

# Role Model or Role Expansion? Popular Perceptions of the Military in Tunisia

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## Abstract

This article introduces a theory on military role expansion in emerging democracies and poses a broad question: *who* wants the military to adopt *which role* in society and politics? Drawing on an original, nationally representative survey conducted in Tunisia, the article explores people's preferences for the military to remain a security provider or serve in government and contribute to policing protests. Findings reveal that public support for military role expansion is substantial and varies across political cleavages. We test hypotheses to account for cleavages driven by the country's authoritarian past versus partisan divides during Tunisia's transition to democracy. Findings indicate that popular support for military role expansion is driven by anti-system sentiments prevalent in contemporary Tunisian politics: while voters prefer the military as a role model for security provision, non-voters support its enhanced role in politics. These observations have ample implications for the research programs on civil–military relations and the dynamics of democratic consolidation. Tunisia's experience warrants greater attention to anti-system attitudes caused by people's disillusionment with democratic procedures. In turn, authoritarian legacies do not appear to play a prominent role during such challenging transitions toward democratic consolidation.

## Keywords

military, Tunisia, role expansion, opinion poll, democratic consolidation

This article analyzes popular attitudes toward the military's role in politics. Prior survey research has shown that the vast majority of people, across a wide variety of political and socioeconomic contexts, have very positive perceptions of the armed forces. Empirical evidence can be found across the globe, including countries in the West and the Global South, and also across different political regime types, including democracies and authoritarian regimes. Yet, beyond generally positive attitudes, we know very little about people's preferences for the role that the military should play in politics and society. This prompts us to pose a broad question: *who* wants the military to adopt *which role* in society and politics? More precisely, we remain interested in why some individuals prioritize the military to primarily serve in its traditional role of providing security from external and domestic threats while others prioritize role expansion, which is an expanded role for the armed forces in politics, society, and the economy.

This puzzle is important not only for scholars of civil–military relations but also for students of democratic transitions. Understanding who wants the military to do what in the context of such transitions will allow us to disaggregate the highly abstract notion of trust in the armed forces. Moreover, in the context of an unfolding democratic transition, military intervention in politics remains a

major alternative to the uncertainties associated with the democratic process. Unpacking support for military role expansion will therefore generate insights into the drivers of anti-system attitudes. Our study of popular perceptions toward military role expansion promises to contribute to the literature on civil–military relations and the research program on democratic consolidation.

In this article, we explore politics in Tunisia, a country experiencing a volatile transition process since the ousting of longtime dictator Zine El-Abedine Ben Ali in 2011. We uncover which political cleavages drive variation in support of role expansion, which we conceptualize as the military's increased engagement in politics. Our investigation focuses on two contrasting cleavages in contemporary Tunisian politics: first, a cleavage going back to the authoritarian past and pitting the losers of the recent democratic transition against elites who rose to influence as a result of the revolution; and second, an insider/outsider cleavage between supporters of the post-authoritarian

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elite compromise that led to the current democratic system, on the one hand, and constituencies who might not feel adequately represented in democratic Tunisia, on the other hand. Based on these general premises, we consider two rivaling hypotheses on attitudes regarding military role expansion in post-authoritarian Tunisia. First, the *authoritarian holdover hypothesis* suggests that support for, or opposition against, role expansion is driven by preferences based on the pre-revolutionary constellation of political forces—in particular, on opposition against the rise of a new set of political elites and resistance to transitional justice. Second, the *anti-system hypothesis* holds that a lack of trust in new democratic political institutions drives expectations for the military to take on a more prominent role in politics.

Drawing on an original nationally representative survey (2017) as well as on the most recent wave of the Afrobarometer survey, we report two main findings. First, popular support for military role expansion is substantial with close to 50 percent of Tunisians calling on the military to assume a more prominent role in policing protests and serving in government. Second, this support is primarily driven by an insider/outsider cleavage and not by differences deriving from the authoritarian past. From a larger perspective, the challenges of consolidation faced by post-authoritarian Tunisia bear greater similarities to the challenges of populism in other parts of the world than to issues of post-authoritarian civil–military relations more narrowly conceived.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: we first discuss the theoretical background of our inquiry. We then briefly examine politics in contemporary Tunisia to develop testable hypotheses on variance in popular perceptions of military role expansion. A third section outlines our research design and introduces the survey data upon which our findings are based. A fourth section reports our empirical findings before we conclude by summarizing our argument and suggesting implications for further research.

## Perceptions of the Military

Existing public opinion research across the globe emphasizes overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the military. Scholars of public attitudes in Western countries have reported high levels of trust in the military generally (Burbach 2017; Hines et al. 2015; King and Karabell 2003) but also in specific policies associated with the military, including defense spending (Simon and Lovrich 2010) and veteran affairs (Kleykamp, Hipes, and MacLean 2017). Surveys report very high levels of popular trust in the military across time and different countries, regions, cultures, and political regime types. Relying on available data, the inevitable conclusion is

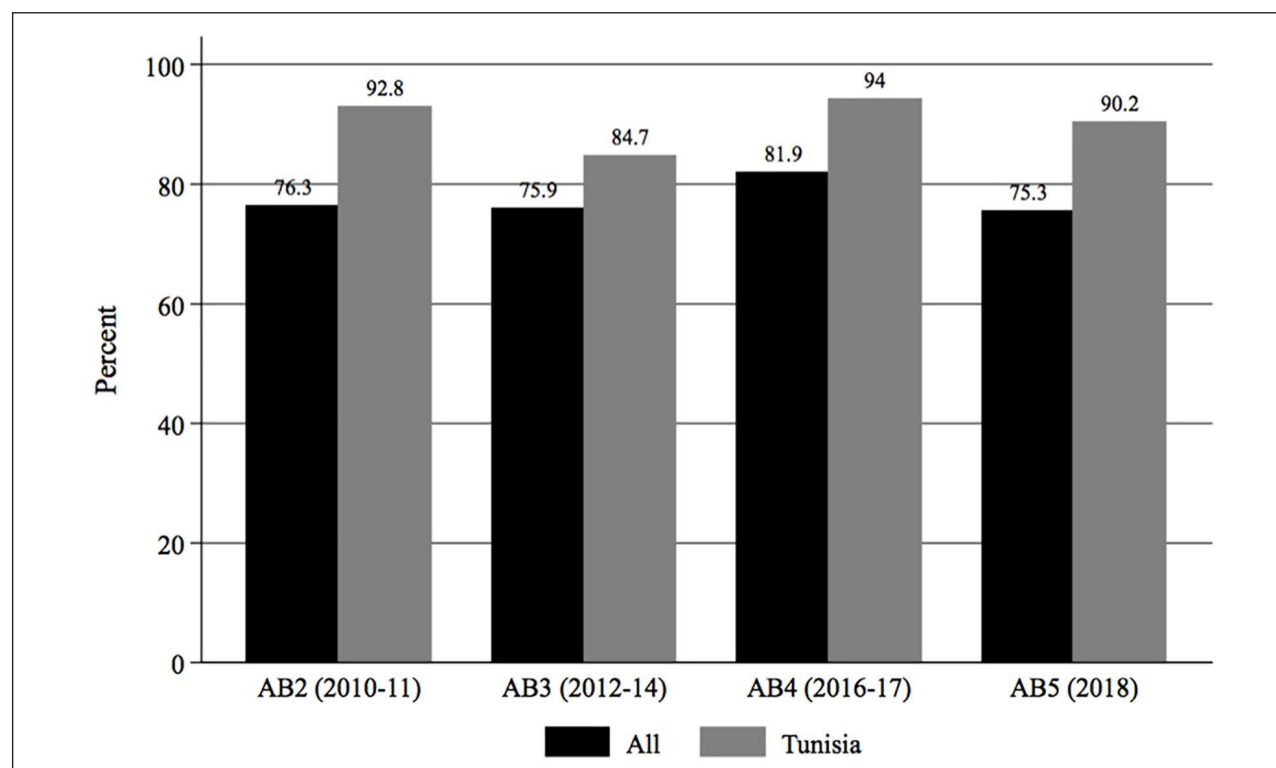
that the military is among the most trusted institutions in the world.

Take the *Arab Barometer* as an example.<sup>1</sup> As Figure 1 shows, the surveys report values between 76 and 82 percent for all countries included and even higher levels of trust when focusing only on Tunisia. Alternative data sources produce a similar picture. According to the *Pew Global Attitudes* surveys, the percentage of respondents who insisted that the Tunisian military had a good or very good influence on how things were going in the country stood well above 90 in 2012, 2013, and 2014 (Holmes and Koehler 2020, 21). The *World Values Survey* suggests that almost two out of three people worldwide trust the armed forces. Popular trust in the armed forces is near-universal and much higher than trust in civilian political institutions.

Despite these seemingly robust findings, we remain interested in variance among social and political constituencies regarding their perceptions of the military as well as their preferences for more specific dimensions of military activity in politics and the economy. Hines et al. (2015), for instance, lament that public support for the military in the United Kingdom is high even though respondents had a limited understanding of what the military was doing. Neither have respondents offered support for the conflicts in which the military was engaged, namely, in Iraq and Afghanistan. With regard to the United States, scholars report significant differences along partisan divides with respect to people's perceptions of the military (Krebs and Ralston 2020).

The question of what people exactly like about the military is particularly salient outside of the universe of consolidated democracies. Civil–military relations theory in consolidated democracies is based on the idea that sovereign democratic states create standing armies under civilian control to protect the polity against external enemies (Huntington 1957; Janowitz 1960). In many parts of the developing world, the military has not always acted in accordance with this Huntingtonian role model. Instead, many countries of the developing world have experienced what Alfred Stepan (1973) called military “role expansion”: the assumption of tasks in politics, the economy, and society writ large beyond the mere provision of external security. While Alfred Stepan, in his formative contribution, has been primarily interested in the *consequences* of military role expansion—for instance, military autonomy from civilian oversight, military effectiveness, and human rights—we remain inspired to study popular *preferences* regardless of whether the military does in fact assume a greater role in politics.

To begin with, we set out to explore attitudes toward military role expansion and therefore reintroduce a research topic that has largely been ignored since the work conducted in the guise of modernization theory a half



**Figure 1.** Trust in the military, Arab barometer (Waves 2–5).

century ago (see, for instance, Jackman 1976; Nordlinger 1970). Today, only few works systematically account for military role expansion in both emerging democracies and authoritarian regimes. Against the backdrop of declining numbers of military coups, “indices do not show a constant decline in military influence,” resulting in the “still highly relevant role of militaries” across the globe (Croissant, Eschenauer, and Kamerling 2017, 411).

Empirically, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has provided ample evidence for military role expansion. Many militaries—namely, those in Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Algeria, Iraq, and Yemen—have adopted a prominent role in state building and regime formation (Koehler 2016). Apart from establishing post-colonial states and directly exercising political power, military officers across the region have also routinely intervened into politics through military coups (Albrecht 2015). They have risen to government positions (Bou Nassif 2013), exerted substantial influence behind the scenes (Cook 2007), and have been prominently engaged in countries’ economies (Grawert and Abul-Magd 2016). Rather than curtailing the military’s role expansion, the popular mass uprisings that came to be narrated as the “Arab Spring” have in fact enhanced the military’s influence not only as an agent in post-revolutionary conflicts and transition processes but also in politics and society writ large (Albrecht, Croissant, and Lawson 2016; Gaub

2017). While the MENA region has emerged as a laboratory of sorts for the study of military role expansion, there is little research examining popular perceptions on the matter.

### Political Cleavages and Support for Role Expansion

We take aim at the two aforementioned areas that have remained underexplored in the literature: variation among social and political constituencies, and the content of expectations people have regarding the role of the military. This leads us to pose a broad question: *who* wants the military to adopt *which role* in society and politics?

Tunisia is a particularly instructive case for such an inquiry for several reasons. For one, the country established itself as the only post-Arab Spring democracy, which allows for the study of popular attitudes in an emerging democracy. This comes with several advantages. First, people are free to express their opinions on potentially sensitive topics such as the military. Second, the capacities of the Tunisian military have increased substantially since the country’s Arab Spring uprising in 2010/2011, making a study of its perception a pressing concern for country experts. Third, findings from this inquiry remain particularly valuable not only for country experts but also for the body of literature on democratic

transition. A better understanding of popular attitudes toward institutions outside of formal governing procedures will generate insights into the prospects of Tunisia's democratic consolidation in what remains an uncertain process of change. Finally, students of civil–military relations will be particularly interested in a more nuanced understanding of support for the military in a politically volatile context.

### *Political Cleavages in Post-Authoritarian Tunisia*

Looking at the post-authoritarian political landscape in Tunisia, we focus on two main cleavages that are particularly relevant for our purposes: a cleavage between old and new elites, or between supporters and opponents of the *ancien régime*, and a cleavage between insiders and outsiders under the new democratic order, or between those who do and do not feel adequately represented by post-authoritarian institutions. We then derive testable hypotheses from these broad differences.

Following the ousting of longtime ruler Zine El-Abedine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011, an uncertain process of regime change culminated in democratic institution building and brought to the fore a complex political landscape (Redissi, Nouria, and Zghal 2012; Zemni 2015). The Tunisian revolution was driven by a politicized, younger segment of society committed to taking to the streets to express their demands for political liberties and a more equitable distribution of economic goods. Not only did the mass uprising culminate in the fall of the Ben Ali regime, it also established protest politics as an element of political expression routinely employed in the ensuing transition period (Weipert-Fenner and Wolff 2019). Moreover, it prompted substantial popular engagement in the rewriting of the country's political order (Maboudi 2020).

In contrast to other MENA countries, Tunisia is also home to strong civil society actors. In particular, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), Tunisia's most influential labor union, has emerged as an effective broker between partisan interests during the transition. Despite its active role in the establishment of democracy, the UGTT remains an ambivalent organization with a history oscillating between collaboration and contention with the state in the authoritarian era (Bishara 2020). Since the fall of Ben Ali, the UGTT had emerged as a powerful actor outside of parliament and government with a heterogeneous membership structure and competing interests within its organization (Yousfi 2018). For the purpose of our inquiry, it is important to emphasize the UGTT as an organization aggregating social interests independent of existing political cleavages, that is, between Islamists, secularists, revolutionaries, and supporters of the *ancien régime* (Hartshorn 2017). On the

political level, the Tunisian transition was sustained by a precarious compromise between revolutionary groups, an ascendant Islamist movement, and old regime elites. This compromise, brokered by the UGTT and other civil society organizations in the so-called “Quartet,” found expression in an uneasy coalition between the main Islamist party, Ennahda, and the principal representative of old elite interests, Nidaa Tounes, after the 2014 elections (Boubekeur 2016).

These actors have been navigating a turbulent post-authoritarian transition period, leading to the establishment of a party system and founding elections in 2011 but also challenges emanating from an economy in crisis and security threats in the country's border regions (Grewal 2019). Economic hardship and electoral defeat have led to disillusionment within parts of the population (Grewal and Monroe 2019), resulting in protracted protest politics and volatile voting patterns in subsequent electoral rounds in 2014 and 2019. With an increasing number of Tunisians economically disenfranchised and disillusioned with politics, the Tunisian democratic transformation remains at risk (Günay and Somavilla 2019).

How does the Tunisian military fit into these political dynamics? Compared with many other Arab countries, the military has kept a low profile in Tunisia's recent past. As of today, the Tunisian military is a small, professional organization that mainly operates in border security, anti-terrorist operations, and humanitarian and peacekeeping operations. Unlike in Egypt, Syria, or Iran, the Tunisian military has no meaningful stake in the country's economy. According to Transparency International's (Transparency International: Defense and Security, 2020) report on the Tunisian armed forces, “. . . the military establishment does not have beneficial ownership of any commercial businesses generating financial revenues of a significant scale, and there was no evidence found of off-budget military expenses.” The Tunisian military has largely stayed on the sidelines in political debates and institutional processes, and therefore appears as a “hard case” to study prospects of, and preferences for, military role expansion. While military units have been deployed to meet Islamist terrorist threats across the country and unrest in the southern border region (Grewal 2019), the armed forces have not been active in domestic policing on a wide scale.

There are no indicators to assume a preference among officers and the military leadership to assume a greater role in contemporary Tunisian politics. Hailed by many as having aided the 2011 uprising, and hence contributing to the ousting of Ben Ali (Brooks 2013; Jebnoun 2014), other observers remain more cautious about the military's role in the Tunisian Arab Spring uprising (Holmes and Koehler 2020; Pachon 2014), pointing at the largely passive role of the armed forces that neither supported Ben Ali nor made any active move to oust him from power.

And yet, the military remains an ambivalent institution in the eyes of the public in part for its role in the past but also for an increasing involvement in domestic security matters, often sidelining the police and National Guard. Historically, compared with other military organizations in the region, the Tunisian military has played a relatively marginal role in the country's post-colonial history (Brooks 2013; Pachon 2014). While military officers stood at the helm of post-independence state building in most Arab republics, Tunisia developed a civilian authoritarian regime based on a dominant party and strong personalist elements in the fabrics of elite coalitions (Buehler and Ayari 2018; Koehler 2016; Moore 1965).

Nevertheless, the Tunisian military has a history of engagement in politics, beginning with its policing of large-scale unrest and bread riots from 1978 onward, the recruitment of officers for political offices, and an aborted military coup by junior officers from both the military and the National Guard in 1987 (Grewal 2020). The military's entanglement with politics culminated in its support of Ben Ali's takeover of power through the "constitutional coup" in 1987, which was led by the Interior Ministry (Ware 1988). New research reveals that, during politically turbulent years in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the military was ready to assume a greater role in politics, including government positions in the early Ben Ali government (Grewal 2016). Looking back at this period, a retired officer revealed: "We are a republican military and we never wanted to become politically hegemonic; this goes against our values. But after decades of marginalization under Bourguiba we did hope to gain some political influence in Tunisia" (quoted in Bou Nassif 2015, 68).

At a time when the military was on the brink of entering the fray of politics, Ben Ali suddenly had officers return to the barracks, developed the National Guard as the main domestic security force, and allowed the military to primarily engage in foreign peacekeeping missions rather than get involved in domestic politics (Albrecht 2020). The consequence was its transition to an army that—at least from a regional comparison—remains professionalized and subject to civilian oversight (Brooks 2016; Jebnoun 2014).

Nevertheless, the military need not engage in a coup d'état for there to be substantial concerns with civil-military relations. Since 2011, the country has witnessed several terrorist attacks at tourist sites, an Islamist insurgency in the Chambi mountain range along the border with Algeria, and problems with smuggling and refugees across the Libyan border due to civil war in neighboring Libya. With the assistance of Western aid and advisors, the Tunisian military has shifted some of its focus from external to domestic security to meet the challenge of asymmetrical conflict with domestic and transnational non-state actors. This includes protecting economic sites

of importance—particularly phosphates and petroleum in the far south—from protestors and terrorism, providing emergency medical services and food to impoverished communities in marginalized regions as a counterinsurgency measure, and building infrastructure for border security. While some have lauded the military's professional engagement toward these domestic security challenges, it also represents an expansion of the role of the military into domestic security and economic services that arguably should be provided by civilian institutions.

In sum, because it has not been battle-tested in war, the Tunisian military's stake as a Huntingtonian role model would be associated with its activities as a security provider fighting against terrorist threats on Tunisian territory and serving in peacekeeping missions abroad. And yet, the military's historical role in protest policing—namely, during the 1970s and mid-1980s—its engagement in government amid Ben Ali's power grab, and the post-2011 expansion of domestic responsibilities into roles normally delegated to civilian institutions would associate military role expansion primarily with these areas: policing political and economic protest along with officers serving in government.

### *Expectations on Public Attitudes*

Given this general political context, who supports military role expansion in Tunisia? Which constituencies, by contrast, want to see the military limited to its core tasks of security provision? In the following analysis, we aim to generate testable hypotheses derived from the Tunisian context, yet keep it broad enough to claim external validity for cases beyond the Middle East and the post-Arab Spring trajectories germane to that region.

*Ascendant Islamists versus established elites.* One major cleavage structuring authoritarian politics in Tunisia and other Arab states existed between Islamist movements and (secularist) regimes (Albrecht and Wegner 2006). The main organizational expression of Tunisian Islamism is the Ennahda movement, which emerged as a social movement organization in the 1970s and 1980s only to become the main target of repression in the Ben Ali era. Amid Tunisia's transition, Ennahda most forcefully cashed in on its popular appeal and quickly emerged as one of the most powerful actors in the new democratic establishment (McCarthy 2018; Wolf 2017). In party-political terms, Ennahda was opposed by a secular catch-all party, Nidaa Tounes, which was explicitly formed to counter the influence of organized political Islam. As an authoritarian legacy party, Nidaa Tounes drew heavily on old elites from the Ben Ali regime (Berman and Nugent 2020; Boubekeur 2016). Nidaa Tounes emerged as the strongest political party from the 2014 parliamentary

elections, and Nidaa's leader, a former minister under Bourguiba, Béji Caïd Essebsi, was elected president in that same year. After coming to power, the party leadership strongly opposed transitional justice, which included blocking parliament from engaging in criminal investigations of elites with ties to Ben Ali. Ever since, Nidaa Tounes has been associated with the interests of the old regime. The contrast between Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes to some extent mirrored a larger cleavage between established elites and ascendant challengers that structured post-2011 politics in other parts of the MENA region.

While these political parties fall short of representing homogeneous political constituencies, the cleavage between ascendant and established elites remains one plausible driver of attitudes on military role expansion. In the U.S. context, for instance, partisan divides between Democrats and Republicans explain significant differences in popular perceptions of the military's role in politics (Burch, 2019; Krebs and Ralston 2020). In an authoritarian context, there is "life after dictatorship" for political parties and elites that often survive regime change and resurface in emerging democracies (Albertus and Menaldo 2018; Loxton and Mainwaring 2018). In the post-2011 MENA region, this cleavage has triggered political polarization and a military coup in Egypt in 2013 (Holmes 2019). More generally, scholars of regime change and democratization have long recognized the danger that regime hardliners might prompt military intervention in a roll-back coup (Koehler and Albrecht 2021; O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

Given the political context in post-authoritarian Tunisia, a possible *authoritarian holdover effect* in public opinion might lead supporters of those political groups associated with the old regime to remain suspicious about democratic procedures and call for an enhanced role for the military in politics and society to prevent the former Islamist opposition from establishing a dominant position. In turn, supporters of groups that suffered most from authoritarian repression may prefer the military to stay in the barracks. The empirical implication of this expectation in the Tunisian case would be to expect a significant divide in opinions about the military between Islamists and supporters of the legacy party Nidaa Tounes.

**Hypothesis 1:** Supporters of old elites support military role expansion, while supporters of repressed groups support the military as a role model for security provision.

*Insiders versus outsiders.* Tunisia's post-authoritarian transition was based on an elite compromise that brought together the country's antagonistic political camps. This process of national dialogue averted further polarization, enabled the adoption of the post-authoritarian constitution,

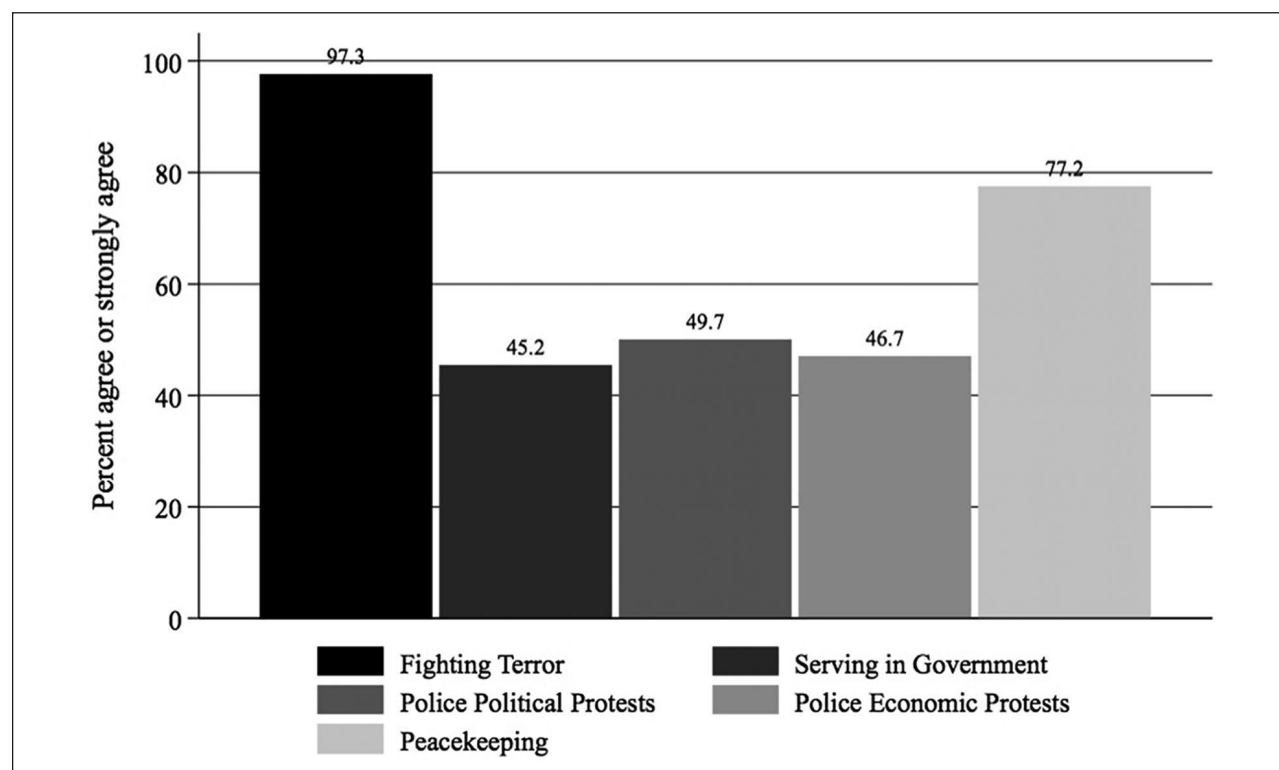
and found expression in a coalition government between the former political rivals, Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, between 2014 and 2019 (Boubekeur 2016; Hassan, Lorch, and Ranko 2019). At the same time, the elite compromise was not without challenges. Ever since the beginning of the Tunisian transition, anti-system sentiments found expression in votes for populist challengers as well as high rates of abstention. The surprise success of the populist Aridha Chaabia party ("Popular Petition") in the 2011 elections, high abstention rates in post-2011 electoral contests, as well as the 2019 election of outsider Kais Saeid to the presidency can be seen as expressions of anti-system and anti-political establishment sentiments (Brumberg and Ben Salem 2020; Koehler and Warkotsch 2014).

Anti-system sentiments reveal an opposition of principle, that is, the rejection of the core ideological and institutional elements of political order (Sartori 1976, 133). While anti-system parties and organizations have been studied in both liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes (Albrecht 2013; Capoccia 2002), anti-system attitudes exist among citizens rejecting the institutional framework of the polity and—in new democracies—the often volatile system of political parties and electoral politics. In the empirical reality of Tunisian politics, anti-system attitudes may be explored among all those people disillusioned with elections and the party establishment (Grewal and Monroe 2019; Yardimci-Geyikçi and Tür 2018). It is this constituency where we may find support for an enhanced role of institutions outside of the existing political establishment. We are hence able to submit a second testable hypothesis on a possible *anti-system effect* in popular perceptions of the military.

**Hypothesis 2:** Non-voters support military role expansion, while voters support the military as a role model for security provision.

## Unpacking Popular Perceptions of the Military in Tunisia

To explore popular attitudes toward the military's role in Tunisian politics and the hypotheses outlined above, we administered a nationally representative telephone survey among adult Tunisians in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Working with a local survey team, the opinion poll included 1,038 individuals and was administered in the Tunisian dialect.<sup>3</sup> The entire survey consisted of 48 questions, 11 of which referred to people's opinions on the role and performance of the military in Tunisia (see Table A1 in the Supplemental Appendix). We used Likert-type scale responses to gauge people's perceptions of issues that can be seen as part of the military's classical role as a security provider, namely, fighting terrorism (Q5) and participating in international peacekeeping missions (Q10)—activities in which the



**Figure 2.** Attitudes toward the military's role in Tunisia, 2017.

Tunisian military has been engaged when the survey was conducted. In turn, we designed similar questions on people's opinions about possible activities that would entail military role expansion, namely, serving in government (Q6), fighting the economic crisis (Q7), and policing economic and political protests (Q8 and Q9).

The latter questions refer to problems and issues of political contestation salient at the time the survey was administered. Hence, respondents could relate to contemporary issues when asked about their preferences on the military's involvement. The questions address specific elements of role expansion, ranging from an expanded security mandate (Q8 and Q9) to popular associations of a direct military intervention in politics (Q6), which allows us to account not only for general popular support for military role expansion but an assessment for the degree to which citizens want the military to be involved beyond a more narrow security mandate. We remain cautious, however, about interpreting involvement in the economy as role expansion (Q7) for Tunisians may associate the military's involvement as part of disaster relief efforts, which can be seen as part of the military's more traditional mission.

Figure 2 shows the degree of agreement—aggregating “agree” and “strongly agree”—with specific tasks. While the vast majority of Tunisians recognize the role that the military assumes in fighting terror and engaging in foreign

peacekeeping, a little less than half agree that the military should take on the role of policing economic and political protests or that military officers should serve in government. Just over 70 percent support for the military's engagement in the economy is testament for both the degree of the economic crisis at the time the survey was conducted and the trust that people have in the military to have a positive impact beyond its role as a security provider. In sum, the vast majority of citizens want the military to take on roles traditionally reserved for the institution as a security provider, but the country is about split in half on whether the military should expand its role into areas traditionally reserved for other political institutions in a democracy. The finding that substantial parts of the Tunisian population look favorably at the military's expansion into civilian realms certainly warrants a more systematic inquiry.

### Who Supports Military Role Expansion?

In this section, we conduct such an inquiry and test the two hypotheses developed above. The *authoritarian hold-over hypothesis* (H1) states that respondents' attitudes toward role expansion should be shaped by their position vis-à-vis the old regime. Those supporting the post-revolutionary rise of new elites should be more skeptical of

role expansion than supporters of old regime elites. In operational terms, we would expect this cleavage to be reflected in the distinction between supporters of Ennahda, on the one hand, and of Nidaa Tounes (or presidential candidate Béji Caïd Essebsi), on the other hand. In turn, the *anti-system hypothesis* (H2) holds that attitudes toward role expansion are driven by political alignments under the new democratic order rather than by authoritarian legacies. In particular, constituencies who do not feel represented by the new democratic institutions would be expected to support military role expansion as an anti-system alternative. This would lead us to expect significantly greater support for role expansion among non-voters in operational terms than participants in elections.

### Research Design

To test these hypotheses, we need to identify two cleavages in our survey data: one between opponents and supporters of the old regime, and another one between respondents feeling represented by the new democratic regime and those feeling excluded under the new political order. Given the timing of our survey (2017), we operationalize the first cleavage by drawing on the distinction between supporters of Ennahda and those of Nidaa Tounes. While these two parties were part of a coalition government at the time of our survey, they nevertheless represent different constituencies with respect to their attitudes toward the pre-2011 political order.

Far from representing homogeneous political constituencies, a political master cleavage separates Islamists as political opponents of the *ancien régime* from a secular current emerging from an authoritarian legacy party. In brief, while Ennahda supporters suffered the brunt of repression under the Ben Ali regime, Nidaa Tounes emerged as a counterweight against the Islamists and a representative of regime supporters (Boubekeur 2016; Wolf 2017). In our survey, we can identify these broad groups in terms of votes cast in the 2014 legislative elections and, in the case of Nidaa Tounes, in the 2014 presidential elections as well.<sup>4</sup> If the authoritarian holdover hypothesis is correct, we would expect to find opposition against role expansion among Ennahda voters and support among voters for Nidaa Tounes (legislative elections) and Béji Caïd Essebsi (presidential elections).

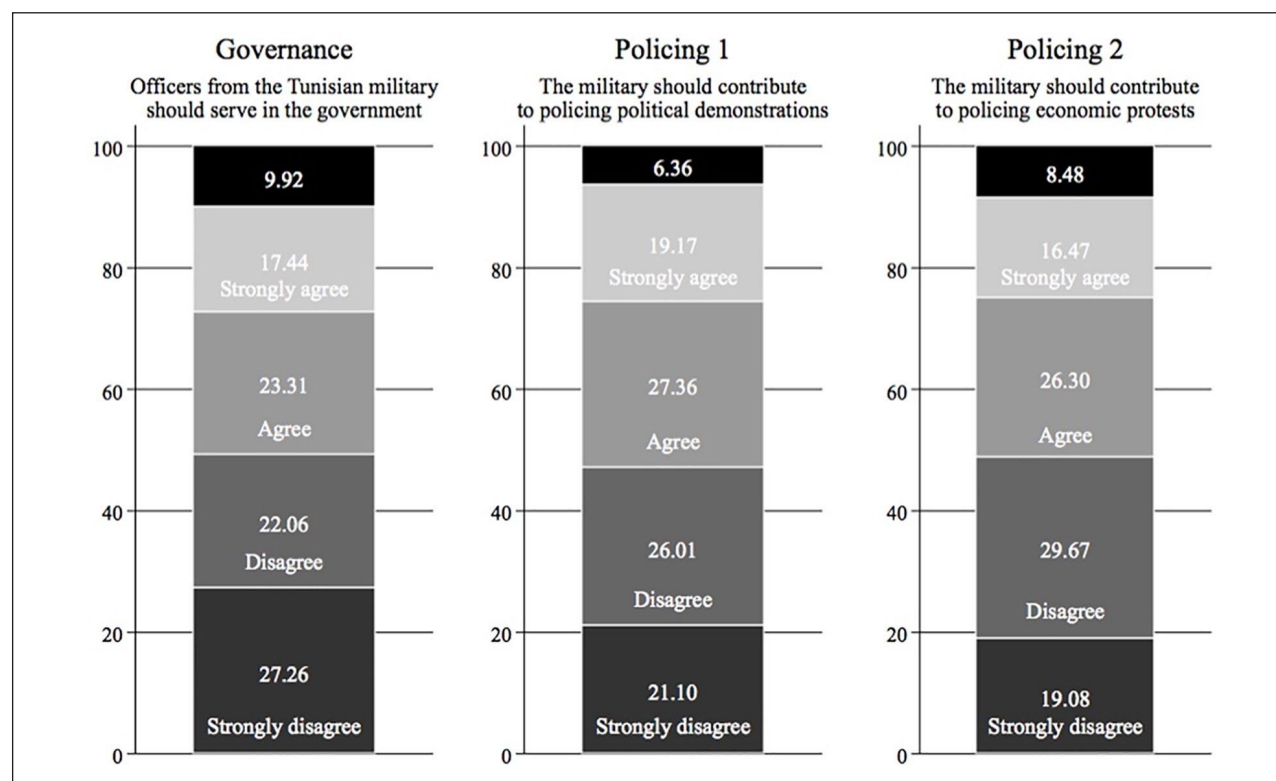
Our second hypothesis is based on the recognition that not all Tunisians feel adequately included and represented under the new political order. While the Tunisian transition has been enabled, at least in part, by elite compromise (Boubekeur 2016) and popular participation in the drafting of the constitution (Maboudi 2020), anti-establishment sentiments were an important part of the political equation right from the start. In Tunisia's founding elections in 2011, the previously largely unknown populist group

Aridha Chaabia won 19 of 217 seats, drawing in particular on support among socially marginalized constituencies in the country's interior provinces (Koehler and Warkotsch 2014). The success of Qalb Tounes ("Heart of Tunisia") in the legislative elections of 2019 and of current president Kais Saied in the presidential contest, respectively, can also be seen as part of a populist backlash (Brumberg and Ben Salem 2020). In the context of our survey data, we operationalize outsiders as those respondents who have not participated in the legislative ( $n = 486$ , 46.82%) or presidential ( $n = 419$ , 43.65%) elections. The fact that non-voters are significantly younger than voters ( $p = .000$  for both the legislative and presidential elections), are more likely to associate democracy with economic inclusion ( $p = .0017$  and  $p = .0018$ ), and tend to have lower levels of education ( $p = .000$  and  $p = .0371$ ) and incomes ( $p = .000$  and  $p = .0047$ ) increases our confidence that we are indeed dealing with specific political constituencies.

We employ different dependent variables that reflect different dimensions of role expansion. First, role expansion occurs if officers take on a stronger role in governance. As Figure 3 shows, roughly half of our respondents disagree or strongly disagree with the statement that military officers should serve in government. Second, role expansion can also occur if the military takes on domestic security functions. We asked respondents' opinions on the military taking over protest policing functions in response to political and economic protest. Figure 3 shows that our sample is again roughly split in half between opponents and supporters of a military role in protest policing.<sup>5</sup>

We generate three different dependent variables based on these questions. To begin with, we construct an index of role expansion, which aggregates the three different components into a common scale.<sup>6</sup> Second, we consider the two sub-components of governance and protest policing separately. The governance dimension is based on the question of whether respondents agree with officers serving in government, while the protest policing variable aggregates the responses to both protest policing questions into a single scale.<sup>7</sup>

We estimate two sets of models. The first set draws upon respondents' reported behavior in the 2014 legislative elections to operationalize the main variables of theoretical interest (Table A2 in the Supplemental Appendix), while the second set relies on questions relating to the presidential elections of that same year (Table A3 in the Supplemental Appendix). Given the high number of categories in the aggregated role expansion index, we estimate linear models for this variable, while we specify ordered logit (OT) models for the other two dependent variables. In the first set of models, we are interested in observing the effect of support for (and opposition against) the old regime, as operationalized in self-reported



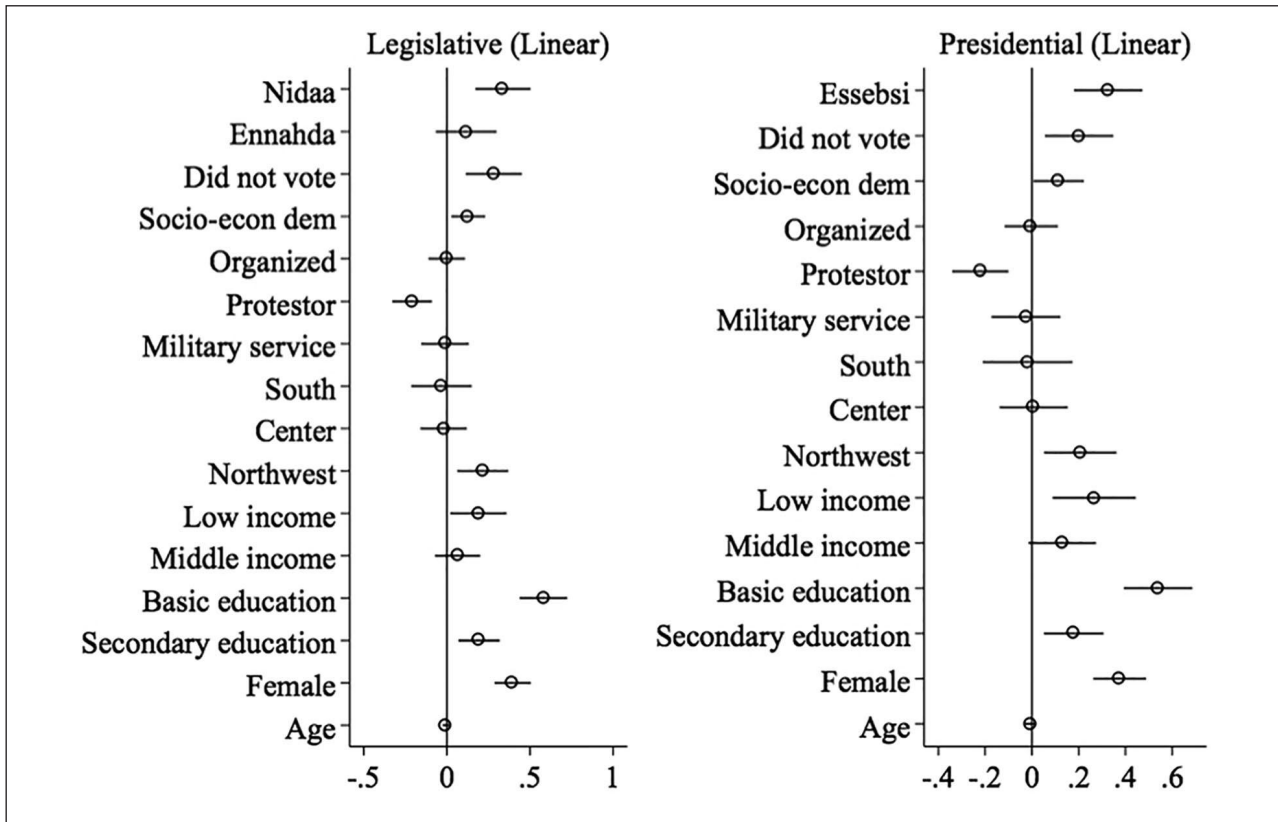
**Figure 3.** Dimensions of role expansion.

votes for Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda, respectively. This tests the authoritarian holdover hypothesis. To assess whether anti-system sentiments drive attitudes toward military role expansion, we focus on whether those who do not participate in elections are significantly different from those who do cast a vote. In the second set of models, the authoritarian holdover hypothesis can only be partially tested. Self-reported votes for Nidaa Tounes candidate Béji Caïd Essebsi stand for respondents more favorably disposed toward the old regime; there is no equivalent to the Ennahda variable here because the Islamist party did not field a presidential candidate in 2014. As electoral behavior is crucial in all models, we only consider respondents who were twenty-five or older at the time of our survey and were therefore legally able to vote in 2014.<sup>8</sup>

We control for a number of potential confounding factors. The variable *socio-economic democracy* is a dummy capturing whether respondents emphasize political or social and economic elements in their understanding of democracy. Research has suggested that trust in institutions in new democracies tends to be driven by performance (Mishler and Rose 2001); if this is the case, we would expect those who evaluate performance primarily in economic terms to be more skeptical of democratic institutions and hence in favor of role expansion. *Organized* is a

variable capturing whether a respondent has been organized in an interest group or political party. We suspect that members of such organizations might be more attached to institutional democracy and thus opposed to role expansion. The *protestor* variable captures whether respondents report having participated in the 2010/2011 protests that led to the fall of Ben Ali. Given their high degree of politicization, we would expect these respondents to oppose military role expansion.

*Military service* captures whether a respondent has previously served in the armed forces. This is to explore potential effects stemming from having spent time in uniform. We would expect such former service members to be in favor of military role expansion. *South*, *Center*, and *Northwest*, finally, are dummy variables, which capture respondents' self-reported home region. Greater Tunis and the coastal regions are the excluded category (see the map in Figure A1 in the Supplemental Appendix for the construction of this variable). These variables control for effects of unequal promotion patterns in the Tunisian armed forces which have tended to favor officers from Tunis and the coastal areas (Jebnoun 2014, 299); they also help us account for potential effects of deeply rooted regional underdevelopment in Tunisia's interior regions (Moore 1965), as well as the impact of the military's anti-terrorism operations in these areas. We also control for



**Figure 4.** Coefficient plots for role expansion index.

demographic factors, including income, education level, gender, and age.

### Findings

Figures 4 to 6 show coefficient plots for the six models to aid the interpretation of effects. The models in Figure 4 are linear regression models, while the plots in Figures 5 and 6 represent odds ratios drawn from ordered logit (OL) models.<sup>9</sup> The full models are presented in Tables A2 and A3 (Supplemental Appendix).

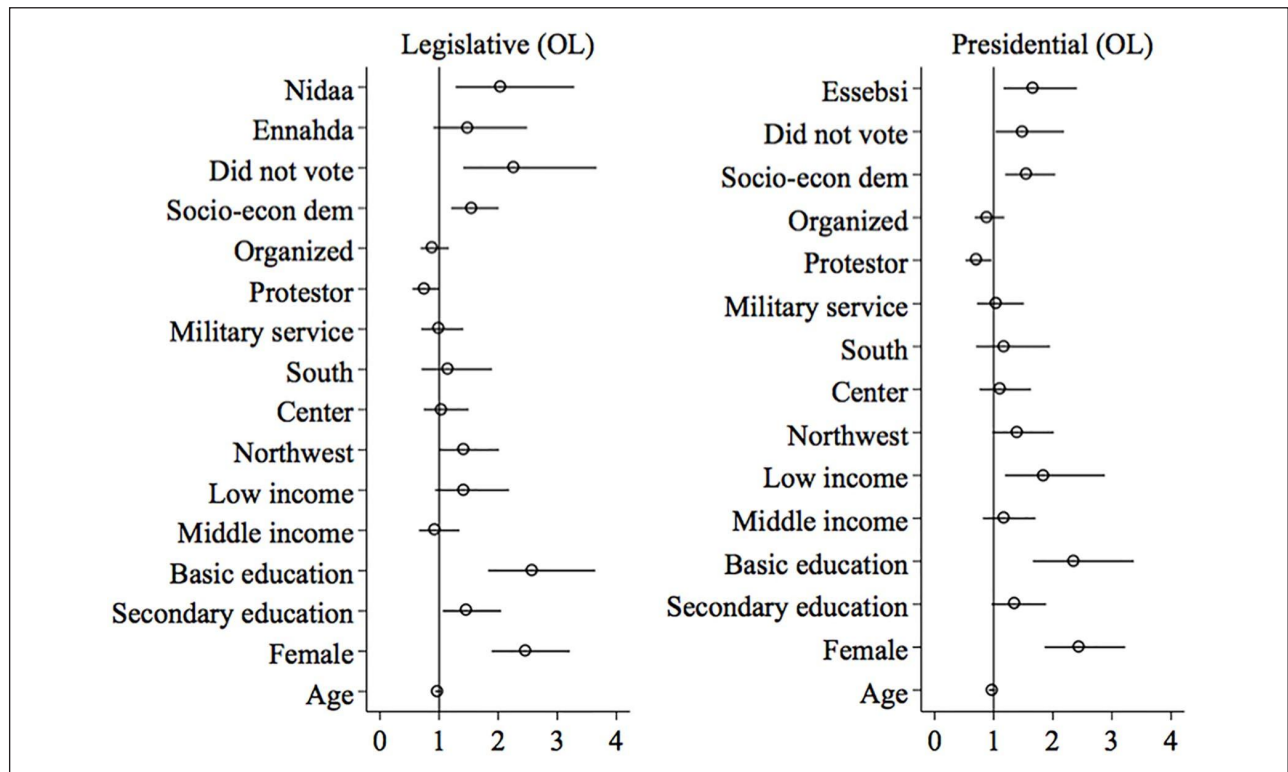
Our empirical findings lead us to reject the authoritarian holdover hypothesis (H1) and to focus on anti-establishment attitudes (H2) as a major driver of support for military role expansion. The results are mixed at best in terms of the former, but strongly support our claim that support for military role expansion is driven by anti-establishment sentiments.

In terms of the authoritarian holdover hypothesis, the coefficients for Nidaa Tounes and Essebsi, respectively, are significant and point in the expected direction in all models; contrary to our expectations, however, the coefficient for Ennahda is not negatively correlated with support for role expansion. Not only does it fail to reach statistical significance, it also points in the opposite direction from what we would have expected under the authoritarian

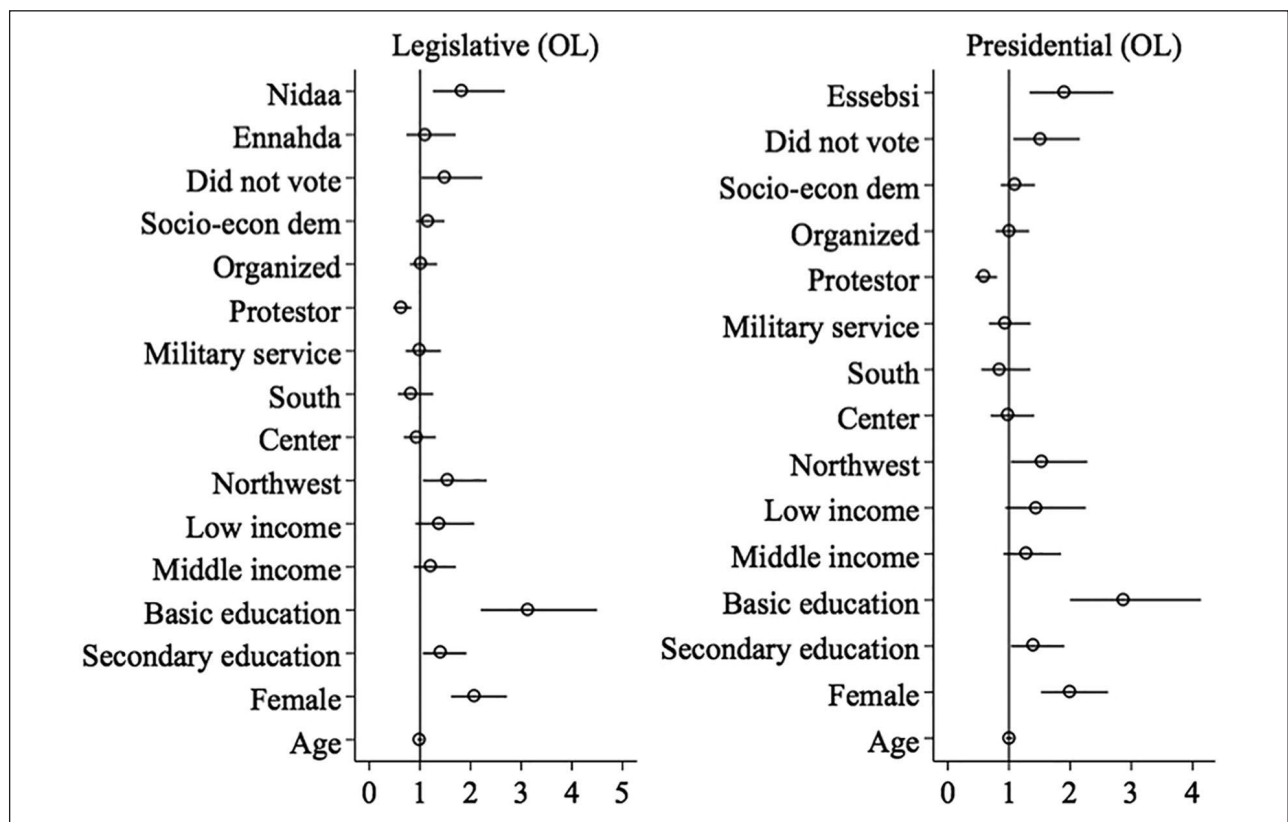
holdover hypothesis. Our observation thus gives rise to the interpretation that, perhaps as a consequence of collaborating during the transition period and serving in a coalition government, supporters of Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes have much more in common than one would expect from the perspective on authoritarian legacies. We therefore reject the authoritarian holdover hypothesis.

The anti-establishment hypothesis fares significantly better. We observe a positive and significant effect of non-participation in electoral politics on support for military role expansion in all six models. This effect, moreover, is substantively large: based on Model 2, the predicted probability of strongly agreeing that officers should serve in government increases by almost 100 percent from .12 to .23, comparing voters with non-voters and holding all other variables constant. Similarly, based on Model 3, the predicted probability of strongly agreeing with the military policing both political and economic protests is 44 percent higher for non-voters compared with voters (.13 vs. .09). The corresponding values for Models 5 and 6 are 46 percent (.19 vs. .13) and 50 percent (.14 vs. .09), respectively.

To test the robustness of our findings, we also estimated the effect of our independent variables on respondents' attitudes toward the military fighting terrorism and engaging in foreign peacekeeping—tasks typically



**Figure 5.** Coefficient plots for officers in government, ordered logit (OL) models.



**Figure 6.** Coefficient plots for protest policing, ordered logit (OL) models.

associated with the Tunisian military's role as a security provider. As we expect widespread support for these traditional military roles, there should be no substantive difference between anti-establishment and pro-establishment constituencies. This serves as a placebo test.

As Figures 7 and 8 (and Table A4, Models 1 and 2, and Models 4 and 5 in the Supplemental Appendix) reveal, the political cleavages that drive variation in popular perceptions of the military's role in politics appear to be irrelevant for popular views on the military's role model as a security provider. Neither assumption underlying our two hypotheses find support in the realms of fighting terrorism and engaging in peacekeeping.

### Additional Evidence

Our survey of popular views on the military identifies the main driver of support for military role expansion: anti-political establishment sentiments among a population disenchanted with political dynamics in Tunisia only a few years after Ben Ali's ousting. Findings regarding our second expectation are mixed thus far: while Nidaa Tounes supporters remain in favor of role expansion (as expected), surprisingly or not, supporters of the Islamist Ennahda party do not oppose an enhanced role for the military. We also remain cognizant of limitations to our empirical inquiry thus far: for one, our survey was conducted at a certain point in time, and we cannot rule out that specific events may have influenced popular perceptions of the military. For another, as noted above, the absence of an Islamist candidate in the 2014 presidential elections only allows for a partial test of our authoritarian holdover hypothesis.

To account for these limitations and further examine the robustness of our findings, we present a second test of our hypotheses using the 2018 Round Seven Afrobarometer survey data, where approximately 1,200 Tunisians were surveyed. We are interested to see to what degree Tunisians support the military's direct intervention into politics as a means to gauge strong support for what we conceptualized as military role expansion. We therefore use the following question from the 2018 Afrobarometer survey: "There are many ways to govern a country. Would you disapprove or approve of the following alternatives: The army comes in to govern the country?" (Afrobarometer 2018).<sup>10</sup>

Figure 9 corroborates findings from our own survey. Roughly half of the respondents shared positive views of a military intervention in politics. This fifty/fifty split is seen in our own data when it comes to the dimensions of military role expansion. For a more systematic analysis, we used questions from the Afrobarometer to specify an ordered logit model adopting variables similar to those we used for our own survey data.<sup>11</sup> For the main

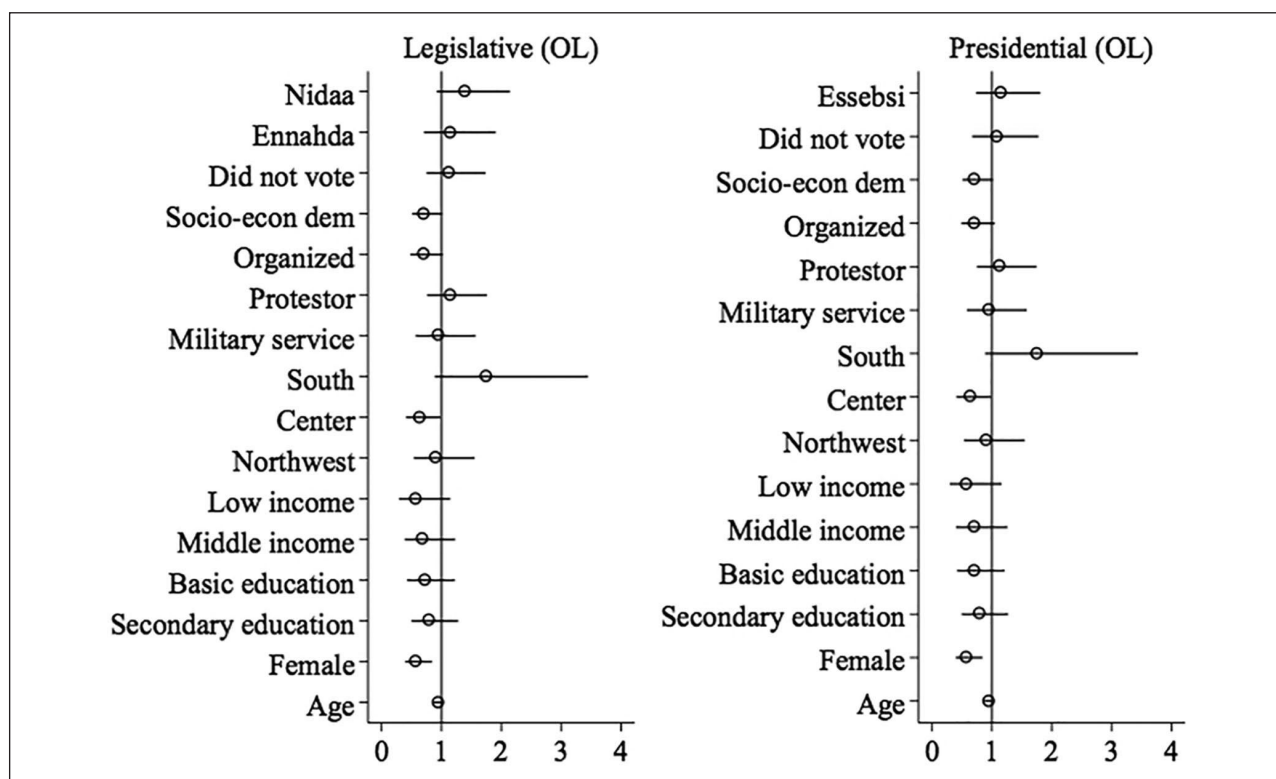
independent variable, we used the following question from the Afrobarometer survey data: "If presidential elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for?" We organized the variable into dummies for Ennahda, Nidaa Tounes, and Not Voting. The constant is respondents who would have voted for one of the other political parties. We also used questions asking whether respondents were members of a voluntary association and whether they protested in the last year. Controls were added for age, gender, education, and perceptions of standard of living. We report odds ratios with robust standard errors.

Again, the results reported in Figure 10 (and in Tables A5 and A6 in the Supplemental Appendix) lend support to the findings from our own survey. For one, the model confirms our anti-establishment hypothesis. Being a non-voter, while controlling for other variables, is correlated with being 1.9 times more likely to support the military's engagement in government. We also ran a separate multivariate model using a question that asks respondents whether or not they voted in the previous national election. Those who purposely did not vote in the previous election were correlated with being more likely to support military role expansion. Furthermore, we analyzed the data to determine the demographics of non-voters. Overall, they tend to be younger and fairly poorer (at least subjectively) than the rest of the population. This is in line with the demographic trends found in the previous survey.

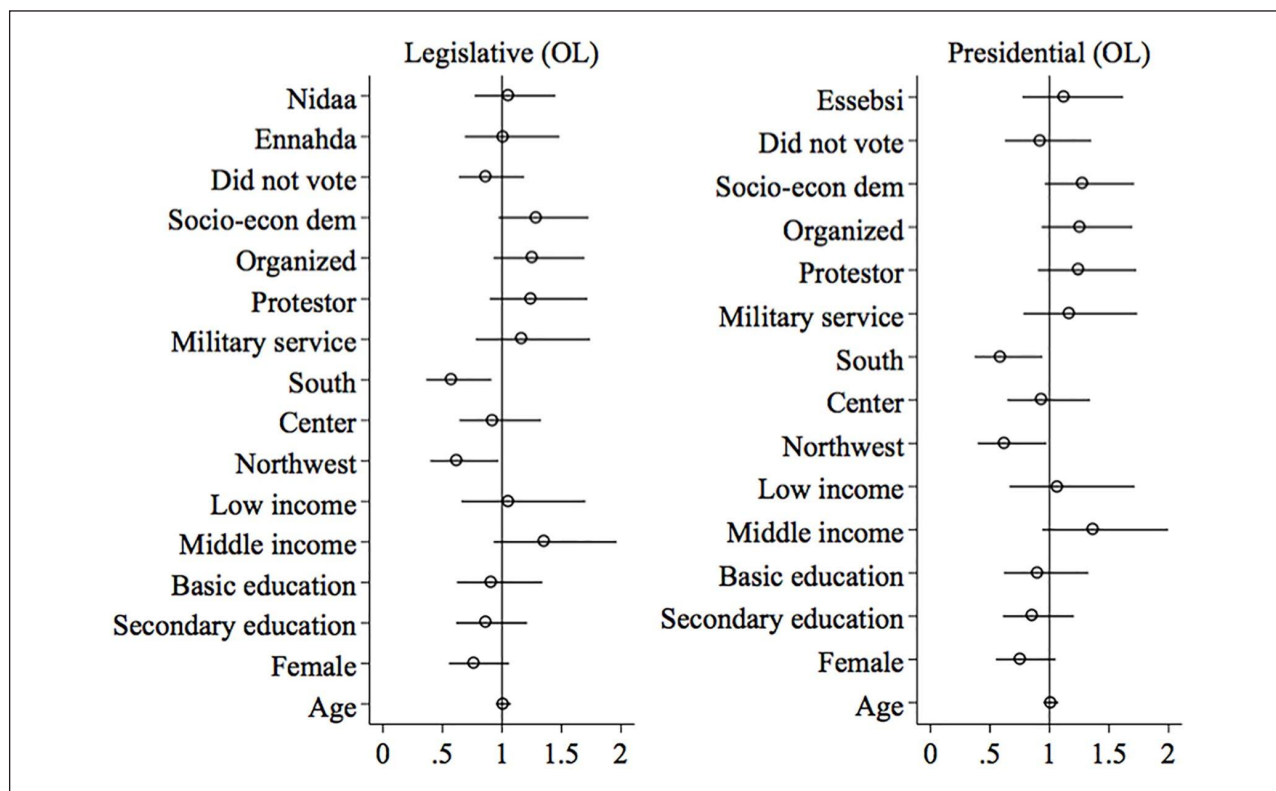
Furthermore, the results make us even less confident in the *authoritarian holdover hypothesis*. For partisanship, the coefficients are not in the expected direction. Supporters of Ennahda were more likely than Nidaa Tounes supporters to be in favor of military rule, with the latter variable failing to achieve statistical significance. It should be noted that the timing of this survey is different from our own and the nature of the question on party partisanship is different. Between 2014 and 2019, support for Nidaa Tounes declined substantially. Only 5 percent of respondents said they would vote for Nidaa Tounes in the following election in this survey, which represents a substantial drop in support. This could have potentially affected the results and explain the lack of statistical significance. Overall, the analysis of the Afrobarometer data provides strong support for the anti-political establishment hypothesis and helps dismiss our alternative expectation about differences emanating from an authoritarian holdover effect.

### Conclusion

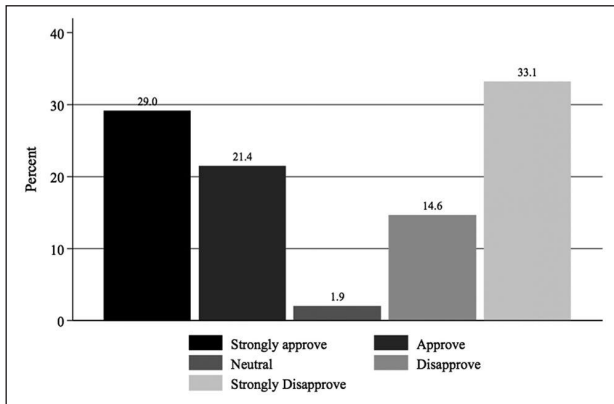
This article explored popular perceptions of the Tunisian military rather than the military's actual advancement into the realm of politics. Tunisia is a "hard case" for such an inquiry in that its military has remained one of the



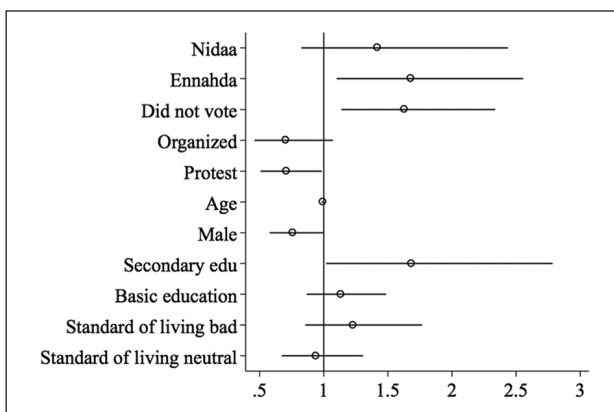
**Figure 7.** Coefficient plots for fighting terrorism, ordered logit (OL) models.



**Figure 8.** Coefficient plots for foreign peacekeeping, ordered logit (OL) models.



**Figure 9.** Approval of military rule (Afrobarometer 2018).



**Figure 10.** Coefficient plots for approval of military rule (Afrobarometer 2018).

most professionalized armed forces across the MENA region with no evidence to suggest paths of transition anywhere close to those in Egypt or Syria. And yet, our inquiry reveals two main findings: first, popular support for role expansion is real and substantial, with roughly 50 percent of the population calling on the military to assume a role beyond its narrow security mandate. Such a call for role expansion includes expectations for the military to help with policing political and economic protests but also more far-reaching dimensions in politics, including taking over the government. In our systematic analysis of specific political constituencies that are more prone to support role expansion than others, we find that current political dynamics drive popular support for military role expansion more prominently than memories of partisan politics from the country's authoritarian past: amid political uncertainty and economic crisis in Tunisia's transition to democracy, growing anti-system sentiments largely fuel popular support for military role expansion rather than the divide between old regime figures and Islamists.

These empirical insights from the Tunisian case have some theoretical implications and should inspire further

research on the topic. For one, scholars of democratic transition and consolidation will note a paradox in popular attitudes in this emerging democracy. Here is the good news: attitudes in Tunisia do not appear to be informed by authoritarian holdover despite the relatively short period of time since the authoritarian regime's breakdown, which calls into doubt arguments emphasizing the importance of authoritarian legacies. And yet, anti-democratic attitudes appear to emerge from uncertainties, setbacks, and political dynamics during the process of consolidation, which may inspire scholarship on democratic backsliding and authoritarian re-equilibration.

Furthermore, scholars in Middle Eastern studies and civil-military relations will come to notice a significant blind spot in the literature on armies in the Middle East and beyond: we still know relatively little about just how the people perceive the military and what they expect the officers to do. To the best of our knowledge, we present the first attempt to disaggregate popular attitudes toward armies with regard to both specific tasks the military is expected to perform and specific social and political constituencies whose expectations in the military vary significantly. Tunisia served as a viable case for our inquiry. Its democratic transition not only allowed respondents to share their opinions openly in our survey study, it also establishes the political context against which we can make broader claims about the possible impact of our study for the research program on democratic consolidation. Expansion into countries with authoritarian state-society relations—including states where the military plays a more prominent role in politics, such as Egypt, Algeria, or Jordan—will most certainly substantiate and test our understanding of popular perceptions of the military. We can see a new area of research to emerge from our attempt that would, in fact, take the “civil” in the field of civil-military relations more seriously than in most standard accounts in this research program largely focusing on the relations between officers and political incumbents, rather than the country's military and its citizens.

### Authors' Note

A previous version of the article was presented at the 2020 annual meeting of the *ISA West Annual Conference*, September 24–27. All errors are ours.

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## Notes

1. The survey data are available at <https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/>.
2. The data are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/8665RK>.
3. The survey was conducted during the period August–September 2017 by *One-to-One for Research and Polling* (<http://www.121polling.com/>). It represents a national quota sample of adults eighteen years and older. Respondents were selected according to the following quotas: governorate, urban/rural, gender, and age. Interviews were solicited proportionally to population size in terms of these variables. *One-to-One* estimates that only 20 to 25 percent of Tunisians have access to a landline and that there is a 95 percent probability that Tunisians who have landlines have a mobile phone. The survey therefore comprised 18 percent landlines and 82 percent mobile phones. Potential respondents' numbers were selected using two methods: a random selection from *One-to-One's* database and a random generation of mobile phone numbers from all mobile operators in Tunisia. The survey was conducted by Tunisian enumerators, using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) technology, and took approximately twenty-five to thirty minutes.
4. While Nidaa Tounes ran a presidential candidate with Béji Caïd Essebsi, Ennahda did not run a candidate of their own.
5. We do not consider the question on fighting the economic crisis here because we do not have clear theoretical expectations on this dimension. We report results for this variable in the Supplemental Appendix (Table A4).
6. A reasonably high Cronbach's alpha (.7140) suggests these components can be usefully aggregated.
7. Cronbach's alpha is .7476.
8. We exclude the lowest age category of eighteen to twenty-four years because some respondents in this category might not have been able to vote in 2014. The results are not sensitive to this restriction.
9. The models in Figure 5 might violate the proportional odds assumption ( $p = .051$  for the model drawing on legislative elections,  $p = .075$  for the model on presidential elections). As the Brant test misses the conventional threshold for statistical significance in both cases, we report coefficients from proportional odds models here. We further examine the violation of the proportional odds assumption and estimate partial proportional odds models (Williams 2016), which produce substantively similar results (Supplemental Appendix, Tables A7 and A8).
10. The data are available at <https://afrobarometer.org/data/337>.
11. The dependent variable is based on the question on approval of military rule in Figure 9, excluding the "neutral" category ( $n = 22$ ).

## Supplemental Material

Supplemental materials for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website.

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