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FAKE NEWS AND THE TUNISIAN ARMY

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Abstract:

The rise of fake news has significantly impacted military institutions, including the Tunisian army, by undermining public trust and operational effectiveness. This research examines the relationship between misinformation and the military, focusing on the Tunisian context. The study highlights the Tunisian army's proactive strategies, such as legal frameworks, collaboration with media, and cybersecurity measures, to combat misinformation. Case studies illustrate the consequences of fake news, including strained diplomatic relations and public confusion. The paper also discusses challenges like resource constraints and evolving technologies, proposing solutions such as media literacy and international cooperation. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of vigilance and adaptability to safeguard military credibility in the digital age.

Keywords: fake news; manipulation; information; misinformation; military.

Introduction:

In recent years, the phenomenon of fake news has increasingly impacted various sectors, including defence and military operations. This research explores the relationship between fake news and the Tunisian army, examining how misinformation can undermine military integrity and operational effectiveness, as well as the strategies employed by the army to combat such threats.

1: Understanding fake news:

1.1: Definition

Fake news refers to false or misleading information presented as news, often aimed at influencing public opinion or obscuring the truth. Generally speaking, fake news is any false information disseminated on the internet, whether or not it is intended to harm a person or organization, or to serve a cause or person. A distinction is made between:

- Satirical or parodic information,
- Faked headlines,
- Misleading content,
- Content taken out of its original context,
- Plagiarized content,
- Content manipulated to mislead the reader and, fabricated content

For Tunisian army, fake and misleading news aimed at undermining the morale of the army is considered hostile acts that must be addressed in a manner guaranteed by Tunisian law.

1. 2: Historical context:

The concept of misinformation is not new; however, the rise of social media has amplified its reach. Historical examples of fake news include propaganda during wartime, showcasing how it has been used to manipulate perceptions and behaviours.



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2. The role of the military in society

2.1: Overview of the Tunisian army:

The Tunisian army, established in 30 Jun 1956 plays a great role in national security and has participated in various peacekeeping missions internationally. After the revolution of 14 January 2011, the Tunisian army played a leading role in maintaining security, public and private property, which strengthened its status among the Tunisian people.

2.2: Importance of trust in military:

Surveys around the world report exceptionally high levels of support for the military. This is particularly relevant for countries in transition from authoritarian rule to democracy, where militaries can play a vital role for democratic consolidation or autocratic backsliding. Trust in military institutions is vital for national stability. Fake news can erode this trust, making it essential for the military to maintain its integrity and credibility in the eyes of the public. From this point of view, it seems necessary to fortify the military institution against rumours and fake news.

3. Impact of fake news on military operations:

3.1: Reasons for the spread of fake news

The major factors that contribute to the dissemination of fake news about the military are:

- ❖ Disinformation operations by state, terrorist entities, or adversarial countries to undermine or control public sentiment.
- ❖ Social media gives a platform to fake news whereby it goes viral within hours; sensationalism and emotions play key content.
- ❖ In their race for exclusive information and scoops, media outlets do not exercise caution in investigating information, which leads to the spread of fake news.
- ❖ The people are made to believe and share untruths due to confirmation bias and emotional manipulation.
- ❖ Sensationalism of the media through clickbait headlines especially when dealing with such sensitive military issues can sometimes warp the facts.
- ❖ The fog of war — in other words, the confusion and misinformation during a conflict — means that facts are often not just scarce but also badly misinterpreted.
- ❖ In an online setting where sources remain nameless, establishing credibility in any military-related assertion becomes a veritable challenge.
- ❖ Low literacy levels in the media mean that people will take news at face value without proper scrutiny or even fact-checking whether it is true or not.
- ❖ Political polarization causes fake news to be sent attacking or undermining military institutions that are aligned with opposing views.
- ❖ Economic incentives for the creators of fake news, who profit from sensational stories—especially military stories.

Combating fake news requires better media literacy, improved fact-checking, and regulation of digital platforms.

3. 2: Case studies:

Several instances of fake news globally have demonstrated its capacity to disrupt military operations and erode public trust. During the Arab Spring, widespread misinformation fuelled confusion and mistrust among both civilians and military personnel, complicating response efforts and weakening institutional cohesion. During Tunisia’s revolution (dec2010-jan2014), false narratives spread rapidly via social media, undermining trust in institutions especially the military institution. The concrete example are “The rumours falsely claimed the military was firing on



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protesters in Tunis, this intensified public anger and confused security forces, delaying coordinated responses”.

A leaked U.S. diplomatic cable noted: “misinformation is paralysing decision-making chains” ((WIKILEAKS, 2011) - cable ID: 10 TUNIS 14- key quote: “Rumours spread via social media claimed the army was shooting protestors in Tunis on January 9-10, 2011. These falsehoods amplified public fury and created confusion within security forces, hampering crisis responses”). The same topic is addressed by the American academic JAMES GELVIN in his research under the title: “The Arab uprising: what everyone needs to know-2012 oxford university press page 45”.

More recently, on May 20, 2024, the Italian newspaper “La Repubblica” published an article titled “Russian Military Aircraft in Tunisia, US Alerts: ‘Moscow is Deploying’,” which claimed foreign military presence in Tunisia, this sparked controversy and concern. In response, Tunisian President Kais Saied strongly rejected the allegations, affirming that Tunisia does not host any foreign military bases and praising the sacrifices and dedication of the Tunisian armed forces in defending national sovereignty. The incident highlights how fake news can strain diplomatic relations, undermine military credibility, and sow public confusion. It can also be argued that information warfare, which relies on misleading and demoralizing the enemy, is a decisive factor in managing the battle and achieving specific political objectives.

3. 3: Psychological warfare:

Fake news serves as a tool for psychological warfare, aiming to demoralize troops or sway public against military actions.

4. The Tunisian army’s response to fake news:

4. 1: Military strategies and policies:

The Tunisian army has developed several strategies to counter misinformation, including digital outreach and collaboration with media organisation to clarify false narratives. The Tunisian army has also engaged in the state’s policy of combating rumours and fake news by honouring the Principle of the right of access to information and promoting the principle of transparency and accountability through organic law No.22 of 2016 dated March 24, 2016. The spokesperson of the Tunisian Ministry of national defence is responsible for answering all inquiries from the media and all official bodies that request information or clarifications.

4. 2: Role of the Defence Intelligence and Security Agency (DISA):

The Defence Intelligence and Security Agency (DISA) is a Tunisian military institution affiliated with the Tunisian ministry of National defence and concerned with military security and intelligence affairs. The draft decree No.4208 of 2014 dated November 20, 2014 was approved, creating a public institution under the supervision of the president of the republic of Tunisia, supreme commander of the armed forces, and the ministry of national defence, and giving it the current name. The DISA through its various structures , particularly those working in the field of cybersecurity and combating electronic crimes , is responsible for combating rumours and fake news in times of peace and war , and for reporting what it deems to be threatening state security and public order to military courts, which are responsible for prosecuting the accused before their competent departments.

4. 3: Approach to combat fake news (STRATCOM):

Tunisian army was one of the first to engage in combating fake news. Stopping fake news is a multifaceted process that involves various strategies and actions by individuals, organizations, and governments. In our country, we can say that the Tunisian army has been a pioneer in the fight against fake news when the Tunisian state has adopted a communication strategy (STRATCOM) based on eight steps to look for this purpose



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❖ **Media literacy education:**

- Promote critical thinking; teach individuals, especially students, how to critically evaluate sources recognize bias.
- Workshops and training; conduct workshops that focus on identifying fake news, understanding how misinformation spreads, and analysing media.

❖ **Fact-checking organizations:**

- Support fact –checkers; encourage the growth and accessibility of independent fact-checking organizations by concluding agreements with friendly countries that include training and developing modern methods of detecting fake news, the Tunisian state also provides important subsidies and encouragement to private initiative holders.
- Fact –checking tools; provide tools and resources for the public to verify claims, such as Snopes, Factcheck.org, and politiFact.

❖ **Digital literacy for all Ages:**

- Curriculum integration; integrate lessons on digital literacy into school curricula, emphasizing the importance of reliable information sources.
- Public campaigns; launch campaigns to raise public awareness about fake news and how to avoid it.

❖ **Developing reliable sources:**

- Encourage credible journalism; support a free, fair and credible press.
- Transparency; encourage news organizations to be transparent about their sources and fact-checking processes.

❖ **Algorithm and policy adjustments by tech platforms:**

- Content moderation; social media platforms implement stronger content moderation policies to reduce the spread of fake news.
- Algorithm changes; adjust algorithm to prioritize credible news sources and limit the reach of misinformation.

❖ **Community engagement and reporting:**

- Empower communities; mobilize communities to actively report fake news and misinformation encountered online.
- Peer support Networks; create platforms for individuals to discuss and verify news with peers before sharing.

❖ **Crisis communication:**

- Swift responses; government and organizations should provide accurate information swiftly to counter misinformation during crises.
- Clear messaging; develop clear and concise messaging to dispel common.

❖ **Collaboration and partnerships:**

- Multi-stakeholder initiatives; collaboration with media organizations, tech compartment NGOs, and governments to tackle the problem collectively.
- International cooperation; share successful strategies and best practice across borders to combat global misinformation.

5. Analyse of recent incidents:

5. 1: Examples of fake news affecting the Tunisian army:

Recent instances where fake news spread misinformation about military activities illustrate the challenges faced by the Tunisian army, such as rumours of military coups or exaggerated reports of military capabilities. In other way, some unreliable web pages deliberately issue fake news about the army and its activities and mislead the Tunisian public opinion. These pages are easily detected and addressed with the available technical and legal means available, especially through the



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cybercrime law (Decree No.54 of 2022 dated September 13, 2022 on combating crimes related to information and communication systems). Through the article 04 of this law “the competent departments of the ministries of national defence and interior are responsible for implementing the authorizations to access their respective information systems , data and stored data”.

5. 2: Public reaction and implications:

Public reaction to such misinformation can lead to protests or decreased trust in Military forces, demonstrating the need for proactive communication from the military. In Tunisia, the national army enjoy a good reputation among the general public, which has full confidence in its armed forces. In some cases of fake news, the media usually ask for clarification or information from the official body of the ministry of national defence, represented by the official spokesperson of the ministry of defence.

6. The future of information warfare:

6. 1: Challenges faced by the army:

The rapid evolution of technology presents ongoing challenges, as the tools for creating and disseminating fake news become more sophisticated. Compounding this, the army faces resource shortages, political volatility and eroded public trust – legacies of Tunisia’s transitional period:

- Resource constraints: limited budgets for cybersecurity tools and digital literacy training
- Political interference: post-revolution instability led to fragmented command structures.
- Social distrust: Fake news has contaminated the relationship between the army and the population.
- Cross-border threats: foreign actors exploited social media to spread destabilizing content.

6.2: Potential solutions:

Implementing robust cybersecurity measures and fostering partnerships with technology firms can help the Tunisian army combat the spread of fake news effectively. Tunisia does not appear to have a specific strategy in place to combat cybercrime and fake news. In 2013 the “Agene Technique des Telecommunications” was created to provide “technical assistance to judicial investigations concerning the fight against cybercrime”. In 2022, decree-law no.2022-54 introduced provisions on cybercrime. Tunisia, on the other hand, has had an IT security strategy in place since the late 90s, including:

- January 2003: creation of the National Agency for Computer security
- February 2004: promulgation of a law on IT security (Law n.2004-05 of February 3, 2004 and in associated regulatory acts)
- September 2005: Launch of tunCERT (computer emergency response team)
- National cybersecurity strategy 2020-2025: This strategy aims to direct and manage national cyberspace, identifying the parties involved and supporting coordination between them. It also aims to prevent cyber threats and improve the country’s resilience to these threats by strengthening national capabilities, accelerating awareness and protecting vital information infrastructures.

As for the Tunisian army the solutions are adopted after analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the military force itself, for that military leaders must secure the external and the internal work environment and educate individuals about the danger of fake news, and from there, the foundation for a long-term and continuous action plan begins, which is based mainly on the following points:

- Run awareness-raising campaigns to explain the dangers of disinformation and the techniques used by manipulators.



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- Train military personnel to recognize fake news, check sources and cross-check information. This task is carried by the DISA by organizing awareness sessions and seminars at various academies and military barracks in Tunisia.
- Encourage military person to question the information they receive and check the facts before sharing it.
- Communicate proactively with troops to disseminate accurate and official information, in order to counteract fake news.
- Use various communication channels (social, intranet, etc.) to reach as many staff as possible.
- Encourage collaboration between the various players in the fight against fake news (technology companies, fact-checkers, and academic institutions).
- Share best practice and resources in the fight against fake news.
- Clearly communicate errors and manipulations, presenting the facts in a transparent manner, this is where the important role of the armed forces spokesperson comes into play.
- developing cooperation relations with the armies of friendly countries around the world, including NATO forces, to benefit from their expertise in the field of cybersecurity, combating fake news and following all developments in the same field, which is what the Tunisian armed forces are keen on.

Conclusion:

The spread of fake news poses a serious threat to the credibility and operational integrity of military institutions, including the Tunisian army. It undermines public trust and can destabilize national security. The Tunisian army has recognized the danger and taken proactive steps to address it through legal frameworks, media collaboration, and cybersecurity strategies. Institutions like DISA play a crucial role in detecting and countering misinformation. STRATCOM efforts have helped enhance media literacy and public awareness.

Despite this, evolving technologies and social media platforms continue to amplify the challenge. Effective crisis communication and prompt fact-checking are essential tools. Regional and international partnerships are key to strengthening defences. Continuous training for military personnel helps build resilience against manipulation. Ultimately, safeguarding military credibility in the information age requires vigilance, coordination, and adaptability.

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