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Trade-Offs and Public Support for Security Reform during Democratic Transitions

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Abstract

During democratic transitions, newly elected governments face public demands to reform the institutions of the old regime, especially the security forces; yet, these reforms often fail. I argue that politicians define policy issues in ways that maximize popular support for their own positions through well-established processes of elite issue framing. Politicians can reduce popular demand for difficult and costly reforms of the security forces by framing them as trade-offs with other types of reform. The argument is tested with original survey data from Tunisia, an important contemporary case of democratic transition. An embedded vignette experiment primes existing issue frames by asking respondents to adjudicate between investments in security reform versus economic or political reform. I find that framing a trade-off with a more popular policy, economic development, reduces public demand for security reform. These findings have important implications for security sector reform and democratic consolidation in Tunisia and beyond.

Keywords

democratization – security sector reform – public opinion – issue framing – Tunisia

1 Introduction

The establishment of civilian oversight and regulation of the security sector is a critical difference between the democratic and authoritarian modes of state control and thus an important component of a successful transition to democracy. Yet, coercive institutions are durable and resistant to change, even during

regime transitions; the election of a democratic leader or dissolution of a hegemonic ruling party does not guarantee the successful reform of the security forces.¹ The security forces are common targets of public resentment in post-authoritarian transitions. Consider Tunisia, where demonstrators continued to vandalize and burn down police stations even after the former president fled into exile.² To relieve public dissatisfaction, transitional governments typically endorse security reform publicly, but often undertake only limited and superficial reforms in the security sector.³ Despite Tunisians' enthusiastic criticism of the police, efforts at security reform soon stalled.⁴

In this paper, I argue that security sector reform becomes avoidable because trade-offs can reduce demand for less favored reforms. Even if a reform policy enjoys broad public support, it may not be a preferred policy once trade-offs are introduced. When citizens believe that policy makers face difficult choices among competing priorities, politicians may be able to strategically avoid pursuing the most politically costly reforms, including reform of the security sector. By shaping public discourse, issue framing allows political elites to manipulate this temporal dimension of transitional reforms. Trade-off framing allows decision makers to delay action on an issue without a loss of public confidence in the first years of the transition. Elite framing thus serves as a political tool to reduce public demand for reforms that politicians consider undesirable, whether for ideological or political reasons.

This paper investigates the effect of issue framing on public support for security sector reform in the context of Tunisia's democratic transition. During

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- 1 Jeremy Ginifer, "The Challenge of the Security Sector and Security Reform Processes in Democratic Transitions: The Case of Sierra Leone," *Democratization* 13, no. 5 (December 2006): 791–810; Alfred C. Stepan, *Rethinking Military Politics: Brazil and the Southern Cone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); and Murray Scot Tanner, "Will the State Bring You Back In? Policing and Democratization," *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 1 (October 2000): 101–24.
 - 2 International Crisis Group, "Reform and Security Strategy in Tunisia," Middle East/North Africa Report 161 (Brussels, July 23, 2015), 8.
 - 3 Robert Egnell and Peter Haldén, "Laudable, Ahistorical and Overambitious: Security Sector Reform Meets State Formation Theory," *Conflict, Security and Development* 9, no. 1 (April 2009): 27–54; and Alice Hills, *Policing Africa: Internal Security and the Limits of Liberalization* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).
 - 4 Haykel Ben Mahfoudh, "Security Sector Reform in Tunisia: Three Years into the Democratic Transition," Security in Times of Transition (Arab Reform Initiative, July 2014), <http://www.arab-reform.net/security-sector-reform-tunisia-three-years-democratic-transition>; Nouredine Jebnoun, *Tunisia's National Intelligence: Why "Rogue Elephants" Fail to Reform* (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishing, 2017); and Moncef Kartas, "Foreign Aid and Security Sector Reform in Tunisia: Resistance and Autonomy of the Security Forces," *Mediterranean Politics* 19, no. 3 (September 2014): 373–91.

the 2010–2011 uprising, protesters decried the security regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali as a police state, rejecting its practices of monitoring and controlling citizens' everyday lives while abusing their political and human rights in the pursuit of political stability. Acknowledging these demands, the interim government under Prime Minister Béji Caïd Essebsi immediately dissolved Ben Ali's political police and state security apparatus. Announcing the decision, an Interior Ministry spokesman alluded to further security reform, promising, "We will take other decisions that will please the people."⁵ After three years of political transition, promises of security reform rang hollow, and the Ministry of the Interior continued to operate much as it had under Ben Ali.⁶ By 2014, the subject had largely disappeared from public debates,⁷ and Essebsi dropped police reform entirely from his platform during his successful presidential bid.⁸

This article seeks to explain why demands for security sector reform may subside during a transition, despite initially high public demand and government statements of support. I propose that elite issue framing can establish trade-offs between security reform and other policy goals, especially economic development and national security, and framing these reforms as trade-offs can significantly reduce public demand for security reform. Because transitional governments depend on the coercive apparatus to maintain public order, reforming the security sector incurs severe political and fiscal costs. Rather than ignore public demands for reform and risk punishment at the ballot box, politicians can shift public opinion by framing security reform as a costly trade-off. While the process of issue framing has been widely observed, scholars have overlooked the effects of this framing on public attitudes during democratic transitions. This article focuses on security sector reform as an important element of democratization and assesses how issue framing shapes support for this policy in Tunisia.

The paper proceeds as follows. A first section discusses the role of security reform in democratization and reviews the literature on issue framing. The following section introduces the context of the study, Tunisia, where a democratic transition began in 2011. The transition has been characterized by vibrant debates over proposed reforms of national political, economic, and security

5 Tarek Amara and Mariam Karouny, "Tunisia Names New Government, Scraps Secret Police," *Reuters*, March 7, 2011.

6 Jebnoun, *Tunisia's National Intelligence*.

7 Kartas, "Foreign Aid and Security Sector Reform in Tunisia," 373.

8 Béji Caïd Essebsi, "My Three Goals as Tunisia's President," *Washington Post*, op-ed, December 26, 2014.

policy. Next, I describe a survey designed to measure the effect of issue framing on popular support for these reforms. Finally, I discuss the results of the survey experiment and the study's implications for critical reforms during moments of political transition.

2 Elite Framing and Demand for Reform

Establishing the rule of law in post-authoritarian contexts requires reforming the security sector to operate as a guardian of civil liberties, not a tool of authoritarian repression.⁹ Above all, security reform aims to ensure two requisites of democratic governance: limited corruption¹⁰ and personal integrity rights.¹¹ Accordingly, public policy research affirms the need for security sector reform during transitions from authoritarianism.¹² However, reform of the security sector poses an especially difficult problem. Security forces are more difficult to reform than other state institutions because they can threaten physical violence against the state or withhold protection – a moral hazard problem at the heart of authoritarian rule that does not disappear with the overthrow of a dictator.¹³ Moreover, coercive institutions are highly path dependent and persistent over time, owing largely to the high initial investment required to establish them.¹⁴ In addition, political transitions create instability which can

9 Tanner, "Will the State Bring You Back In?" 3.

10 Christian Davenport and David A. Armstrong, "Democracy and the Violation of Human Rights: A Statistical Analysis from 1976 to 1996," *American Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 3 (July 2004): 538–54; and Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., "Thinking Inside the Box: A Closer Look at Democracy and Human Rights," *International Studies Quarterly* 49, no. 3 (September 2005): 439–58.

11 Charles T. Call, "War Transitions and the New Civilian Security in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 35, no. 1 (October 2002): 1–20; and Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, "Inequality and Regime Change: Democratic Transitions and the Stability of Democratic Rule," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 03 (August 2012): 495–516.

12 Ersel Aydinli, "The Reform-Security Dilemma in Democratic Transitions: The Turkish Experience as Model?" *Democratization* 20, no. 6 (October 2013): 1144–64; Sean McFate, "Securing the Future: A Primer on Security Sector Reform in Conflict Countries," Special Report (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, September 2008); and Mark Sedra, ed., *The Future of Security Sector Reform* (Waterloo, ON: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 2010).

13 Milan W. Svoblik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

14 Jason Brownlee, *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret*

heighten security threats, and consequently the new leaders' dependence on the security forces.¹⁵ Public disturbances, such as riots and violent protests, and political violence, including terrorism and armed insurgency, may increase as an immediate consequence of democratization.¹⁶ Because existing security forces can most readily respond to these crises, political leaders typically avoid alienating those forces too much through their reform efforts.

How do elites navigate the security reform demanded by a vocal and mobilized citizenry, on the one hand, and status quo pressures emanating from the coercive institutions themselves, on the other? I argue that despite initial public support for democratizing the coercive apparatus, the framing of trade-offs among various reform policies reduces public demand for security reform. As newly elected governments balance citizens' demands with their own political goals, elites may seek to manipulate public opinion in favor of their preferred policy agenda. Political elites, including elected officials and ranking members of major political parties, shape the national debate over policy questions through public statements, rallies, and media appearances. Elites also have access to privileged government information, including budgets, personnel files, and internal reports. These advantages empower political elites to manipulate public attitudes through issue framing.

When the political agenda is set at the elite level, the frames used to communicate policy issues to the masses can have a profound effect. Indeed, issue framing¹⁷ is widely recognized as one of the most important tools elites use to influence public attitudes.¹⁸ Here, I focus on a specific genre of frames based on trade-offs. The way political elites describe various issues in their public communications has a strong effect on public opinion, and politicians are

Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); and Allison Spencer Hartnett, Nicholas J. Lotito, and Elizabeth R. Nugent, "The Origins of Coercive Institutions in the Middle East: Preliminary Evidence from Egypt" (Working Paper, 2018).

- 15 John Gledhill, "Conclusion: Managing (In)Security in Post-Arab Spring Transitions," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 46, no. 4 (October 2013): 736–39.
- 16 Jack L. Snyder, *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000).
- 17 "[F]raming effects occur when different presentations of an issue generate different reactions among those who are exposed to that issue." William G. Jacoby, "Issue Framing and Public Opinion on Government Spending," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 4 (2000): 750–67.
- 18 Thomas E. Nelson and Zoe M. Oxley, "Issue Framing Effects on Belief Importance and Opinion," *The Journal of Politics* 61, no. 4 (November 1999): 1040–67; and Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, "Framing Theory," *Annual Review of Political Science* 10, no. 1 (2007): 103–26.

known to manipulate these frames for strategic purposes.¹⁹ Although elite cues are less influential when voters have even a modicum of independent information about an issue, citizens often lack any relevant information and must rely entirely on elites;²⁰ this is the kind of environment citizens find themselves in during transitions. Information about security issues is particularly limited, meaning that public opinion can be strongly influenced by relatively small informational cues.²¹ Therefore, while well-informed citizens may be impervious to elite manipulation, they are relatively few in number.

Issue framing may be particularly effective during transitions from authoritarianism. Authoritarian regimes are characterized by censorship and limited access to public information,²² even where internet access is widespread.²³ In the early years of a transition, the public demands greater openness and access to government information, but the state still lacks institutional mechanisms for transparency and public accountability or an effective free press.²⁴ Elected officials in a newly democratizing state therefore control the floodgates of public information, initially exercising a near monopoly on access to information relevant for policy making, as they take control of existing authoritarian institutions. Elite framing may be especially influential in these contexts where informational asymmetries create opportunities for the manipulation of public opinion.

Politicians produce issue frames through public communication, such as press releases, public statements, parliamentary debates, and media appearances. The media also plays an important role in communicating elite discourse to the public, potentially distorting political messaging to exert a direct

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- 19 Jacoby, "Issue Framing and Public Opinion on Government Spending"; James N. Druckman, "Political Preference Formation: Competition, Deliberation, and the (Ir)Relevance of Framing Effects," *American Political Science Review* 98, no. 4 (November 2004): 671–86; Matthew Gabel and Kenneth Scheve, "Estimating the Effect of Elite Communications on Public Opinion Using Instrumental Variables," *American Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (October 1, 2007): 1013–28; and Rune Slothuus and Claes H. de Vreese, "Political Parties, Motivated Reasoning, and Issue Framing Effects," *The Journal of Politics* 72, no. 3 (July 2010): 630–45.
- 20 John G. Bullock, "Elite Influence on Public Opinion in an Informed Electorate," *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 3 (August 2011): 496–515.
- 21 Christopher Gelpi, "Performing on Cue? The Formation of Public Opinion Toward War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 1 (February 2010): 88–116.
- 22 Barbara Geddes and John Zaller, "Sources of Popular Support for Authoritarian Regimes," *American Journal of Political Science* 33, no. 2 (1989): 319–47.
- 23 Espen Geelmuyden Rød and Nils B. Weidmann, "Empowering Activists or Autocrats? The Internet in Authoritarian Regimes," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 3 (May 2015): 338–51.
- 24 Joseph Chappell H. Lawson, *Building the Fourth Estate: Democratization and the Rise of a Free Press in Mexico* (University of California Press, 2002).

influence, even in more established democracies.²⁵ Business elites may also exert significant influence through personal or financial ties to the media.²⁶ Here, I focus on the efforts of political elites to create narrative frames and consider the production of effective issue framing as the sum of inputs from political, media, and business interests.

In sum, issue framing allows elites to create the public belief that various reform options are rivalrous of scarce government resources (time, money, political capital, etc.) rather than complementary. Such framing can enhance individuals' beliefs that one reform can only be accomplished at the cost of another, thereby biasing their preferences. At the aggregate level, the framing of various institutional reform efforts as trade-offs rather than complements can reduce overall public support for the relatively less popular reform.

3 Contested Reform during Tunisia's Transition

Tunisia's revolution began with mass protests in December 2010 and culminated on January 14, 2011 with the departure of longstanding authoritarian President Ben Ali. The uprising sought to overthrow a regime which had operated as a "policing state" built on latent violence and pervasive surveillance.²⁷ The regime was characterized by "its opacity and lack of formal regulation, its instrumentalisation by the central power, the broad and politicized definition of police functions, the combination of centralization and fragmentation of the police, as well as its permeation with cronyism and corruption, all of which were instrumental in sustaining the Ben Ali regime."²⁸ Protesters, representing broad sections of society, declared their opposition to the corruption,

25 Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

26 Peter Gross, *Entangled Evolutions: Media and Democratization in Eastern Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002).

27 Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011); Hicham Bou Nassif, "A Military Besieged: The Armed Forces, the Police, and the Party in Bin 'Ali's Tunisia, 1987–2011," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 47, no. 1 (February 2015): 65–87. Domestic security and intelligence were overseen by civilian police agencies under the Ministry of the Interior, while the army was politically marginal.

28 Derek Lutterbeck, "Tool of Rule: The Tunisian Police Under Ben Ali," *The Journal of North African Studies* 20, no. 5 (October 2015): 813.

stagnation, and human rights abuses of the Ben Ali regime.²⁹ Many used the appellation “revolution of dignity” (*thawrat el-karama*) to invoke a rebellion against their mistreatment by the state.³⁰ Moreover, the physical target of the protests was the coercive apparatus, especially the police.³¹

Despite public demand for change in the security sector, actual reforms were limited. From the fall of Ben Ali to the first elections under a democratic constitution in October 2014, three different governments led Tunisia. During the uprising, protesters’ attacks caused a near-total collapse of the civilian security forces, creating a serious security crisis. When the transitional authorities took power, they quickly restored most of the police force to their previous positions. Security reform began in June 2011 with the elimination of the Interior Ministry’s Intelligence Directorate, widely derogated as the “political police.”³² Although this decision is often cited as a substantial reform, it is unknown whether the unit’s political functions continued under another name after the reorganization.³³ Upon taking office in late 2011, President Moncef Marzouki declared the necessity of “radical, swift and real reforms” in the security sector.³⁴ Further reforms remained on political party agendas but were never enacted in parliament. In November 2011, the Ministry of Interior produced a white paper offering a roadmap for further reforms. However, the former opposition considered the document a product of former regime elements, and Interior Minister Ali Laarayedh faulted it as “not comprehensive enough.”³⁵

29 Mark R. Beissinger, Amaney A. Jamal, and Kevin Mazur, “Explaining Divergent Revolutionary Coalitions: Regime Strategies and the Structuring of Participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions,” *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 1 (2015): 2.

30 Amira Aleya-Sghaier, “The Tunisian Revolution: The Revolution of Dignity,” *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 3, no. 1 (January 2012): 26.

31 Jason Brownlee, Tarek E. Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds, *The Arab Spring: Pathways of Repression and Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 66–70.

32 Amara and Karouny, “Tunisia Names New Government.”

33 Interview with Tunisian journalist, September 1, 2014. Police personnel files are considered a state secret, but it is believed that most members of the secret police continued their employment after the revolution.

34 Yezid Sayigh, “Missed Opportunity: The Politics of Police Reform in Egypt and Tunisia,” (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015), 18, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/17/missed-opportunity-politics-of-police-reform-in-egypt-and-tunisia-pub-59391>

35 Ali Laarayedh, who was tortured by the Ben Ali regime, became the interior minister and then prime minister during the transition. See Omar Ashour, “Finishing the Job: Security Sector Reform After the Arab Spring,” *World Politics Review* (Washington, DC: Brookings, May 28, 2013), <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2013/05/28-security-sector-reform-mena-ashour>.

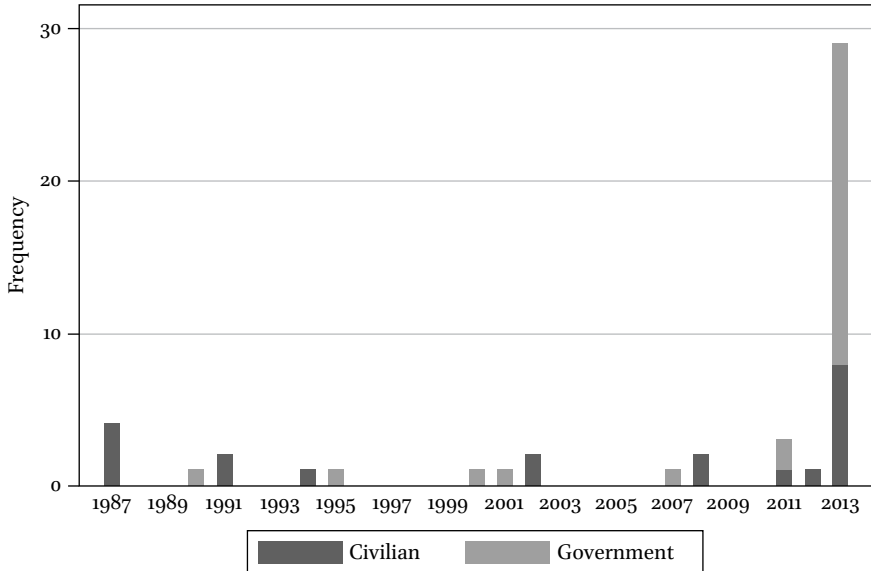


FIGURE 1 Terrorist incidents in Tunisia, 1987–2013 (Global Terrorism Database)

During the remaining years of the transition, no major reorganization of the Ministry of the Interior occurred. Laarayedh later claimed some progress in opening up the security forces to outside scrutiny, but admitted a long list of necessary structural reforms had not been accomplished during the transition.³⁶ In public speeches, however, neither the government nor the opposition emphasized the need to reform and reorganize the security sector, causing observers from civil society to blame the lack of reform on a failure of political will.³⁷ Legislatively, the National Constituent Assembly lacked a dedicated security commission, and legislators did not exercise their authority to restructure the Ministry of Interior or the security forces, redefine security roles and missions, or formulate a new legal framework for democratic oversight of the security sector.³⁸

Although citizens remained dissatisfied with the slow pace of reform, issues like economic development and counterterrorism began to supplant political discussions of security sector reform. Long stifled by widespread corrup-

36 Ali Laarayedh, interview by the author, December 1, 2015.

37 Sayigh, "Missed Opportunity."

38 Ben Mahfoudh, "Security Sector Reform in Tunisia: Three Years into the Democratic Transition," 7.

tion and heavy-handed state interference, Tunisia's economy struggled to gain traction after the uprising. Rather than rooting out corrupt practices among the business elite, the government proposed an amnesty for financial crimes committed under the old regime, arguing that the so-called "economic reconciliation law" would spur economic growth by reducing uncertainty and facilitating the recovery of assets from corrupt businessmen.³⁹

Tunisia also began to face threats to its national security from violent Islamist groups. Although Salafism had been developing in Tunisia since the 1980s, the dictatorship kept Salafism underground and off the front pages. After the uprising, the Salafists' open political activities, including large demonstrations, struck many Tunisians as a frightening tidal wave emanating from the conservative Gulf states. Meanwhile, some domestic Salafi groups developed jihadi tendencies.⁴⁰ Figure 1 demonstrates the trend in political violence from 1987 to 2014. While few terrorist attacks successfully targeted civilians from 2011 to 2014, attacks on military and government targets, especially in border regions, and failed attacks on civilian targets generated a mounting sense of alarm among the public. After several high-profile security incidents, by late 2013, many Tunisians had come to believe a surge of political violence was seriously threatening the country's political transition.⁴¹

Throughout the year, leading political figures and domestic media outlets framed terrorism as an existential challenge.⁴² Opponents of the Ennahda-led coalition government were quick to blame the Islamist party for the rise in terrorism.⁴³ Essebsi, as head of the secularist Nidaa Tounes party, accused Ennahda of sympathizing with Salafist extremists and perpetrating an Islamist "infiltration" of government ministries.⁴⁴ Throughout 2013, elites with connections to the old regime – politicians, but also police unions and much of the

39 Amna Guellali, "The Law That Could be the Final Blow to Tunisia's Transition," *Middle East Eye*, May 23, 2017.

40 The largest of these organizations is Ansar al-Sharia, which the Tunisian government declared a terrorist organization in August 2013. The group led an attack on the US Embassy, Tunis, in September 2012.

41 Interviews with Tunisian politicians, Tunis, August 28–29, 2014.

42 See, e.g., Hella Lahbib, "Nous sommes aux portes de l'enfer," *La Presse de Tunisie*, September 4, 2014.

43 Known as the *Troika*, a coalition of the Islamist Ennahda with two center-left secular parties, CPR and Ettakatol, governed Tunisia from late 2011 to early 2015, under Prime Ministers Laarayedh and Mehdi Jomaa.

44 Hardin Lang et al., "Tunisia's Struggle for Political Pluralism After Ennahda," (Center for American Progress, 2014), 20.

media, with close ties and financial backing from the business elite – promoted the narrative that Tunisia’s terrorism challenge required an urgent buildup in the security sector.⁴⁵ Under mounting criticism, the government adopted a more aggressive posture on security issues, and by late 2013 the Ennadha-led government was dealing with militant Salafists even more harshly than the Ben Ali regime.⁴⁶ As political elites framed security policy in terms of buildup, support for reform dropped: “Public opinion became more supportive of assertive security policies, and Tunisia’s political parties in turn became even less willing to pursue security sector reform actively.”⁴⁷

Since the fall of Ben Ali, the general public has continued to engage in protests and demonstrations around major issues. The largest protest campaigns have continued to target economic grievances and government corruption. The first, *Winou el-Petrol?* (“Where Is the Oil?”), focused on transparency and accountability in the use of public funds, while the second, *Manich Msamah* (“I Will Not Forgive”), arose in opposition to a proposed amnesty for corruption and malversation under the old regime.⁴⁸ Six years after the initial uprisings, widespread disillusionment with the political elite and anger at tax and price increases continue to motivate protesters. In 2017–2018, these resentments gave rise to a mass sit-in at an oil and gas facility at Kamour, and to *Fesh Nestanneh?* (“What Are We Waiting For?”), a group comprised mostly of students and unemployed youth from Tunisia’s underdeveloped interior, which led to more than 700 arrests.⁴⁹

Yet in each of these cases, the government has weathered the protests without significant concessions. The government’s intransigence in the face of this mobilization is surprising, given the country’s general trend toward democratic responsiveness. Even in nondemocratic systems, where formal legislative channels are unresponsive, researchers have found that protests serve as the primary means by which citizens demand and receive policy change and

45 See, e.g., Abou Khalil, “De l’art de fixer les priorités nationales !!!!” *La Presse* (Tunisia), June 9, 2014; and “Les experts restent sceptiques,” *La Presse*, June 5, 2014.

46 Sayigh, “Missed Opportunity,” 21.

47 Sayigh, “Missed Opportunity,” 23.

48 Laryssa Chomiak and Lana Salman, “Refusing to Forgive: Tunisia’s Maneesh M’sameh Campaign,” *Middle East Report*, no. 281 (2016), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer281/refusing-forgive>.

49 Youssef Cherif, “The Kamour Movement and Civic Protests in Tunisia” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 8, 2017), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/08/08/kamour-movement-and-civic-protests-in-tunisia-pub-72774>.

service delivery.⁵⁰ And in the Middle East, public support has been identified as an important causal factor in the adoption of political reforms.⁵¹

In sum, reform policy during the Tunisian transition cannot be understood without reference to the universe of real and constructed trade-offs that shaped public and elite debates. Even as Tunisians exercised new freedoms and embraced democratic values, they continued to demand economic development and stronger counterterrorism capabilities as much, or more, than security reform. Although Tunisians have continued to support security reform, their preference for this reform must be understood not in absolute terms, but in the context of the elite framing which structured public debates.

4 Research Design

I investigate the extent to which framing reforms as trade-offs can influence public opinion using an online survey experiment of Tunisian adults. The survey measures citizens' baseline preferences over security policy and the importance of security sector reform, along with three other important policy priorities: economic reform, governance reforms, and increasing the capabilities of the security forces. An embedded vignette experiment is designed to determine whether citizens' attitudes about security sector reform are malleable when presented with trade-offs. The experiments include treatments which ask respondents to adjudicate between investments in security sector reform versus economic or political reform, the exact types of trade-offs political leaders face during the transition from authoritarian rule. The three alternatives were chosen as representative reform proposals from the economic, political, and security policy areas. I also examine whether citizens perceive a trade-off between providing national security – i.e. against terrorist threats – and reforming the military to protect civil liberties, a question that has been

50 Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle, "Popular Protest and Political Reform in Africa," *Comparative Politics* 24, no. 4 (1992): 419–42. See also Chantal Berman, "When Revolutionary Coalitions Break Down: Evidence from the Tunisian Bardo Protests, 2013," in this volume.

51 Mark A. Tessler and Eleanor Gao, "Gauging Arab Support for Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 16, no. 3 (2005): 83–97; Mark A. Tessler, *Public Opinion in the Middle East: Survey Research and the Political Orientations of Ordinary Citizens* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); and Sarah Sunn Bush and Amaney A. Jamal, "Anti-Americanism, Authoritarian Politics, and Attitudes about Women's Representation: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Jordan," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (March 2015): 34–45.

debated since Tunisia's 2011 uprising. The experimental set-up also allows me to test whether reactions to the different vignettes vary by basic demographic, attitudinal, and partisan characteristics.

4.1 *Survey Design*

The "Tunisia Reform Survey" (TRS) relies on a convenience sample drawn from online opt-in respondents and Tunisian students.⁵² The majority of respondents were recruited through an online advertising campaign targeting all adult users of the Facebook social media platform in Tunisia. Facebook is by far the most popular social media network in the Middle East, and Tunisia has the third highest daily user rate in the Middle East region, after Qatar and the UAE.⁵³ Overall, Tunisia's Facebook penetration rate stands at 55%,⁵⁴ compared with 68% in the United States.⁵⁵ Subject recruitment was open from February 6–24, 2017, and generated a sample of 436 Tunisian adults.⁵⁶ In addition, a team of student volunteers collected a snowball sample by recruiting subjects through their personal social networks.⁵⁷ To incentivize participation, participants were given an option to enter a prize drawing after completing the survey. In total, 505 respondents completed the full survey.

Survey experiments are one means of seeking to more accurately measure individual attitudes and identify causal effects. Through random assignment, the experimental design allows causal inference on the main hypotheses (in this case, how trade-offs influence policy preferences) even when using a non-representative sample.⁵⁸ Moreover, research on experimental methodology suggests that outcome measures in online experiments do not differ significantly from those in laboratory experiments, except that online surveys are likely to oversample young people, and online respondents are more likely to

52 Reliance on convenience samples, such as groups of students and online opt-in samples, can dramatically lower the cost of survey research, at a possible loss of generalizability relative to population-based samples.

53 Fadi Salem, "Social Media and the Internet of Things," Arab Social Media Report (Dubai: Mohamed bin Rashid School of Government, 2017), 33–4.

54 Salem, "Social Media and the Internet of Things," 36.

55 Pew Research Center, "Social Media Update 2016," 2016.

56 The online advertisements were targeted to adult Facebook users located in Tunisia. The click-through rate for the ads was 1.64%, generating 30,142 unique visits.

57 Separate analyses run on the online sub-sample are consistent with the main results.

58 "Generally speaking, results from convenience samples provide estimates of causal effects comparable to those found on population-based samples." Kevin J. Mullinix et al., "The Generalizability of Survey Experiments," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 2, no. 2 (2017): 109–38.

consult outside sources before answering questions.⁵⁹ In the experiment, the four treatment groups are balanced across key demographic and attitudinal variables.⁶⁰ In addition, I test for heterogeneous treatment effects to determine whether these demographic variables influence the main outcome.⁶¹

4.2 *Experimental Design*

The experimental manipulation is a randomized vignette, which can elicit outcome measures that closely mirror behavioral benchmarks observed in the real world.⁶² The vignette methodology also helps to avoid social desirability bias – where responses are influenced by how they might be viewed by others – by embedding respondents' judgment in a hypothetical scenario. In a vignette experiment, the researcher randomizes the text that precedes a set of questions to measure how variation in the text influences the average response across the population surveyed.

To investigate the framing of budgetary and policy trade-offs, I designed vignettes to mimic existing issue frames from public debates during Tunisia's transition.⁶³ After reading one of these vignettes, chosen at random, respondents are asked to allocate 10 million Tunisian dinars (approximately 4.3 million U.S. dollars) to a hypothetical security reform program. For the first group of respondents, there is no issue frame imposed by the vignette, which reads as follows:

As you know, the government budget in Tunisia is limited. Members of the Assembly have up to 10 million dinars available for reform programs.

59 Scott Clifford and Jennifer Jerit, "Is There a Cost to Convenience? An Experimental Comparison of Data Quality in Laboratory and Online Studies," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 1, no. 2 (2014): 120–31.

60 Summary statistics and balance tests are available in the online appendix.

61 Alexander Coppock, "Generalizing from Survey Experiments Conducted on Mechanical Turk: A Replication Approach," 7, no. 3 *Political Science Research and Methods* (March 2018): 1–16. In the presence of moderate treatment effect heterogeneity, estimates are similar whether using a nationally representative sample or an online convenience sample. This finding increases my confidence in the generalizability of the online survey results.

62 Jens Hainmueller, Dominik Hangartner, and Teppei Yamamoto, "Validating Vignette and Conjoint Survey Experiments against Real-World Behavior," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112, no. 8 (February 2015): 2395–400.

63 The priming texts were written to mimic actual issue framing in contemporary Tunisian politics. To determine which trade-offs Tunisian respondents would find most salient, I analyzed data from the Arab Barometer survey fielded February 3–25, 2013. For details of this analysis, see online appendix.

Some members of the Assembly have called for spending this money on a reform program for the security forces, which includes reducing bribery and training to improve respect for citizens' rights. Others have called for the government to return the money to the general fund.

The survey then asks, "If you could allocate up to 10 million dinars to these programs, how much would you spend?" The outcome, measured in millions of Tunisian dinars, indicates the value respondents place on the security sector reform program described in the vignette, relative to all other budget priorities.⁶⁴

In each of three other vignettes, a policy trade-off is imposed, as respondents are asked to split the security reform budget with a second reform program: economic development, governance improvements, or increasing the capability of the security forces. In this case, respondents' decision making is framed by the given trade-off. In the treatment condition, "return the money to the general fund" is replaced with one of three alternative policies:

1. Spend the money for economic development which aims to redistribute wealth to the regions, and also for improving government management of the budget.
2. Spend the money to improve interaction with electoral candidates.
3. Spend the money more on the security forces, meaning purchasing new equipment and training to improve intelligence gathering.

Here, the respondent's budget allocation is potentially influenced by inclusion of an alternative policy in the opening vignette. Each of the three treatments is designed to assess the influence of an alternative frame, wherein an unrelated policy is presented as an either-or with the main reform of interest, security reform. In the implementation of the experiment, the treatment condition was randomized across the survey sample, so that any difference in measured

64 Jonathan Rogers, "Nothing to Lose: Charitable Donations as Incentives in Risk Preference Measurement," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 4, no. 1 (September 2017): 1–23. Many experiments use behavioral measures to provide more accurate information about subjects than self-evaluation alone could provide, although standard behavioral measures pose legal, ethical, and methodological challenges in the Middle East and North Africa due to religious and cultural values opposing gambling and interest. In this case, however, the outcome of interest is public opinion itself, and respondents have no expectation that their actions can individually affect the policy outcomes under consideration, so no behavioral measure is required.

support is attributable only to the trade-off, not individual characteristics of the respondent.

In the control condition, the unassigned budget is returned to the general fund, so the outcome measure represents how much the respondent would invest in security reform if no specific trade-off exists. In the treatment conditions, the outcome is conditioned by the direct trade-off with a given alternative policy. Any differences in the security reform budget across treatment groups may be attributed to the influence of the trade-off presented in the vignette. The above scenario therefore provides the best approximation of how an individual will express a political attitude under a given information environment.

5 Results

Using the experimental survey data, I assess how framing reform decisions as trade-offs can increase or decrease support for security reform. Consistent with my expectations, the economic development trade-off produces a large decrease (-34%) in the average amount budgeted for security reform (see figure 2). Conversely, presenting the trade-off with electoral reform leads to large increase (41%) in the security reform budget. Surprisingly, the proposal to build up the security forces has no effect on support for security reform.

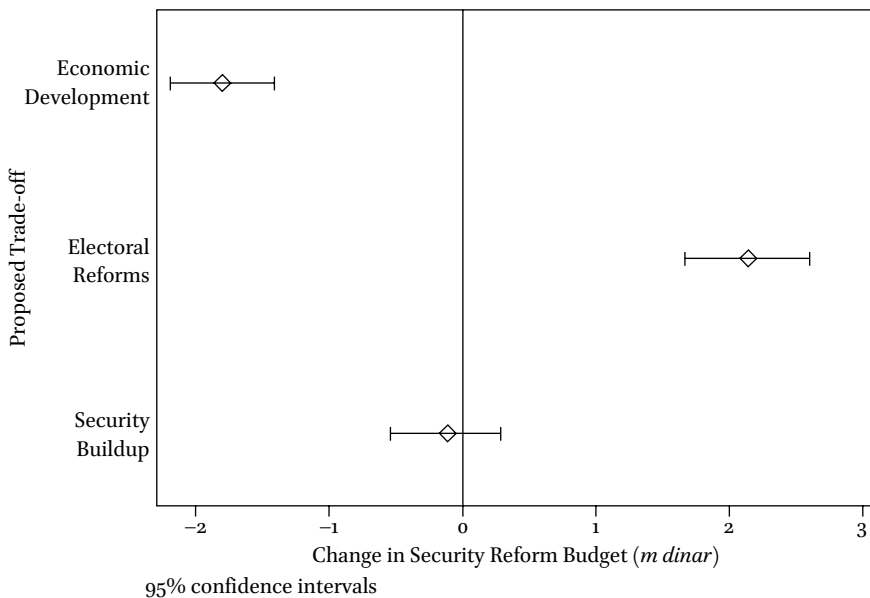


FIGURE 2 Effect of trade-offs on support for security reform

Overall, the experimental results confirm that trade-offs influence individual preferences over policy choices. These results establish a clear hierarchy of concerns among Tunisian citizens: economic development, security reform, then electoral reform. Moreover, these patterns are consistent across demographic groups, regardless of the age group, employment status, gender, and education level of respondents. The survey evidence supports the notion that citizens have developed a clear preference ordering regarding these three issues, and that their policy preferences are responsive to trade-offs.

However, the finding that security buildup does not affect support for security reform is surprising. To explore this result, I test for heterogeneous treatment effects conditional on respondents' (pre-treatment) assessment of the level of national security in Tunisia.⁶⁵ The interaction between the treatment and reported security level is statistically significant, but substantively opposite from the predicted direction. Therefore, the results disconfirm the hypothesis that respondents who do not feel national security is assured in Tunisia will favor security buildup more strongly, relative to security reform. Instead, respondents who perceive national security to be fully assured are more likely to support an overall security buildup (i.e. ascribe higher importance to strengthening the security forces' capabilities than to reforming them).

Other questions from the survey shed light on this result. I find an inverse relationship between trust in police and support for both reform and buildup, on the one hand, and between trust in the army and support for security reform, on the other. The results indicate that those who trust the security forces most are least willing to invest in reforming or strengthening them. Because increasing trust in public institutions is an important goal of democratic development, levels of trust in the police and army can be expected to rise with democratization. This scenario could create a paradox, wherein increasing trust undermines support for necessary reform. In the case of Tunisia, it is possible that a premature increase in public trust during the transition may have reduced public demand for reforms. Although high demand for reform does not guarantee its implementation, low demand virtually guarantees that institutional inertia will prevail.

The distinction between security reform (e.g. anticorruption programs and human rights training) and buildup (e.g. new equipment and tactical training) is firmly established in academic discourse around security reform. Yet the survey indicates that this trade-off – between reforming the security forces, on the one hand, and strengthening their capabilities, on the other – is not salient

65 Full statistical results are available in the online appendix.

to the public. Indeed, public debates in Tunisia have not always reflected this distinction. For example, post-uprising developments, such as the legalization of police unions, have been discussed in public as “police reforms,” even though unions have no impact on professional conduct or corruption and are instead relevant only to personnel concerns, such as salary and working conditions. This case suggests that because elites have not framed security reform and buildup as a trade-off in public discourse, such framing has no effect on respondents in the context of the survey.

6 Conclusion

Reform of the coercive apparatus is a critical component of democratic consolidation. However, security reform after regime change cannot be taken for granted. Many state institutions are untouched by regime change, and security forces may even become stronger after revolutions due to the resulting instability. Moreover, the mobilized citizenry – which holds crucial power in a new democracy to demand such reforms – cannot always be relied upon to make these demands salient to policy makers. The experimental results demonstrate that the presentation of policy trade-offs has a significant effect on support for a given reform measure. Specifically, support for a given reform drops when it is offered as a trade-off with a more favored policy. If trade-offs, like those presented in the experimental vignettes, can be employed strategically by political elites to sway public opinion on sensitive policy questions, the result can be a lack of essential democratic reforms.

In line with my hypothesis, respondents are less supportive of security reform in the presence of a trade-off with a more favored alternative policy. The survey finds that in Tunisia, the most favored policy is economic development. Therefore, the framing of economic development as a trade-off with another policy, such as security reform, has the effect of reducing support for the alternative. The effect of trade-offs suggests that politicians can strategically deploy economic concerns to reduce public demand for costly institutional reforms. Despite the theoretical distinctions made by security experts between security reform (e.g. professionalization, anti-corruption) and security buildup (e.g. capacity building, equipment), individuals do not appear to distinguish much between these policies.

Proponents of democratic governance must take voters’ hierarchy of preferences seriously. Citizens will not demand institutional reforms, which guarantee the long-term sustainability of democracy, if they require – or are

believed to require – economic hardship. Therefore, the pathway to a successful democratic transition must include a strategy for mustering public support for reforms that may seem self-evident. To predict the path of regime transitions, we must understand the sources of the public attitudes that constrain the actions of the political elite. While it is beyond the scope of this article, the theory articulated here has implications for democratic consolidation more broadly. The failure of successive transitional governments to significantly reform state security forces presents a major challenge for theories of democratization, which assume institutional changes to the coercive apparatus as a condition of consolidation.⁶⁶

In conclusion, the experimental results provide new insight into how elite actors shape the discursive space for the formation of policy demands during democratic transitions. This theory is important for two reasons. First, it highlights the role of public demand in transitions to democracy, which have often been overlooked in favor of structural factors or elite-bargaining. Discounting public attitudes is a significant oversight, given that popular mobilization is central to many regime changes and that government accountability to public opinion is fundamental to democracy. Second, it identifies the role of elites in constructing the discursive space within which demands for transitional reform are constructed and negotiated. Political communication – notably, the framing of trade-offs – can substantially disrupt the translation of mass preferences into political policy. The distortion of public opinion to support elite interests is a major perversion of democratic representation, and merits further scholarly consideration.

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66 Juan J. Linz and Alfred C. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Yaprak Gürsoy, *Between Military Rule and Democracy: Regime Consolidation in Greece, Turkey, and Beyond* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

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