Article

How Erroneous Beliefs Trigger Authoritarian Collapse: The Case of Tunisia, January 14, 2011

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Anne Wolf[1]

Abstract

Why was the longtime Tunisian ruler Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali ousted on January 14, 2011? Prevailing theories focus on popular mobilization, grievances, and the role of the army to explain the collapse of the authoritarian regime. I evaluate these arguments in light of new empirical evidence, which shows that they are insufficient to explain Ben Ali's ousting. Analyzing key decisional moments and counterfactual scenarios, I propose that the regime collapsed because of a set of erroneous beliefs, which flourished amid the contingent revolutionary context. Erroneous beliefs are endogenous to highly contingent revolutionary periods and a potential contingency themselves in that they can change collective outcomes. This study shows how the microanalysis of events can furnish new insights into highly impactful events in history—the collapse of the Ben Ali regime gave rise to the wider Arab Uprisings—and topics of key concern to scholars of contentious politics, authoritarianism, and democratization.

Keywords

Tunisia, Regime collapse, Arab uprising, contingency, democratization, erroneous beliefs, belief-formation, revolution, process-tracing

[1]All Souls College, Oxford, UK

Corresponding Author:
Anne Wolf, All Souls College, Oxford, OX1 2JD, UK.
Email: anne-margret.wolf@all-souls.ox.ac.uk

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Introduction

The collapse of the authoritarian regime of Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who left for Saudi Arabia amid mass protests on January 14, 2011, caught scholars completely off guard. Political scientists had long focused on the Arab world's apparent authoritarian resilience. Tunisia, in particular, was considered a poster child of successful "authoritarian upgrading" (Heydemann, 2007). And yet the Ben Ali regime collapsed just a month after mass protests erupted, inciting popular mobilization throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Since then, many theories have emerged to explain Ben Ali's fall and the Arab Uprisings more generally. The roots of the revolts lie in popular grievances, especially unemployment and police violence (Anderson, 2011; Goldstone, 2011). The suddenness by which long-standing regimes came under threat owed to the specific protest cascades and dynamics of diffusion (Della Porta, 2014; Hale, 2013). And variations in international relations, natural resources, and the army's conduct explain why some regimes collapsed whereas others proved highly resilient (Ambrosio, 2014; Bellin, 2012; Yom & Gause, 2012).

One thing most of these arguments share is retrospective determinism. Given specific prevailing conditions, the Ben Ali regime collapsed: Because the Tunisian army "sided with the protesters against the regime," Ben Ali fled the country (Lutterbeck, 2013, p. 36). "[Mass] protests. . . led to the regime's downfall" (Hmed, 2012, p. 33). I contend that certain arguments, specifically those on deprivation and mobilization, help to understand the wider context of regime decay and contention in which Ben Ali's ousting occurred. But they are in themselves insufficient to explain the regime's collapse. Other claims, such as those about the Tunisian army's defection, are erroneous.

In this paper, I propose that the Ben Ali regime collapsed on January 14, 2011, because of a set of erroneous beliefs and their consequences, specifically: (1) a security official's misconception that Ben Ali was at the airport that day to flee the country, which led him to defect; (2) Ben Ali's decision to join his family on a plane to Saudi Arabia following this defection, believing he could return to Tunisia promptly; and (3) the widespread belief that his leaving constituted an "escape" in that he did not intend to come back.

Erroneous beliefs reflect the high levels of contingency present during revolutionary episodes, that is, their indeterminate and open-ended character (Sewell, 1996; Ermakoff, 2015; Schwedler, 2022, p. 72). That regime breakdown involves contingency has long been recognized by scholars of democratization (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, pp. 2–4). More recent scholarship has shown that "radical uncertainty" (Lynch 2022) prevailed throughout the Arab Uprisings, affecting all actors—the protesters, security forces, political elites, and even apolitical sections of society (Beissinger,

2022; Bennani-Chraïbi, 2017; El-Ghobashy, 2021; Schwedler, 2022; Volpi & Jasper, 2018; Weyland, 2012). I push this research agenda further by focusing on Ben Ali's ousting on the critical day of January 14, 2011, and evaluating how one particular contingency—erroneous beliefs—altered one of "the most apparently durable trends of history" (Sewell, 1996, p. 263), that is, authoritarian stability in the Arab world. The breakdown of the Ben Ali regime had particularly wide-ranging effects, as it triggered pro-democracy revolts throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

This study takes up Kurzman's (2004, p. 6) call to investigate anti-explanations, that is, to "[compare] the lived experience of the event with the main explanations offered by studies of [the Arab Uprisings]." It also follows McAdam and Sewell's (2001) efforts to consider multiple temporalities alongside the corresponding units of analysis—a single day and individuals in this paper—and put them in dialogue with one another to assess whether specific findings may be artifacts of a dominant framework of analysis. Thereby, this paper is part of the "historical turn" in the literature on democratization (Capoccia & Ziblatt, 2010; Kreuzer, 2010). It also integrates research on contingency and belief-formation more closely into the literature on authoritarian politics, traditionally more concerned with "big causes" of regime collapse, such as coups and mass protests (Svolik, 2012; Geddes et al., 2018).

Methodologically, it draws on "explaining outcome process-tracing" (Beach, 2017) to propose a tentative roadmap for the study of highly contingent revolutionary periods, combining congruence analysis with micro-theory building. The study's narrow time frame and the political turmoil of the day called for utmost attention to internal validity in recognition that, particularly during moments of "compressed history," any actions, events, and beliefs, no matter how seemingly minor, may have wide-ranging consequences (Beissinger, 2002, p. 43). Thus, I examine a particularly wide range of qualitative sources, including written testimonies of key actors, video footage, recorded phone conversations, and interviews with key informants. This material provided ample opportunities to cross-check data, evaluate it against existing claims in the literature, and recreate the sequence of events leading to Ben Ali's ousting. I also investigate counterfactual scenarios. Most scholars agree that history cannot be discussed without them (Bunzl, 2004; Tetlock & Belkin, 1996), and case studies are well suited to counterfactual reasoning (Gerring, 2004, pp. 350–351).

The next sections review dominant explanations for the collapse of the Ben Ali regime and clarify what I mean by "erroneous beliefs." I then introduce the method and present the empirical analysis. The conclusion discusses the article's main findings and contributions.

The Arab Uprisings: Conditions of Regime Collapse

Why did some regimes collapse so swiftly during the Arab Uprisings while others proved highly resilient? The prevailing arguments suggest that certain conditions explain the breakdown of long-standing dictatorships in the Middle East and North Africa. Scholars have frequently cited regime decay and popular mobilization, while affirming that a country's international relations, natural resources, and the army's conduct account for variations in authoritarian resilience (Bellin, 2012; Lawson, 2019; Yom & Gause, 2012). In the case of Tunisia, international relations arguments are less pertinent. Most external actors, including the US and the EU, offered active support neither for the regime nor for the opposition.[1] Moreover, natural resource arguments typically pertain to some Gulf countries providing handouts to contain the protests (Brownlee et al., 2013; Yom & Gause, 2012). To explain Ben Ali's ousting, scholarship has focused on the following factors: regime decay, mass mobilization, the army's conduct, and elite divisions, often in a sequential or combinatorial approach. For the sake of analytical clarity, I will examine each of these separately below.

(1) Regime decay: Many works highlight popular grievances, such as poverty, unemployment, corruption, and police violence (Anderson, 2011; Goldstone, 2011; Salih, 2013). After all, the very person who sparked the Tunisian uprising—Mohamed Bouazizi—was an unemployed youth who set himself on fire after the police confiscated his vegetable goods and berated him. In addition, scholars have pointed out that a drought in 2010 made it difficult for rural citizens to make ends meet, giving rise to wider discontent (Ayeb & Bush, 2019; Holland, 2012; Soffiantini, 2020).

However, many of these grievances had been present for some time. In fact, repression was much worse in the 1990s (Perkins, 2014; Wolf, 2017). Tunisia had suffered from severe droughts before (Ayeb & Bush, 2019; USAID, 2015), and Mohamed Bouazizi was not the first person to have set himself on fire.[2] Moreover, the same grievances that affected Tunisians existed in many other Arab countries (Bellin, 2012, p. 139; Brownlee et al., 2013, p. 30). Some countries had even higher unemployment rates and were more impacted by the 2010 drought, yet mobilization varied starkly across the region. As Eva Bellin (2012, p. 140) rightly stressed, "incidence of grievance does not predict incidence of protest." Many regimes are in decay, by which I mean that they are in "stagnation and crisis" (Kalyvas, 1999, p. 333), but they do not necessarily break down, let alone through mass protests.

(2) Mass mobilization: Popular grievances do not automatically lead to mass mobilization, but they do make it more likely, specifically during moments of wider political crisis and turmoil (Della Porta, 2014; Schock, 2005; Tarrow, 1998). Following Ben Ali's ousting, scholars have examined the particular protest dynamics in Tunisia, including patterns of diffusion, to

explain the regime's sudden collapse (Barrie, 2021; Della Porta, 2014; Hale, 2013). One of the most important findings was that demonstrations were initially confined to the southern and interior regions, where they focused on socioeconomic demands, before becoming more political in nature and spreading to other parts of the country, eventually reaching the capital of Tunis (Barrie, 2021; Hmed and Raillard 2012; Piot, 2013).

One of the main contributions from this strand of literature is that it uncovered "the endogenous emergence of democratic demands" (Barrie, 2021, p. 3), that is, the contingent nature of the revolutionary process. What it does not provide, however, is an explanation for regime breakdown. After all, many authoritarian regimes have experienced mass protests—sometimes much more forcefully than those that occurred in 2010–11 in Tunisia—but they didn't necessarily break down. Popular grievances do not automatically lead to mass protests, and, equally, the presence of mass protests alone cannot explain regime breakdown, that is, why Ben Ali decided to leave the country so swiftly on January 14 after almost twenty-five years in power, during which he had defended his rule with an iron fist.

(3) The army's conduct: A notable number of scholars seeking to identify the missing link between the protests and regime breakdown have pointed to the army's role. They maintain that regime breakdown during the Arab Uprising ultimately depended on whether the army decided to defect or not (Brooks, 2011; Droz-Vincent, 2014; Albrecht et al., 2016; Burns, 2018). In particular, they have asserted that Tunisian officers "sided with the protesters against the regime" (Lutterbeck, 2013, p. 36) and that, abandoned by the military, Ben Ali thus fled the country on January 14. To explain the army's defection, scholars advance two points: (1) the military's long-standing marginalization from politics, which left some officers disgruntled; and (2) the army's professional and independent functioning—especially compared with many other Arab militaries—which meant that officers' positions and careers were generally not tied to the Ben Ali regime and that they were closer to the people (Albrecht et al., 2016; Bellin, 2012; Brooks, 2013; Lutterbeck, 2013).

While these two observations of the Tunisian military are correct, the obviousness of the defection argument has been deceptive, and it has only ever been asserted, never proven. As Jebnoun (2014) and Holmes and Koehler (2020) previously pointed out, there is no empirical evidence whatsoever suggesting that the Tunisian military sided with the protesters, though officers helped ensure a smooth political transition once Ben Ali had left. All available primary sources indicate that the army in fact supported Ben Ali until the very end. These sources include recorded phone conversations between the military chief and the president,[3] interviews with key informants,[4] and the written testimonies of senior officials, including a court statement by General Rachid Ammar, the army chief of staff during the Tunisian uprising.[5]

Scholars suggest that the military refused to shoot at protesters and that this evinces its defection (Brooks, 2013). However, in reality the military did kill protesters (Holmes & Koehler, 2020), though Ben Ali relied more heavily on other security personnel with administering heavy repression.[6] What is more, in a court statement dated January 25, 2011, General Ammar affirmed he supported Ben Ali throughout the protests. To underline his "loyalty" to the regime, Ammar testified that he waited for Ben Ali to give him more instructions. He even cited previous instances in which the army had "dutifully" protected the regime against popular protests, including through violence.[7] There is no reason to doubt his testimony, which was highly controversial in the revolution's immediate aftermath. It is also backed by other sources, with no evidence to the contrary.[8]

(4) Elite divisions: Last, I will briefly explore another explanation of regime collapse, which scholars of democratization and authoritarian politics frequently evoke, that is, elite divisions. A small number of works maintain that elite fractures explain the Ben Ali regime's collapse (Syed, 2014). In the first decade of the new millennium, Ben Ali increasingly personalized politics, marginalizing many figures from his ruling party and the elite (Wolf, 2018, 2024; Perry & Wolf, 2024). However, it is notable that none of the sidelined elites defected from the regime during the Tunisian uprising (Kchouk & Mamuji, 2019; Wolf, 2023). Indeed, those figures who turned against Ben Ali on January 14, such as his prime minister, were all longtime loyalists who benefited from his presidency. What is more, the prime minister decided to assume power only under immense pressure and in the face of limited political alternatives—there was no grand elite scheme to depose the president, as I will show.

Erroneous Beliefs and Authoritarian Collapse

A shortcoming of many works is that they muddle the causally distinct processes of regime decay and breakdown. Structural factors explain why a regime is in decay and help to understand why widespread contention may erupt in the first place. However, they say little about the specific dynamics of contention and cannot on their own explain its effects. In the context of the Ben Ali regime, structural vulnerabilities such as narrow personalist rule and socioeconomic downturn illuminate why sections of society desired political change. They also help us understand why some erroneous beliefs, which contributed to regime collapse, arose in the first place, as I will detail below. But they don't say much more concretely about how and why Ben Ali was ousted and why this was just one of several possible outcomes on January 14. Indeed, structural factors cannot explain why some regimes may not break down, despite existing vulnerabilities, and vice versa.

I agree with others that revolutionary experiences are full of "confusion" (Kurzman, 2004, p. 332), and thus I place the contingent at the very center of this investigation. At the most basic level, contingency entails the idea that "things could be different" (Schedler, 2007, p. 72). Scholars have recognized that contingency prevailed throughout the Arab Uprisings and affected all actors, though most works focus on the mass protests (Volpi & Jasper, 2018; El-Ghobashy, 2021; Schwedler, 2022; Lynch, 2022). They differentiate between distinct types of contingencies, such as chance happenings and accidents (Shapiro & Sonu, 2007; Volpi & Jasper, 2018), and investigate the properties of contingency itself, specifically "collective uncertainty," and their effects (Ermakoff, 2015). This article contributes to this research agenda by focusing on the role of erroneous beliefs amid the highly contingent context of the Tunisian uprising, scrutinizing their roots and possible consequences on Ben Ali's ousting.

I argue that erroneous beliefs are endogenous to highly contingent political processes. Revolutionary periods in particular are full of indeterminacy and uncertainty; they are moments of "compressed history" (Beissinger, 2002, p. 43). Events move quickly, often in unexpected ways, and thence people struggle to understand what is going on. Belief-formation is a mechanism to attribute meaning to the perceived chaos accompanying highly contingent political events. The formation and proliferation of erroneous beliefs, in particular, directly document the rise of contingency, as human error abounds during moments of stress and uncertainty. Agency enters the picture when we investigate how specific erroneous beliefs inform action, which is what people intentionally do. Individual action can play the role of "small causes" having "big effects," that is, they are "collective and enduring" (Ermakoff, 2015, p. 66). Thus, erroneous beliefs become a contingency themselves where they inform actions with wide-ranging consequences; other beliefs, including more accurate ones, would lead to different collective outcomes. I will elaborate below.

Erroneous beliefs are any beliefs based on incorrect, incomplete, or—at the very minimum—flawed propositions. Beliefs are an understanding of events, things, and the wider world in which a person has a minimum of confidence (Hedström, 2005; Kruglanski, 1989; Rydgren, 2011). Most people rely on others to form beliefs, including the media and their associates, who play important priming and framing roles. Beliefs are not always correct, and scholars have identified various factors contributing to the formation of biased or false beliefs. They show that "the more stressful and unpredictable a situation is, the greater is. . . the desire to reduce anxiety and uncertainty" (Rosnow, 1980, 587), yet this cognitive disposition is not contributive to truth-seeking. Indeed, as people seek to lower their anxiety, they are more likely to believe information that works for them and which they deem good (Rosnow, 1980; Rosnow & Foster, 2005; Rydgren, 2011). Actors often become aware of

the beliefs they hold only once they doubt their truthfulness, which helps explain why erroneous beliefs can be so persistent.

Scholars have recognized the importance of beliefs in antiregime contention (Sewell, 1985; Baker, 1990; Goodwin, 1994; Kalyvas, 1999, p. 335), although most do not investigate in more depth processes of belief-formation and most fail to disaggregate between beliefs that are erroneous and those that are not. Kalyvas (1999, p. 335) noted that "[regime] breakdown is a process full of highly contingent and subjective factors, wherein beliefs cause events and events change beliefs." It was, in fact, the Iranians' perception that the monarchy was vulnerable—as opposed to any objective structural vulnerabilities—that paved the way for the success of the 1978–79 Iranian Revolution (Kurzman, 1996). Conversely, Weyland (2012, p. 922) argues that people's mistaken belief that the 1848 French Revolution could be repeated elsewhere led to "ill-considered challenges against established rulers in very diverse contexts." Incomplete or incorrect information has also led incumbents to make decisions that have facilitated their own demise: The 1986 People Power Revolution in the Philippines that toppled Ferdinand Marcos was triggered by a snap election, which Marcos wrongly believed he would win swiftly (Beissinger, 2022, p. 10). Similarly, Chile's Augusto Pinochet overestimated his popularity and called for a national referendum to prolong his mandate, but he lost, "splitting the elite and empowering opponents" (Treisman, 2020, p. 793).

Treisman (2020) has shown that incumbent mistakes can lead to unintended democratization. Actions become mistakes in light of their suboptimal or undesired outcomes (Beissinger, 2022; Przeworski, 1991; Treisman, 2020). Mistakes are a form of contingency in that the very notion suggests another outcome could have been possible. However, I conjecture that mistakes are often a mere consequence of specific erroneous beliefs, and which affect all actors—not just incumbents. Notably, erroneous beliefs do not necessarily lead to mistakes: They may have no effects whatsoever, while some may even result in the desired or a superior outcome. Erroneous beliefs particularly flourish during revolutionary contexts: Actors are trying to keep up with the fast-paced events, but time restraints and contention in increasingly dense urban spaces mean "the stakes and risks are great" (Beissinger, 2022), limiting opportunities to check information. Notably, in the case of Tunisia, Ben Ali made the decision to leave for Saudi Arabia while at the airport under immense stress and amid time constraints, which made it difficult to process and verify information. During such great uncertainty, heightened by spatial and temporal pressures, erroneous beliefs abound.

What is more, the structural vulnerabilities of a regime in crisis can bestow some credibility on any false information. In the case of Tunisia, key vulnerabilities pertained to Ben Ali's narrow personalist rule; he controlled all executive power and had promoted many of his relatives to key public posts

(Wolf, 2023). During the Tunisian uprising, the regime's personalist nature had three important consequences: First, Ben Ali—detached from the reality on the ground— vastly overestimated his capacity to restore order (Wolf, 2023). Second, many presidential relatives became focal points of the protest movement, which left them anxious and panicked (Belkhodja & Cheikhrouhou, 2013). Third, it gave rise to rumors about the presidential family, as people sought to make sense of their strategies and actions.

In situations where political uncertainty predominates, specifically during periods of contentious politics, actors make their behaviors conditional on those of others, as they are "at a loss to figure out where they collectively stand" (Ermakoff, 2015, p. 67). This includes regime figures. Nobody wants to belong to the losing side. Any instance of defection, escape, or simply inaction—or, importantly, the mere belief therein, even if erroneous—may trigger a wider trend of behavioral adjustment, which in turn may completely alter the overall balance of forces. Thus, individual-level erroneous beliefs can alter collective outcomes. I propose that a wider process of behavioral adjustment occurred in Tunisia on January 14, when people broadly believed that Ben Ali left to seek exile abroad, which ultimately led to his ousting that day.

Methods

The study of erroneous beliefs during a revolutionary period can be methodologically challenging, specifically because erroneous beliefs can be so persistent, sometimes even in the academic literature. What is more, most established research methods in political science are not suited to investigating temporarily narrow periods, let alone issues of uncertainty and beliefs. I thus had to draw my own methodological roadmap. I borrow from "explaining outcome process-tracing," which "serves to gain a greater understanding of the causal dynamics that produced the outcome of a particular historical case" (Beach, 2017, p. 1). In a first step, "an existing cause (or set of causes) and the associated mechanisms are tested to see whether they can account for the outcome [under investigation]" (21), here, the collapse of the Ben Ali dictatorship. This article previously established that none of the prevailing arguments in the literature—popular deprivation, mass mobilization, the army's conduct, and the elite—are sufficient in explaining Ben Ali's ousting, whether on their own or in combination.

Secondary sources can perpetrate misinformation during highly contingent political contexts. Therefore, it is imperative to rely on primary material to test existing claims, where possible, including audiovisual sources, official testimonies, and author interviews, to triangulate information and to stop this process only once new data does not reveal more information.[9]

In a second step, I pursued a theory-building path to come up with "a new mechanism that can account for the elements of the outcome that were unaccounted for" (21). This "micro-theory" elucidates only the case under investigation; future research will have to test its wider applicability. I have used an inductive approach to theory building that involved the study of both works on contingency and the available empirical evidence, which will be discussed in more detail in subsequent sections. I organized my data both in a chronological and a thematic fashion, according to important themes, actors, places, decisions, and beliefs, given the latter's potentially wide-ranging consequences. Once I gained a solid understanding of certain trends, I explored others by gathering more primary material. This meant that I constantly updated my research priorities in a dialectical way, including by devising new interview questions and revisiting specific information. Notably, I also documented and evaluated all contradictory information, not only including primary sources but also secondary material. Inconsistencies themselves document the rise of contingency, when confusion and misinformation mount, and they typically reveal important information about actors' interpretations of events. On the basis of this work, I propose that erroneous beliefs provide the missing link between antiregime contention and the collapse of Ben Ali's personalist dictatorship on January 14, 2011.

I have employed an action-centered understanding of "mechanisms" that focuses on "how actions and interactions bring about a change in state" (Ermakoff, 2022, p. 206), which is particularly suitable to investigating the study's unit of analysis: individuals. The key is to scrutinize which factors "bear on actors' minds as they make their choices" (208). I do this by centering the investigation on decisional moments—moments in which individuals exercise substantial agency and influence the direction of events, sometimes in unexpected or unintended ways (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Ermakoff, 2015). Three decisional moments stand out in this study: (1) the commander of Tunisia's Antiterrorism Brigade, Samir Tarhouni, defecting; (2) Ben Ali's decision to fly to Saudi Arabia; and (3) Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi's decision to invoke the constitution to assume power. I suggest that all decisional moments were informed by erroneous beliefs—of either those who took them or others. By focusing on beliefs, specifically those based on incomplete, wrong, or flawed propositions, I suggest that other sets of beliefs may have led to a different outcome.

I test this by investigating counterfactual scenarios. Any nonexperimental research must scrutinize counterfactuals to test causal claims (Fearon, 1991, p. 194). Studies focusing on the causal dynamics of a specific historical event are well suited to counterfactual reasoning (Gerring, 2004), particularly if it is temporarily limited (Bunzl, 2004). In such instances, the counterfactual may scrutinize only "conceivable causes," that is, "factors that could actually have been different" in the specific case under investigation (Fearon, 2021, p. 41)—

here, the Tunisian political context. These factors do not necessarily need to "be consistent with well-established theoretical and empirical generalizations" (Treisman, 2020). Of course, there is no way of establishing with absolute certainty what else could have happened. I merely intend to identify possible alternative scenarios and evaluate their credibility and likelihood.

What helps formulating counterfactuals, specifically in action-centered process tracing, is knowing what the individuals under investigation wanted. This allows one to "make inferences about how [they] would have acted based on the assumption that agents will choose the best way (by their lights) to achieve their wants based on their beliefs" (Bunzl, 2004, p. 852). While it can sometimes be difficult to ascertain the motives of historical actors, in the Tunisian context I propose that (1) Ben Ali wanted to stay in power, and (2) Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi wanted to retain political leverage once the president had left. In fact, both actors themselves confirmed to have had these intentions.[10] The counterfactuals thus focus on how alternative beliefs—specifically those based on more accurate information—may have informed their actions, with a focus on the decisional moments under investigation.

The study's short time frame offered many opportunities for data collection and evaluation. As many secondary sources repeated misinformation—with the important exception of a study by Abdelaziz Belkhodja and Tarak Cheikhrouhou (2013)—I sought out mostly primary material to recreate the sequence of events leading to Ben Ali's departure. I used the following four types of sources: (1) written testimonies of key actors, specifically 206 court statements; (2) photographs and video footage of specific scenes, including at the airport; (3) recorded phone conversations among senior regime officials; and (4) author interviews. I conducted ninety-nine semi-structured interviews totaling 164 hours, which were anonymized, unless conducted with senior public figures who agreed to speak on record.

Different types of sources are vulnerable to different biases, and in the appendix I have provided details on these potential pitfalls and how I dealt with them. The narrow time frame, the variety of types of sources, and the wealth of information available boosted the study's internal validity.

Tunisia, January 14, 2011

I begin the empirical analysis by elucidating wider developments on January 14, 2011, before Ben Ali left. By January 14, a total of 125 people had died in the uprising—96 had been gunned down by the security forces—and the demonstrations were quickly increasing in number and magnitude (Belkhodja & Cheikhrouhou, 2013). Protests had reached the capital city, Tunis, and massive crowds of people were calling for the

regime's downfall at Avenue Bourguiba, the central square downtown. While responding with harsh repression, Ben Ali also increasingly portrayed himself as reconciliatory, announcing a series of political and economic reforms and pledging that he would not seek another term as president. On January 13, in an address to the nation, he conceded that he had "made mistakes" and appealed to the people to forgive him (Fitouri, 2021). Notably, during a phone conversation with an associate later that day, Ben Ali "sound[ed] reassured" (MEE Staff, 2022). Wider trends on January 14, 2011, suggest that Ben Ali had not planned on leaving at all that day—despite mounting protests.

(1) The formal political opposition: Not only the president but also many prominent formal political opposition figures believed in a path of political reform and reconciliation—as opposed to revolution. In a BBC article entitled "Tunisian Opposition Welcomes President Ben Ali's Pledge," published on January 14, the opposition figure Nejib Chebbi affirmed that Ben Ali's speech the previous day was "important politically and corresponds to the expectations of civil society and the opposition." He further elaborated that "the president has touched on the heart of the issue, demands for reform," stressing his satisfaction that Ben Ali "promised not to put himself forward for the election" (BBC, 2011).

In addition, senior Ben Ali officials testified that they had reached out to key opposition figures, such as Chebbi, and that many had agreed to take part in a political debate on the evening of January 14. This was broadcast on al-Wataniya, Tunisia's main public television channel, and it expressly sought out political reconciliation.[11] After almost twenty-five years of Ben Ali's rule, political reform was the best option that many hoped for. Few, if any, had even considered the possibility that Ben Ali would leave, let alone so swiftly, a tendency underlining the urgency to explain why he, in fact, did. Far from defecting, most elite actors indeed publicly supported the president's reform initiative.

(2) The presidential palace: On the night leading up to January 14, dozens of Ben Ali relatives gathered at the presidential palace in Carthage, where they sought refuge from the protesters.

Ben Ali's family members had become a focal point of the demonstrators, especially Ben Ali's in-laws—the Trabelsis—who had been accused of enriching themselves on the backs of the people, in addition to competing for the presidency (Rijkers et al., 2014, p. 3; Wolf, 2023). Some relatives feared that Ben Ali might arrest some of his own to tame the protesters' anger.[12] Even one of Ben Ali's key advisers suggested he "give[s] a clear and strong signal about his associates who are at the origin of the popular feelings of injustice."[13] Much of the protesters' anger was, in fact, directed against the Trabelsis more so than against Ben Ali himself. As a result, many of the president's kin decided to leave the country on January 14. They wanted to seek safety abroad

until Ben Ali had gained control of the turmoil—at least, that was their plan. As one relative testified, "nobody" even considered the possibility that Ben Ali himself would be ousted that day,[14] an impression many protesters shared (Wolf, 2023, 191).

Tracing Ben Ali's Departure

Ben Ali's own leaving can be understood only in the context of the Trabelsi family's sudden departure on January 14, 2011. At around noon that day, Ben Ali's kin headed to the airport. The group included particularly infamous figures, such as Imed Trabelsi, the president's nephew and one of the wealthiest and most corrupt figures of the regime. Their arrival at the airport did not get unnoticed. Pictures and videos of the relatives in the airport's VIP lounge invigorated the protests when they were circulated on social media, to the distress of the Trabelsis. Their insecurity was reinforced by an extended waiting period: Their planes were not ready, and many relatives first had to be issued new travel documents, having left their homes in such haste that they hadn't brought their passports with them (Wolf, 2023, 201).

While the Trabelsis were awaiting their departure, Ben Ali also decided to remove his immediate family—his wife Leila and their children—from the country. According to the testimonies of Nabil Chettaoui—then head of Tunisair and in charge of the presidential plane—and of Ben Ali's personal

Table 1. Timeline of Key Events on January 14, 2011.

Night/early morning	The Trabelsis seek refuge at the presidential palace
Around noon	The Trabelsis leave for the airport Ben Ali gives orders to get the presidential plane ready for his immediate family to depart to Saudi Arabia
4:00 p.m	Ben Ali's family convinces him to accompany them to the airport to ensure their safety
4:30 p.m	Tarhouni heads to the airport after receiving information that Ben Ali is about to leave the country
5:47 p.m	The presidential plane leaves for Saudi Arabia with Ben Ali
Around 6:15 p.m	Mohamed Ghannouchi and other senior officials meet at the Ministry of the Interior to discuss how to react to Ben Ali's departure
6:45 p.m	Mohamed Ghannouchi declares in an address to the nation that he has invoked Article 56 of the Constitution to assume the interim presidency
10:50 p.m	Ben Ali arrives in Saudi Arabia

pilot, at around noon on January 14, Ben Ali gave orders to get his plane ready.[15] The plan was for his family to stay somewhere safe until he had reassumed political stability (see Table 1 for the timeline of events).[16]

Mounting Political Uncertainty

The Trabelsi family's attempt at escape led to increased political indeterminacy. In the videos shared of them at the airport, they appeared exhausted, nervous, and anxious. They looked weak. This reinforced a sense of insecurity among various regime figures, who had so far loyally served the president. These actors were increasingly "[searching] for behavioral cues from peers" (Ermakoff, 2015, p. 67). Such features, typical during moments of heightened political contingency, opened the airport episode up to various outcomes, some of which had not existed before.

First Decisional Moment: Samir Tarhouni Defects

The conduct of one person, that is, Colonel Major Samir Tarhouni, the head of the Antiterrorism Brigade, was to have wide-ranging consequences. In video footage he is seen searching for the Trabelsis at the airport. Court testimonies reveal that Tarhouni's wife, who worked at the airport, had called him around 4:30 p.m. to tell him that the presidential plane was about to leave and that Ben Ali was on it.[17] Believing Ben Ali intended to seek exile abroad, that is, that his regime was about to collapse, Tarhouni left for the airport with the intention to arrest the Trabelsis.[18] Tarhouni himself testified that, together with a few members of his unit, he headed to the airport and searched for the Trabelsis there to arrest them, as he was dismayed that the security forces "were about to shoot unarmed people [while] the entire family. . . wanted to escape."[19]

Importantly, other key officials who learned about Tarhouni's actions did not align with his behavior. They tried to understand who had given Tarhouni orders; once it became apparent that he was acting on his own, key figures, such as the minister of defense, the army chief of staff, and the head of presidential security, tried to stop this rogue officer.[20] Tarhouni, however, continued his pursuit of the Trabelsis, believing he had received privileged information from his wife about Ben Ali's imminent ousting and that other officials simply were not yet aware of this. The head of Tunisia's Intervention Force, Jallal Boudriga, recalled that Tarhouni tried to convince him of Ben Ali's escape, which Boudriga initially believed to be untrue.

Second Decisional Moment: Ben Ali Embarks for Jeddah

Ben Ali's departure for Saudi Arabia occurred amid this quickly mounting atmosphere of confusion at the airport. According to Ben Ali's personal pilot, it was the head of presidential security, Ali Seriati, who convinced Ben Ali to accompany his family to Saudi Arabia when he heard about Tarhouni's conduct; information, however, was incomplete and difficult to assess. Ben Ali himself recounted a similar story, testifying that Seriati initially only "recommended. . . that he lets his wife and children board a plane" but later "insisted that the president flies with his family to Jeddah and stays there for a few hours until the security agencies. . . guarantee [his] security." Other sources similarly suggest that Ben Ali boarded the plane spontaneously, given Tarhouni's actions, but that he always intended to return promptly to Tunis.[21]

Notably, after the revolution Seriati testified in court that he had, in fact, convinced Ben Ali to seek exile in Saudi Arabia days earlier.[22] Many previous regime figures retrospectively claimed to have played a role in Ben Ali's ousting—even if they hadn't—in an attempt to bolster their own image after the collapse of the dictatorship. However, the president's ousting was not in Seriati's interest but rather made him vulnerable; as a close presidential associate, Seriati served three years in prison after Ben Ali's departure. Therefore, it is more likely that Seriati advised the president to leave temporarily given the information he had received about Tarhouni's behavior at the airport. It was probably a spontaneous response to "inconsistent and contradictory" cues (Ermakoff, 2015, p. 100) amid rising insecurity and panic among regime officials, ultimately meant to protect Ben Ali, and not an organized attempt at deposing him.[23]

During moments of heightened stress and anxiety, individuals use shortcuts to make sense of what is going on, which contributes to the formation of flawed, if not false beliefs (Rydgren, 2011). In hindsight Ben Ali himself affirmed that his decision to leave was based on wrong information.[24] He stepped on the plane believing he could drop his family in Jeddah and, once his associates had investigated and dismantled the Tarhouni group, promptly return to Tunisia. At 5:47 p.m. on January 14, the presidential plane departed for Jeddah.

Third Decisional Moment: Mohamed Ghannouchi Takes over Power

Soon after Ben Ali left Tunisia, the rumor began circulating that he left to seek exile abroad. Massive crowds of people at Avenue Bourguiba celebrated their perceived victory, and international media outlets circulated pictures of them cheering and dancing, further propagating the narrative that "Ben Ali [had] fled his country after weeks of mass protests culminated in a victory for people power" (Chrisafis & Black, 2011). There was little questioning of his

"escape," and commentators instead deliberated specificities of his assumed departure, such as which country would accept the now "deposed" dictator (Lemal, 2011). Misinformation multiplied in the hours that followed, with prominent newspapers reporting that Ben Ali had tried to land in France but had been refused entry (Lemal, 2011), among other examples.

It is in light of the widespread belief that Ben Ali had fled his country for good—not only in Tunisia but also internationally—that later events that evening must be understood. Shortly after Ben Ali's departure and the eruption of celebrations of the so-called Tunisian Revolution, a group of high officials met at the Interior Ministry to discuss how to respond to the new situation. These included the prime minister, the defense and interior ministers, and the chief of staff of the Tunisian armed forces. Mohamed Ghannouchi, then prime minister, testified that during the meeting, "the defense minister affirmed that … [he] is not capable of guaranteeing the security of the president, if he ever wants to return to the country."[25] The defense minister reportedly insisted that "if [Ben Ali tried], there would be a bloodbath," and proposed to invoke constitutional provisions to formally depose the president.[26] At 6:45 p.m., in a televised address to the nation, Mohamed Ghannouchi declared that he had invoked Article 56 to "assume the function of interim president," elaborating that "President Ben Ali was temporarily incapable of exercising power" (Al Jazeera, 2011).[27]

Notably, Article 56 did not give Ghannouchi the power to assume the interim presidency himself; it only allowed the incumbent president—Ben Ali—to "delegate" this function "by decree" to the prime minister. This is important insofar as Ghannouchi's assumption of the interim presidency can be considered a coup, as he acted outside the constitutional framework and further informed Ben Ali that he would not be able to ensure his safety if he decided to return.[28] Ghannouchi and his associates did not have a long-standing plan to depose Ben Ali and assume power, however. Their actions were spontaneous and occurred amid increasing distress and panic among senior regime officials.

In fact, Ben Ali's departure and the widespread perception that he had fled for good altered the calculations of close presidential associates: If they denied this narrative and continued to support Ben Ali, they would themselves become the target of the protest movement. Crucially, the belief in Ben Ali's escape had shifted the power balance between the regime and its adversaries. The people's perceived success invigorated and strengthened the protest movement, with an ever-greater number of people flocking to the streets. This made any move against them risky. By contrast, with Ben Ali out of the country, Ghannouchi and his associates had a relatively low-cost political opportunity to assume power and save their own skins by ostensibly siding with the people—even if they opposed revolutionary transformations.

Possible Counterfactual Scenarios

This section explores possible counterfactual scenarios for the day of January 14, 2011, to scrutinize if regime collapse that day was indeed contingent on erroneous beliefs. In particular, I investigate what may have happened if actors had held different beliefs, that is, if (1) Tarhouni did not think Ben Ali was escaping; (2) if Ben Ali had known he could not return to Tunisia; and (3) the people did not believe Ben Ali escaped. I focus on "conceivable causes," "factors that could actually have been different" in the specific case under investigation (Fearon, 2021, p. 41), in light of both the particular power dynamics during the Tunisian uprising as well as broader historical trends—while other instances of revolutions and regime collapse offer some comparative insights. Of course, there is no way of knowing with absolute certainty what would have happened. The purpose of this section is merely to identify plausible alternative scenarios and assess their credibility and likelihood for the day of Ben Ali's ousting (Figure 1).

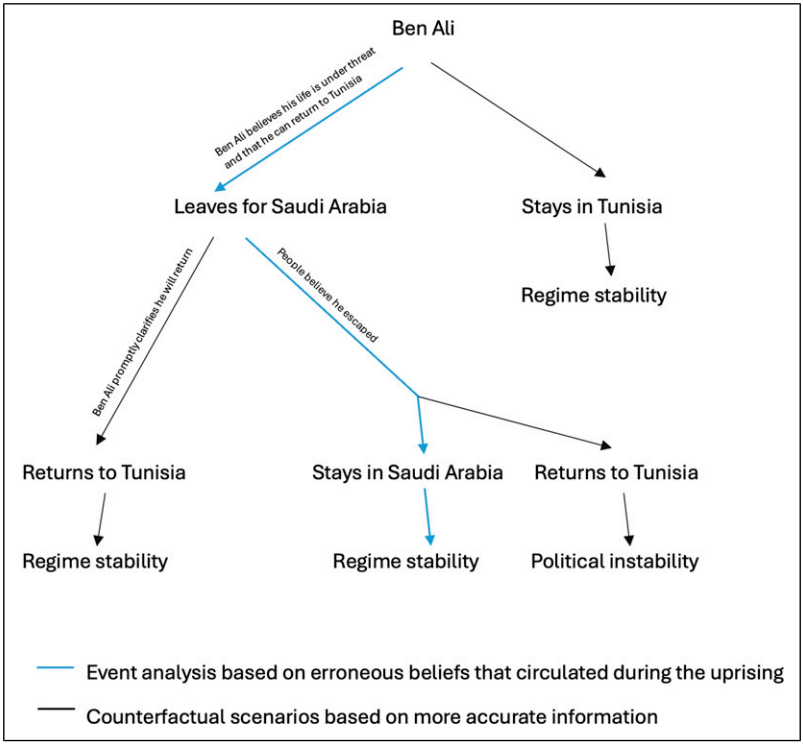

Figure 1. Event analysis of Ben Ali's departure: Possible trajectories.

Scenario 1: Tarhouni did Not Believe Ben Ali was Escaping

It is highly unlikely that Tarhouni would have headed to the airport to arrest the Trabelsis if he hadn't believed Ben Ali was escaping. Tarhouni only went to the airport once his wife informed him about Ben Ali's supposed departure. The Trabelsis had been at the airport for over 4 h by that time, and this was public knowledge, yet Tarhouni did not defect. Convinced that Ben Ali was seeking exile abroad, Tarhouni sought to portray himself as a leader of the revolution, even asking journalists to come to the airport and cover the arrest.

Scenario 2: Ben Ali Knew He wouldn't be Able to Return to Tunisia

Ben Ali's departure to Saudi Arabia was informed by two beliefs: first, that he was in danger and, second, that he would be able to return to Tunisia. Of course, it is difficult to argue that Ben Ali was not under threat at the airport, given a security officer's defection close by. However, the extent of this threat may have been exaggerated, as Tarhouni sought to arrest only the Trabelsis, not Ben Ali, and his actions did not prompt a defection cascade. In fact, various officials immediately sought to arrest Tarhouni and proceeded with this plan even once Ben Ali's plane was airborne.[29] What is more, Ben Ali believed he could return to Tunisia. Had he known that that wasn't an option, he may have decided to stay and face his adversary.

What would have happened if Ben Ali had stayed in Tunisia? While we cannot know for sure, given the highly contingent political context, it is plausible that regime stability would have prevailed, at least in the short term. Tunisia has no history of violent coups (Perkins, 2014), and the president had surrounded himself with close loyalists (Wolf, 2023). It is unlikely that Ghannouchi and his associates would have wanted—let alone dared—to confront him in Tunisia. Their power grab on January 14, 2011, was not organized but was a spontaneous response to a very unique situation, including Ben Ali having left Tunisia; even during recorded phone conversations with the ousted Ben Ali, they appear subservient and apologetic about events.

Notably, as demonstrated earlier in the article, the army also remained loyal to Ben Ali until the end—even once Tarhouni had defected—making any attempt at ousting him inside Tunisia risky. Individual instances of defection are in fact very common during revolutionary episodes. Also, much of the security forces' anger was directed at Ben Ali's in-laws, and only secondarily at the president. Of course, there is no way to know for sure if popular mobilization would have dissipated, given the inherently contingent nature of protest cascades (Clarke and Kocak 2018; Hale, 2013; Pearlman, 2018). It is tempting to argue that it was just a matter of time until the regime collapsed,

but scholarship warns of such retrospective determinism (Kalyvas, 1999, pp. 332–33). We simply do not know if popular mobilization would have continued and, if so, for how long and with what effects. But what we do know is that, in the absence of further defections, protests would have been much less likely to result in regime collapse.

Scenario 3: The People did Not Believe Ben Ali Had Escaped

First, let us explore whether this scenario is realistic. Could people have learned that Ben Ali was en route to Saudi Arabia yet believed this was *not* an attempt to seek exile abroad? Yes, I argue, especially if Ben Ali had immediately explained he was only dropping off his family and would return to Tunisia. An instructive comparative example is that of Turkey's Recep Erdoğan, who, amid a coup attempt in 2016, addressed the nation from his mobile phone in a live stream to clarify he was still in power at a time when some opponents were already cheering his supposed "escape" (Poole, 2016). Had Ben Ali similarly clarified that he was fully in charge, he may have nipped any narratives about his "escape" in the bud. In fact, many revolutionaries recalled a brief state of collective confusion, during which they had been seeking more information as they didn't immediately believe Ben Ali had left for good. They typically suggested "it seemed too premature. . . it didn't make sense."[30] So why didn't Ben Ali clarify his intentions right away? Arguably, Ben Ali was still not aware of the severity of the situation on the ground. Personalist dictators frequently overestimate the stability of their rule (Beissinger, 2022), so when Ben Ali learned that Mohamed Ghannouchi had assumed power, he responded with utter disbelief (Nader, 2022). Moreover, timing matters: Any clarification would probably only have worked if provided straightaway. By the time Ben Ali arrived in Jeddah, the political opposition had already won the war of beliefs, in that the erroneous belief had become the generally accepted narrative.

Ben Ali was initially still fully intent on returning to Tunis. When Ben Ali arrived in Jeddah on the night of January 14, 2011, he ordered his pilot to get the plane ready for his return the following day, though the pilot flew back without him under orders from the new authorities.[31] Testimonies reveal that Ben Ali tried to convince his associates in Tunisia to help him return to the country weeks after his ousting.[32] While it would be facile to retrospectively dismiss such intentions as unrealistic, it is notable that other presidents have left their countries amid political crisis and later returned, such as Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh, who sought medical treatment abroad in 2011 when protests and calls for his ousting were fast increasing in magnitude. Charles de Gaulle's weeklong stay in Baden-Baden is another historic example illustrating that some presidents have successfully sought refuge abroad to weather political crisis.

What would have happened if Ben Ali had tried to return to Tunisia once people widely believed he had escaped for good, with revolutionaries celebrating their "victory"? Ben Ali's own decision to stay in Saudi Arabia, however reluctantly, suggests that he doubted his ability to recreate political stability if he returned to Tunisia, and I concur with this assessment. Ben Ali's presumed fleeing had an "epistemic impact" (Figure 2) in that it redrew "expectations about collective outcomes in a way that crucially [shaped] the likelihood of these outcomes" (Ermakoff, 2015, p. 80). In Tunisia, people began celebrating their "victory." This narrative was picked up internationally as influential media outlets reported that Ben Ali sought exile abroad on the evening of January 14, 2011. Thus, the erroneous belief became the official narrative. This, in turn, led key diplomatic partners to express their support for the revolutionaries later that night—for the first time since the protests erupted—including France, which had close ties to the Tunisian regime. All of this further invigorated the protest movement, which sustained its magnitude in the days that followed and whose demands became more ambitious. Specifically, protesters now sought to overhaul the entire political establishment, not just the leadership. Many Ben Ali figures came to portray themselves as standing on the side of the people, out of fear of becoming targeted themselves, and their behavioral adjustment strengthened the protesters' influence even more. If Ben Ali had returned, massive elite defections could have been expected; Ben Ali's own associates even warned him that they would not be able to ensure his safety. The likely outcome would have been major political instability, possibly leading to civil war.[33]

Ben Ali's ousting did not mean the end of the authoritarian regime, however. His associates initially sought to spearhead the political transformations and opposed revolutionary change in an attempt to regenerate regime stability and secure a political future for themselves. On January 17, 2011, Mohamed Ghannouchi created a government of national unity in which Ben Ali officials kept key cabinet posts and only minor roles were bestowed on the opposition. Faced with sustained large-scale protests, the prime minister offered a series of political concessions and government reshuffles, which, however, always included ex-regime officials.

Eventually, on February 27, he was forced to resign and the government was dissolved. The new prime minister, Beji Caid Essebsi, announced free

Figure 2. Epistemic impact of Ben Ali's presumed exile.

elections of a constituent assembly, which took place in October 2011 and launched a decade-long era of democratic politics.

Conclusion

Why did the Ben Ali regime collapse so swiftly on January 14, 2011? This article proposes that it was erroneous beliefs, which thrived in a highly contingent revolutionary setting, that led Ben Ali to leave for Saudi Arabia and prompted his prime minister to invoke the constitution to assume power. It showed that Ben Ali's ousting, which inspired upheaval throughout the Arab world, was just one of several possible outcomes of the Tunisian uprising.

Considering the high political stakes, it seems puzzling that Ben Ali decided to embark on a plane to Saudi Arabia, believing he could return to Tunisia. But the contingent political context helps explain why he did. Specifically, he made the decision under immense time pressure while at the airport. Information was difficult to evaluate, and stress and uncertainty mounted quickly. Not to forget, the Tunisian regime was the first one to collapse during the Arab Uprisings, so there wasn't yet a precedent that could have served Ben Ali as a warning of what may come next. As erroneous beliefs and misjudgment proliferate during revolutionary periods, the real puzzle is how leaders might still succeed in making rational decisions.

This is not to suggest that rationalist arguments were redundant to this study. In fact, they informed key analytical points, including counterfactuals, in order to evaluate how actors would likely have behaved had they possessed more accurate information. These arguments also explain specific decisions of key actors, such as Ben Ali deciding not to pursue his initial plan to return from Saudi Arabia to Tunisia. From a safe vantage point in Jeddah, he was well positioned to assess the changing political situation back home, and he judged it too risky to return.

Methodologically, this study proposes a tentative roadmap for investigating contingent revolutionary episodes; it combines congruence analysis with micro-theory building in a process-tracing approach that draws on primary sources and takes the potentially causal force of beliefs seriously. Amid political turmoil, it is often difficult to verify various sources, especially as events happen so quickly, hence the task of scholars to go back to them retrospectively to assess competing causal claims. The study further shows how the microanalysis of events can furnish insights into topics of interest to scholars of revolutions, democratization, and authoritarian collapse. So far, comparable event analyses have focused mainly on protest dynamics. The case of Tunisia on January 14, 2011, reveals the value of extending such efforts to the regime camp to gain new insights into topics of prime concern to political scientists, including events with large geopolitical effects. One potential path for future research would be to investigate how to identify these

potentially game-changing moments or "critical events" (García-Montoya and Mahoney, 2023) and to consider the extent to which they occur across revolutions.

The case of Tunisia on January 14, 2011, further adds novel insights into the scholarship on contingency by showing that erroneous beliefs are both endogenous to highly contingent revolutionary periods and a potential contingency themselves. Erroneous beliefs can change collective outcomes through their epistemic impact and processes of behavioral alignment. The study of beliefs and their possibly wide-ranging consequences is invaluable to a more nuanced understanding of processes of authoritarian collapse. Of course, we often cannot be entirely sure of what really happened and what key actors thought. But the study of beliefs—including the attempt at disaggregating those that are erroneous and those that aren't—can at a minimum serve to question our own core assumptions and disprove certain claims.

While focusing on the actions of individuals, this article also reveals new information about how both structural factors and political contingency matter, interact, and reinforce each other during revolutionary episodes. Most scholars nowadays agree that both agential and structural elements are pertinent (Beissinger, 2022; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004). Indeed, it was the Ben Ali regime's structural vulnerabilities—specifically, its personalist character—that lent credibility to some erroneous beliefs that circulated during the uprisings. Specifically, structural vulnerabilities bestowed substance on the rumor that Ben Ali went to the airport to escape, especially in a context in which many of his relatives sought refuge abroad.

Scholarship on democratization and authoritarian collapse tends to focus on big causes of regime change, such as elite divisions, coups, and popular mobilization (Svolik, 2012; Geddes et al., 2018). The case of Tunisia suggests that the role, strength, and impact of these actors may be conditioned by beliefs. It was the belief that Ben Ali had escaped for good that led to a security official's defection and elite divisions, specifically, the prime minister invoking the constitution to oust Ben Ali. The belief in Ben Ali's permanent departure also critically strengthened the protest movement. This suggests that revolutionary struggles may be about controlling revolutionary narratives and beliefs much more so than has been recognized. Ultimately, the power of dictators depends to a great extent on the perception that they are invincible.

Of course, erroneous beliefs are not always a mere by-product of political uncertainty. Strategic actors have spread misinformation to gain political advantage, during not only processes of revolutions and authoritarian collapse but also democratic backsliding (Jee et al., 2022; Krishnarajan, 2022). Exploring different roots and types of erroneous beliefs and their effects on various processes of regime change are possible avenues for future research.

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ORCID iD

Anne Wolf https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4060-4004

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. An exception was France, but its foreign minister's offer to help Ben Ali quell the uprisings was quickly retracted.
2. Tunisians had witnessed other instances of public self-immolation, including in October 2010 in Monastir, though regime actors sought to keep them a secret. For more details, see Lageman (2020).
3. On January 14, 2011, Ben Ali called the army chief of staff, Rachid Ammar, from his airborne plane en route to Saudi Arabia and, during a cordial conversation,

asked for his advice on when to return to Tunisia. He certainly would not have had this conversation had the military chief defected. For more details, see Nader (2022).

4. Author interviews with two members of Ben Ali's immediate family, alongside four key military and security personnel, all carried out in Tunis and by telephone between 2016 and 2017; and with the senior regime officials Mohamed Ghannouchi, who became interim president on January 14, 2011 (interview conducted in Tunis, October 2, 2015); Fouad Mebazaa, interim president between January 15, 2011, and December 13, 2011 (interview conducted in Tunis, May 30, 2016), and Mohamed Ghariani, last secretary general of Ben Ali's ruling party (interview conducted in Tunis, July 22, 2017).
5. Author copy of the transcript of Rachid Ammar's court hearing, record number 11-3-55, dated January 25, 2011; and testimony from the head of Ben Ali's anti-terrorism force, charged with protecting the presidential family, published in "Témoignage de Colonel Major M. Samir Tarhouni Sur le Déroulement des Événements du 14 Janvier 2011 à l'Aéroport de Tunis Carthage," in *L'Observatoire de la Révolution Tunisienne*, ed. Abdeljelil Temimi (Tunis: Fondation Temimi Pour la Recherche Scientifique et l'Information, 2015).
6. Ammar, court hearing transcript; Belkhodja and Cheikhrouhou (2013).
7. Ammar, court hearing transcript.
8. Author interviews with two members of Ben Ali's immediate family, alongside four key military and security personnel, carried out in Tunis and by telephone between 2016 and 2017; Nader (2022); Ali Seriati, court statement, number 11.3.174, Ministry of Interior, August 11, 2011; Mohamed Ghannouchi, court statement, number 11.3.55, Ministry of Interior, January 25, 2011; Ahmed Friaa, court statement, number 11.3.55, Ministry of Interior, January 25, 2011.
9. I describe this process in greater detail in the methodological appendix.
10. "Tasrih al-Ra'is Bin Ali—20 Huzayran 2011" (Declaration of President Ben Ali—June 20, 2011), published via his lawyer, Akram ʿAzuri, Beirut, June 20, 2011; interview with Mohamed Ghannouchi, Tunis, October 2, 2015.
11. Interview with Ghariani, July 22, 2017. Note that key opposition figures confirmed to me that they agreed to the debate. Author interviews with opposition figures, Tunis, July and August 2017.
12. Author interviews with Ben Ali relatives, in Tunis and by telephone, February and March 2017.
13. This advice was given by Ben Ali's associate Hakim El Karoui in a letter dated January 12, 2011. A copy of the letter was published by Magnaudeix and Bredoux (2011).
14. Interview with Ben Ali relative, by telephone, February 2017.
15. Interviews with Nabil Chettaoui, head of Tunisair, Tunis, June 29, 2016; and Ben Ali's personal pilot, July 2016.
16. Interviews with Chettaoui, June 29, 2016; and Ben Ali's personal pilot, July 2016.

17. Samir Tarhouni testimony, court document, number 11.3.55, Ministry of Interior, January 25, 2011; Chiraz Yacoubi Tarhouni, court document, number 11.3.55, Ministry of Interior, January 25, 2011; Zouhair Bayeti, head of Carthage Airport, testimony, court document, Ministry of Interior, number 11.3.55, January 25, 2011.
18. Samir Tarhouni testimony; Chiraz Yacoubi Tarhouni, court document; Bayeti, testimony.
19. "Témoignage de Colonel Major M. Samir Tarhouni," 52.
20. Ghannouchi, court statement; Ammar, court hearing transcript; Friaa, court statement.
21. Interviews with Ben Ali relatives, in Tunis and by telephone, February and March 2017; MEE Staff (2022).
22. Author interviews with Ben Ali relatives, in Tunis and by telephone, February and March 2017; "Tasrih al- Ra'is Bin Ali—20 Huzayran 2011."
23. In fact, Ben Ali wasn't even supposed to be at the airport that day, but his family convinced the president to accompany them at the last minute. Belkhodja and Cheikhrouhou (2013, p. 82).
24. "Tasrih al-Ra'is Bin Ali—20 Huzayran 2011."
25. Interview with Ghannouchi, October 2, 2015.
26. Interview with Ghannouchi, October 2, 2015. Note that other data corroborate his testimony. See, for details, Friaa, court statement; Ghannouchi, court statement; Belkhodja and Cheikhrouhou (2013, p. 125).
27. Note that the Constitutional Council later decided that not Article 56 but 57 applies. This bestowed the interim presidency on the head of parliament, Fouad Mebazaa, who took on this function on January 15, 2011.
28. I define a coup "as the removal of an authoritarian leader by his inner circles that is accompanied by the threat or actual use of force" (Svolik, 2012, 41). Note that other high officials similarly informed Ben Ali that they could not ensure his safety if he tried to return to Tunisia. For more details, see Belkhodja and Cheikhrouhou (2013).
29. See, for details, Friaa, court statement; Ghannouchi, court statement.
30. Interview with revolutionary, June 2012.
31. Interviews with Chettaoui, June 29, 2016; Ben Ali's personal pilot, July 2016; and Ghannouchi, October 2, 2015.
32. Interviews with Ghannouchi, October 2, 2015; and Mebazaa, May 30, 2016.
33. I offer more data on the epistemic impact in the methodological appendix.

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Author Biography

Anne Wolf is a Fellow at All Souls College, University of Oxford, where she researches and teaches Authoritarian Politics, with a specific focus on the Middle East and North Africa.