not be Tunisia's traitor returning Ben Ali to the country. In the meantime, the confused Tunisian officials gathered in a crisis meeting, unsure of what to do. Mistrusting one another, scared of each other and of Ben Ali's anger, and still convinced that someone must be behind all this chaos, they all told their president that everything was Serhati's fault. He was the one who had planned the whole thing, they claimed. Facing a request by the presidential plane's pilot to fly back, they finally agreed to his demand, planning to send a plane the next day for the president to come home. No plane would ever be sent.

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The mesmerizing story of what transpired in Tunisia during those eventful days is perplexing. The story answers our initial questions and provides important details of how the regime collapsed. But these remarkable details not only contradict perceptions

of how the revolution unfolded, but they confront us with further questions as to the nature of the regime it brought down. How could an Arab dictatorship, carefully constructed over many decades and based on tyranny and brute force, crumble so easily? How could the choices and actions of such low-ranking officers as Tarhouni and Sik Salem, in a tightly controlled security apparatus, bring down Tunisia's strongman? Why was a man who had withstood many fierce storms—from an Islamist challenge to his rule to a bloody civil war in neighboring Algeria—be so frightened by events that he would escape his country in such haste?

Fundamentally, the confusion stems from the mistaken notions long held by outside observers concerning the strength of Ben Ali or, for that matter, other similar Arab strongmen's regimes. If there is one essential lesson from the Arab revolutions—a lesson that is remarkably and continuously overlooked—it is how weak these regimes actually were. The Arabic-speaking world's regimes have often been portrayed as omnipotent. Starting with their archetype, Gamal Abdel Nasser, these strongmen built powerful state and security apparatuses to ensure their survival. The word *mukhabarat*, merely the Arabic term for the intelligence service, became a worldwide synonym for a police state that monitored citizens' very heartbeats. In a famous poem, the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani declared, "Do you know who I am? A citizen who lives in the state of Suppression-istan. A citizen who is afraid to sit in a café, so that the state does not rise from the depth of the cup. A citizen who is afraid to come close to his wife, in case the security is monitoring the place. I am a citizen of the people of Suppression-istan, I am afraid to enter any mosque, so that it is not said that I am a man who practices faith."

And yet below this image of invincibility, the modern Arab regimes were innately weak. The polished house, which appeared to outsiders as built on strong foundations, was in reality built on sand. Repressive these regimes certainly were, but the Arabic-speaking world's state structure had never been strong. The modern state structure—a recent introduction to the region, carried to its shores by the European colonizers or the native modernizers who sought to imitate them—had never penetrated too deeply. The late Tahseen Bashir was on to something when he famously quipped that Egypt was the only real nation-state in the region, whereas the rest were merely "tribes with flags," as the collapse of several Arabic-speaking states in the last few years testifies. But Bashir, a quintessential Egyptian nationalist, overestimated his own country's resilience and modernity. "We have worn the crust of civilization, but the spirit remained *jahiliyya* [state of ignorance]," lamented Nizar in his mournful poem following the 1967 defeat in the Six-Day War. The blindness of many outside observers to the very weakness of state structures across the region



would lead them to continue describing “deep states” reigning supreme in the Arabic-speaking world; in reality nothing as such ever existed.

But the fundamental weakness of the Arabic-speaking world’s regimes was not simply the result of weak state foundations. It was further amplified by a flawed construction design. Coming to power typically in the wake of a military coup that had toppled his predecessor, the first priority of an Arab strongman was to ensure that no similar fate would await him. The manuscript for foiling the next military coup had been written by role model Nasser. Obsessed with conspiracies, Nasser had created a host of security agencies with similar tasks and competing jurisdictions to ensure that each would serve as a check on the power of the other. No subordinate would be allowed to amass enough power to challenge the supreme leader.

But Nasser had not been infallible. His deep friendship with his defense minister, Abdel Hakim Amer, allowed the latter to build his own empire and emerge as a competing center of power. The struggle between the two men played out against the backdrop of Egypt’s humiliating defeat in 1967 and nearly brought down the regime Nasser had carefully constructed. In Syria, Hafez al-Assad committed a similar mistake, allowing his brother Rifaat to amass power and challenge his rule as his health deteriorated in 1983. Others took note, and the manuscript was updated. Whereas Saddam Hussein could diffuse power within a larger cadre tied to him through family or tribal connections, ensuring that no single one could challenge his rule, Ben Ali was not as fortunate, lacking such an extended network of relatives and confidants.

To avoid the emergence of a future Amer or Rifaat, Ben Ali first multiplied the number of security agencies with competing jurisdictions. The reader must have found it confusing to encounter in the story of the Tunisian revolution the Ministry of Interior’s Counterterrorism Unit headed by Lieutenant Colonel Samir Tarhouni, the National Guard’s Specialized Unit headed by Colonel Larbi Lakhal, and the National Unit for Rapid Intervention headed by Colonel Zouheir el-Ouafi. Such divisions were intentional. Each security agency included Special Forces, counterterrorism units, regular police officers, and police assistants, each performing the same job. The military was not immune to such divisions. Besides being kept small, the military had no unified command structure but was instead divided into three separate commands for the army, navy, and air force. Next to these was the powerful Presidential Guard headed by General Ali Seriati, which itself included a number of units dealing with various security tasks as well as a rapid deployment force.

By themselves, these divisions were not enough. To maintain his grip on power, Ben Ali borrowed another chapter from the book of Nasser, ultimately emerging

as the formula's master. In ruling Tunisia, Ben Ali intentionally appointed to the highest offices men who deeply disliked each other and deliberately sowed mistrust among them. Those men would be allowed to compete for the dictator's attention and patronage but would not be able to cooperate with one another. This policy was not limited to the security forces; it was carried further in society at large. "Divide and conquer" may have been attributable to the previous colonial powers, but Ben Ali perfected the art. Sowing divisions among political currents resulted in a fragmented political scene of numerous small parties and currents antagonistic to each other. The fragmentation of the political scene was further encouraged by the regime's policy of manipulating opposition parties and playing them against one another.

Ben Ali's ruling formula and the mistrust he sowed among his assistants may have served him well for twenty-three years, but it ultimately proved to be his undoing. Nearly twenty centuries before the Arab revolutions, Jesus famously declared, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand." The House of Ben Ali serves as exhibit A for the folly of such policies. At the regime's moment of crisis, facing its ultimate challenge, the labyrinthine security agencies proved incapable of cooperating with each other to protect the regime, with their deeply mistrustful commanders unable to coordinate their work. Review the scenes we encountered in the tale of the Tunisian revolution: Minister of Defense Ridha Grira was occupied with foiling an imaginary coup he was convinced General Ali Seriati was conducting, instead of confronting the demonstrations; the lack of coordination between the various security agencies left Seriati unaware that the helicopter he had earlier requested was back in the air; Grira's mistrust of General Rachid Ammar resulted in his sending the latter to the Ministry of Interior to keep him away from commanding the army. These scenes may have been comical, but they were hardly accidental. Instead they were the natural outcome of the regime Ben Ali had built. As Edmund Burke remarked more than two centuries earlier, "It was not an event depending on chance or contingency. It was inevitable; it was necessary; it was planted in the nature of things."

But the widespread mistrust between the leading confidants of Ben Ali was not the only inherent weakness in his regime. The inability of these actors to form bonds of trust creating social capital is but one symptom of the very weakness of the human capital that these regimes attracted. Although Tunisia has been fortunate to have a relatively good educational system compared to the rest of the region, repressive regimes, by virtue of their very discomfort with free thinking and inquiry, do not recruit from among a country's best minds. Instead, the Tunisian regime, similar to its counterparts across the region, favored obedience over brilliance and trust over





qualifications. The result was a state of mediocrity that we encounter throughout the remarkable story of the Tunisian revolution. The story line is full of helpless characters unable to take command or to rise to the task: the Presidential Guard's second-in-command, Adnene Hattab, who ran away and informed his subordinate, Sami Sik Salem, that he needed to find a place to hide; Zouheir Bayeti, the feeble airport director who didn't know what to do; Parliament president Fouad Mebazaa suddenly feeling sick to avoid reading the address to the nation; and the clownish Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi who, after reading the statement to the nation, stood upright and swore his allegiance to the cursing Ben Ali seeking to record another statement denying what he had just declared to the nation.

Those were the kind of men the Arab strongmen surrounded themselves with: clowns, mediocre characters, and charlatans. In Michael Oren's brilliant study of the 1967 war, *Six Days of War*, he recounts similar scenes from Nasser's Egypt where Field Marshall Abdel Hakim Amer's plane circled in the air, failing to find a base to land while the Israeli air force destroyed Egypt's military airports. Finally landing ninety minutes later at Cairo International Airport, Amer is greeted by his hysterical air force liaison officer "with a drawn pistol, convinced that a coup had been staged against his boss. 'You want to murder him, you dogs,' he shouted, as the other officers present also pulled out their guns." The tragicomedy would only be completed with Amer, lacking military transportation, taking a taxi to his military headquarters to start fighting a war he had already lost.

But the overestimation of the strength of Arab regimes is not the only flaw that the Tunisian revolution's story exposes. Largely absent from the story line is any mention of the Tunisian people, those brave men and women who rose against their Republic of Fear and dared to challenge its security apparatus. We encounter them in few mentions, one of protests coming close to the Ministry of Interior, forcing Tarhouni to make a choice. We see references to them here and there, but their faces and heroism are hardly the major players in the final act of Ben Ali's play. What are we to make of this absence? After all, even if Ben Ali's house was built on sand, that alone would not necessarily bring it down. Left untouched, such a house may indeed remain standing. It had indeed stood for twenty-three years. Again returning to scripture, we are told that the reason the man was foolish who built his house on sand was because "the rain came down, the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat on that house; and it fell—and great was its fall."

There is no denying that the Tunisian people were more than simply rain or wind as they rose to challenge their dictator. Even if the exact details of Bouazizi's act continue to be unknown, there is little dispute that the Tunisian people had grown frustrated

with their country's state of affairs. Faced with limited opportunities, along with the absence of social or economic mobility and of hope in building a better life, Arabic-speaking youth had been voicing their frustrations for decades—frustrations that often became acts of desperation. Bouazizi may have committed suicide by setting himself on fire, but he was hardly the only one. As an astute Tunisian member of Parliament remarked to me, “Tunisian young men are committing suicide in two ways; some are taking the boats to Europe, dying in the journey, and some are joining the Islamic State, dying in the killing fields of Syria and Iraq.”

There is little dispute about Tunisians' frustration and desperation, but the story of the Tunisian revolution does challenge their strength and impact. First in Tunisia, but perhaps most in Egypt, a narrative of a whole population rising against the oppressors was woven. The narrative presented the protesters as not only countless in number but, more important, as representative of the wider population. A square in Cairo, which could perhaps hold a quarter of a million people at best, was reported by enthusiastic media outlets as holding one or two million people. What started as delusional enthusiasm naturally ended as a farce, with Egypt's coup supporters insisting that thirty-three million Egyptians demonstrated two years later, demanding the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood from power. But beyond the size of the gathered crowd, Tahrir Square is not Cairo, and Cairo is not Egypt. The absolute majority of citizens in both Tunisia and other Arabic-speaking countries were not to be found in streets demonstrating, but rather at home watching the protests unfold on their TV screens, sometimes with enthusiasm, sometimes with rejection, but most often with apathy.

Perhaps once and for all, the story of what took place during the Tunisian revolution will put to rest the enormous number of conspiracy theories that have dominated the minds of many Arabic-speaking peoples as they confront the sudden changes engulfing their countries. The Arab revolutions were not the result of devious scheming by foreign powers, nor were they the outcome of malicious actions by internal agents or, as Egypt's newest military strongman, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, is fond of claiming, the product of “fourth-generation warfare.” In this, as in all that has befallen them, the Arabic-speaking peoples have been masters of their destinies; their wounds, as the late Fouad Ajami proclaimed, “were self-inflicted.”

That is not of course to suggest that conspiracy theories play no role in the Arabic-speaking world—on the contrary. Outside observers often attribute the prevalence of conspiracy theories among Arabic-speaking peoples—especially those involving Jewish control of the world—to an elaborate attempt by regimes to divert their peoples' attention from their misery. But little attention has been given to how much those



very regimes have fallen for these theories and how the theories came to shape the regimes' mind-set. If regime leaders have played a role in spreading conspiracy theories, it is because they often believe in them themselves. Ben Ali, his fellow Arab strongmen, and the men they surrounded themselves with fully believed that nothing was a result of accident. Their belief that some unseen actor manipulated events shaped their understanding of reality. It is no coincidence that Ben Ali so easily believed that Islamists had infiltrated his counterterrorism unit or that he continues to insist today that a conspiracy brought an end to his regime. That is the world Arab strongmen live in.

The story of what transpired in Tunisia during its revolution stands as a cautionary tale regarding the narratives that have come to dominate the way the Arab revolutions and events in the broader region have been reported and understood. The implications are not only of historical significance but, perhaps more important, offer important lessons to be discerned and explanations to be examined about what has taken place since the revolution and the future of the country. After all, only by understanding the past will the peoples of the region ever learn not to repeat it.



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## *The Working Group on Islamism and the International Order*

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on Islamism and the International Order at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, seeks to engage in reversing Islamic radicalism through reforming and strengthening the legitimate role of the state across the entire Muslim world. Efforts draw on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners, from within the United States and abroad, to foster the pursuit of modernity, human flourishing, and the rule of law and reason in Islamic lands—developments critical to the order of the international system. The working group is co-chaired by Russell Berman and Charles Hill.

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