

Tunisia's Security Concerns

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Ansar al-Sharia, established in April 2011, is the most prominent Salafist jihadist organization in Tunisia. At the beginning the movement, which sympathizes with the ideology of al-Qaeda, focused its attention on humanitarian and missionary works. Later it did not balk at using violence to enforce religious norms. The conflict between the Ennahda Government and the organization culminated between May and July, 2013. At the end of August the Government finally designated Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist-organization. According official reports, the organization is responsible for planning several unsuccessful attacks during the intervening months. Additionally, Okba bin Nafaa, the military wing of Ansar al-Sharia, has been fighting an open war with the Tunisian Army in the Algerian border region since December 2012.

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Introduction

The Salafist jihadist movements have been strengthened significantly in Tunisia after the 2011 Arab Spring. The Ansar al-Sharia (AST), the most prominent local organization, came into existence after three months of the collapse of Ben Ali's regime. The movement, which has unreservedly sympathized with the ideology of the international al-Qaeda terror-organization, emphasized works of mercy and *dawa* (missionary activity) since the beginning. It has taken full advantage of the critical economic conditions of the country and the social tensions that originated from the previous situation. It has not flinched away from using the *hisba*, the enforcement of Islamic doctrines with violence, to achieve its purpose. The conflict between the Ennahda majority government and the organization culminated in the May through July, 2013 period. Finally, at the end of August that year the cabinet declared the Ansar as-Sharia a terrorist organization. According to government sources, the organization has attempted a number of attacks since then. The Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, the military wing of the organization, has waged open war on the Tunisian Army in the Algerian border region.

The Establishment of Ansar Al-Sharia

The Salafist Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) was set up in late April, 2011 by Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (also known as Seifallah Ben Hassine) in Soukra, one of the suburbs of Tunis.

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Previously, the founder was one of the Tunisian activists of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. He was released in an amnesty, like his other Islamist companions.³

From the beginning its openly declared aim was to provide those services, that according to its point of view, the government was incapable of providing. The exact structure of the organization was unknown until now. We only know that it is a hybrid organization, consisting of a network of small, local groups in an overall pyramidal structure. According to the available information, the groups average 20 members and enjoy considerable autonomy. It is also common knowledge that the organization has divided the country into three districts (northern, central and southern) in the interests of effective district direction. [1] Only a smaller group of the core leaders has been named publicly beside Abu Iyad (eg. Hassan Ben Brik, the leader of the Dawa Committee, Ahmed al-Akrami, the coordinator of the medical and humanitarian activities of the organization or Sayf al-Din Ben Rayes, who produced the statements and sermons of the group). Supposedly, they are assisted by several individuals in the background. These individuals, who had military experience (eg. Tarek Maaroufi, Sami bin Khamis Essid or Mehdi Kammoun) were subsequently linked to Ansar al-Sharia's violent activities. [2: 10]

There has been no reliable information about the exact size of the organization, because membership figures were regularly underestimated by the governmental authorities and overestimated by its supporters.⁴ The first adherents came mainly from the working-class in Bab al-Khadra as well as al-Kambes and Malik bin Anas Mosques. The popularity of the AST grew dynamically, due to its intensive campaign and religious activities in the local mosques. In a short while, mainly desperate youths who were disappointed in the revolution and the regime became the base of the AST (this was contrary to the other Salafist political movements, the Jabhat al-Islah, whose supporters came primarily from a more mature age-group). [4] From the beginning the organization emphasized the importance of propaganda to pass its message to a wide audience. It established the al-Qayrawan Media Foundation (QMF) on April 27, 2011 to popularize its ideology and activities. It ran its own blog and created Facebook pages, and it regularly published in various press forums. The propaganda activity of the AST increased the number of its adherents in Tunisia, and it has attracted the attention of Arab readers of the two most popular online jihadist forums, the Ansar al-Mujahidin and the al-Jahad al-Alami.

Officially it covered its expenses from donations that mainly Tunisian locals offered in the mosques during the Friday sermons. However, it was clear that the funds thus collected were not enough to defray the costs of the organization's various humanitarian activities. Therefore there could be no doubt that its works of mercy were also sponsored by prominent foreign – mainly Saudi and Kuwaiti – foundations. Beside the activity on behalf of the community, it made an intensive campaign to demand the release of such Islamist prisoners as the blind Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman, the religious leader of the Egyptian al-Gamaa al-Islami-

3 The Tunisian Combat Group was co-founded by Abu Iyad and Tarek Maaroufi in June, 2000. The organization trained volunteers in Afghanistan, forged documents and passed activists from Europe to Afghanistan. Later it was linked to the assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Afghan Northern Alliance, on September 9, 2011. The United States designated the group a foreign terrorist organization on December 20, 2004. Abu Iyad was imprisoned by the Tunisian authorities in 2003 and he was released after the Jasmine Revolution.

4 One of the AST's activists estimated the number of members between 90 and 100 individuals in March 2013, which we can accept only with considerable skepticism. [3]

yah or Abu Qatada al-Filistini, the spiritual leader of al-Qaeda in Europe. In addition, it held peaceful sit-ins on several occasions outside the Iraqi embassy in Tunis on behalf of Tunisian activist of al-Qaeda, who were imprisoned in Iraq during 2005–2007. It also demonstrated in front of the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where it demanded that the government intervene in their case. [4] The name of the organization itself shows that the main objective of the Ansar al-Sharia is to strongly promote the application of the sharia in everyday life. The ideas of AST about the new Tunisia were clearly manifested during the nationwide conference in Kairouan on May 20, 2012. On this occasion Abu Iyad urged the reform of the media, tourism and commercial sectors in accordance with Islamic principles. He also felt it necessary to create an Islamic trade union to counteract the powerful and secularist Tunisian General Labour Union. [6]

The Ideology of Ansar Al-Sharia

There is no doubt that Ansar al-Sharia was strongly influenced by the world-view of al-Qaeda. It supported unreservedly the global jihad ideology of the international terrorist organization. It also posted on its forums the views of Ayman al-Zawahiri and his prominent adherents on several occasions.⁵ Despite this ideological affinity, in the beginning the group concentrated primarily on recruiting local volunteers and on its missionary activities (*dawa*). According to their opinion, Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali established and ruled a profane state that favored secularism and downplayed Islam. Therefore AST considered it its main duty to return to the right way and to enforce strongly Islamic values in everyday life. The long-term aim of the organization was to re-establish the Islamic Caliphate. To achieve that goal, it was ready to cooperate with any organization that had similar ideas.

The Ansar al-Sharia emphasized several times that its aim was not to acquire state power. In contrast to the Egyptian Salafist parties it did not want to participate in internal politics so it did not set up its own legal party. It condemned the state and democracy and in the distributed pamphlets it pronounced the participation in political life a polytheist act. It encouraged fellow Islamists to absent themselves from elections and it warned the participants that they would regret their actions on the Day of Resurrection, because they infringed on God's sovereignty. In addition, AST regularly posted fatwas and videos from popular Salafi jihadist sheiks arguing against democracy, in order to discourage potential voters from voting.⁶

Another important aspect in which it differed from the international terrorist organizations was that although it adhered to the radical interpretation of Islam, it rejected violent jihad in Tunisia. This attitude was not due to the weakness of Salafi jihadist tendencies that had not been able to gain strength earlier in Tunisia. The main reason was that the government had not encouraged the emigration of undesirable persons during the Ben Ali regime. Therefore

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- 5 For example, in a statement AST congratulated the Afghan Taliban, the Islamic State of Iraq, the Caucasus Emirate, the Islamic Maghreb Emirate and the Somali comrades in November 2011. In addition, the group asked God to give victory to the mujahedin, raise the word of Islam, bring together the Muslims and annihilate such enemies of Islam as the Jews, Christians, atheists and apostates.
 - 6 For example, Sheikh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti's proclamation, which emphasized the un-Islamic character of democratic elections, received great publicity. Another fatwa of the Sheikh against Ennahda also received prominent place on the forums of the organization. In this he characterized the program of the Islamist party as a violation of monotheism, described its secretary-general, Rachid Ghannouchi and his colleagues as heretics and declared the position of the party on jihad, dhimmis, infidels, women and music as a "pollution" of Islam.

the volunteers returning from Afghanistan after the Soviet withdrawal did not carry out such violent acts like their Egyptian, Algerian or Libyan fellows did during the 1990's. [7] It must also be noted in connection with this statement of non-violence that Ansar al-Sharia only rejected an open fight with external enemies of Islam in Tunisia. This must be noted, because the main aims of the organization were missionary activities and the so-called *hisba* – the avoidance of forthcoming wrong; in practice this means the enforcement of religious norms in the Muslim community. According to Ansar al-Sharia's interpretation this entitled them to attack those individuals and institutions that violated those norms.⁷

Non-violent *dawa* at home did not keep Abu Iyad from supporting violent jihad in foreign countries. In an interview in March 2012 he considered legal the struggle in Iraq after the American withdrawal, and that struggle also should have been extended to Iran. For this reason he created a dual strategy in the interest of maintaining non-violence and alleviating tensions in Tunisia. He offered his followers an opportunity to decide whether they wanted to do peaceful missionary works at home, or fight abroad. Those who wanted to fight were sent to Syria, Libya or Mali.⁸ At home he consistently endeavored to promote true Islamic morals mainly through verbal persuasion and exemplary behavior among the people. In this regard he shared Sheikh Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi's thoughts. According to the Palestinian writer with Jordanian citizenship, jihad meant a non-violent aspiration to realize a life style in accorded with Islam. He did not want to persuade the community through the destruction of enemies, but rather through education and missionary works. Other influential theorists of the movement are Sheikh al-Khatib al-Idrisi, who is one of the most prominent Salafi clerics in Tunisia, the imprisoned Abu Qatada al-Filistini, the Syrian Abu Basir Tartusi, Anwar al-Awlaki, who was killed in the end of September, 2011, or Hani Sabahi. [1] The group also reveres Yosri bin Fakher Trigui (also known as Abu Qudama al-Tunisi), who was arrested in Iraq in 2006 and executed in November 2011 for his participation in the bombing of the Shiite tombs at Marqad al-Imamayn Houssin and Hadi al-Askari. AST considered Trigui an illustrious martyr of the movement the equivalent of Osama bin Laden or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. More than a thousand members of the Ansar al-Sharia carried banners and placards with Islamic slogans at his funeral. [11]

In practice the organization's goal was to offer concrete choices in accordance with Islam for everyday challenges and tribulations. For example AST often organized presentations for winning hearts and minds. During these events notable Tunisian scholars popularized the idea of returning to Islamic values. In addition, during the weekly market it regularly distributed among the people the works of Salafist literature; the activists cleaned the streets as a service to the public; they nursed elder locals in their home, and performed humanitarian work in the refugee camps as well as in the region afflicted by natural disasters. The organization helped those in need with donations of food, medicine and clothes in the backward rural

7 The first targets of *hisba* were women. Shortly after the revolution, the enraged mobs set brothels on fire in Kairouan, Médenine, Sfax and Sousse. During these attacks the prostitutes were seriously beaten. Later there were frequent cases of women walking in public being attacked, because their clothes were found objectionable according activists' judgment. [8: 4] [9]

8 In the interview with al-Sabah Abu Iyad claimed that there was a sizeable group of young men beside him who wanted to travel to Syria to fight in the jihad. According to Aaron Zelin's research, one year later the number of the Tunisian volunteers was between 150 and 300. In February 2013 alone 26 of them lost their lives. Two months later Tunisian Foreign Minister Othmane Jarandi stated that the Tunisian volunteers who were fighting in Islamist rebel ranks in Syria numbered some 800. Also a local radio station announced that 132 Tunisian fighters were killed during the fighting in and around the city of Aleppo in February alone. [10] [7] [3]

areas that had previously been neglected by the government. AST took maximum advantage of the opportunities of the modern age to form a wide support base. This is why AST continuously reported its activities on the internet and illustrated them with photos. At the same time it also reviewed the events and new issues about various jihadists, supplementing their Facebook pages. [3]

Warning Signs

There were many warning signs from 2011 that the Salafists were prepared to enforce their Islamist mindset and rebuild the state according to their own design as soon as possible, despite their professions of non-violence on several occasions. The first serious conflict between the government and Ansar al-Sharia occurred on June 26, 2011, when the Tunisian film “No God, No Master” was presented. Like other Islamist organizations, Ansar al-Sharia declared the film apostate. Several dozen activists demonstrated on Habib Bourghiba Avenue against the work that outspokenly criticized political Islam. The demonstrators trooped to the Afric’Art Theater, where the film was being screened. They broke into the building, assaulted the manager of the establishment and destroyed the projection equipment. The police arrested seven individuals after they arrived at the scene. Two days later about 100 Salafist demanded the release of the detainees in front of the Justice Ministry. There was a verbal exchange between the protesters and five lawyers and the latter ones were attacked. One lawyer was so severely beaten that he had to be hospitalized. After the incident the interim government determined to crack down on Islamists and arrested 26 persons, among them several members of Ansar al-Sharia. [12] [13]

Some three months later, as the date of the National Assembly elections was approaching, tempers flared up again due to another film. This time the cause was the Oscar-nominated film *Persepolis*. As a matter of fact, the animated work showed the Iranian revolution through the eyes of a young girl. Abu Iyad especially disapproved of that scene, when God appeared in human form to teach the hero about forgiveness. He incited his fellows against the Nessma private television channel after it had broadcast the film on October 7, 2011. The next day the Islamists tried to set fire to the TV station and the channel owner’s home was raided. [14]

By this time the demonstrations in the capital were usually organized on behalf of women wearing niqabs (which covers the whole body) on university campuses. The protesters attacked with sticks, stones and knives, the riot police tried to disperse them with tear-gas. The street disturbances soon reached the universities as well. The Salafist activists attacked secular minded students and a little group of undergraduates led by Mohamed Bakti practically kept Habib Kazdaghli, the dean of Manouba University as hostage in his own office for weeks, in order to force him to give permission to wear the niqab in classrooms and during examinations. [15] [16] The influence of religious extremism was clearly and alarmingly manifested on March 16, 2012. Thousands of Islamist protesters under al-Qaeda’s signature black banner demonstrated in front of the Constituent National Assembly building in Tunis, demanding the acknowledgement of sharia as the fundamental source of law in the future constitution. [17] The flag appeared again nine days later in downtown Tunis during the demonstration organized by Ansar al-Sharia to glorify the Koran. The demonstrators flew one from the clock tower near one of the busiest crossroad of the capital and demanded the establishment of a new caliphate. The demonstration started peacefully, but violence occurred on

this occasion, too. This time the participants interrupted a performance in front of a theater, and attacked and maltreated the members of the company. [18]

In La Marsa, one of Tunis's suburbs, other disturbances broke out on account of an art exhibition on June 12, 2012. This time Ansar al-Sharia and Salafists were angered mainly by three pictures: one caricatured Mecca, the other portrayed a nude woman and on the third one the artist had spelled out the word "Allah" with strings of ants. Tempers got out of control after the assault on the gallery. Thousands of protesters set alight the offices of the country's main labour union in Jendouba, torched a local court in west Tunis and threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at several police stations. The police again tried to disperse the crowd using tear-gas. By the end of the riots 65 members of the security forces were wounded and 162 people had been detained. [19] [20]

The turning-point with long-term consequences occurred on September 14. The demonstrations began after Friday prayers on account of a film which portrayed the Prophet Mohammad engaged in vulgar and offensive behavior. The disturbances quickly spread throughout the capital when Ansar al-Sharia endorsed the rallying call on Facebook by Islamist activists. The protesters marched to the U.S. embassy in Tunis with sticks, stones and petrol bombs where they forced their way into the building and started systematically plundering it. Some individuals pulled down the U.S. flag flying over the embassy, burned it, and replaced it with the black flag of Islam, while others carried off the valuables. Luckily no one from the embassy staff was hurt, due to the quick arrival of riot police, although at first the attackers resolutely stood on the defensive. Their resistance ended when the police started using live ammunition. The protesters tried to leave the place quickly after they smashed windows and attempted to set fire to several rooms. During this time, others broke into the nearby American School. They set fire to that building as well, after they took away some laptops and computers. On this occasion the clashes resulted in fatalities, and at least 29 people were injured and two lost their lives. The Libyan authorities subsequently linked the events with the attack against a U.S. embassy facility that occurred three days earlier in Benghazi. According to their suspicions, the Libyan branch of Ansar al-Sharia was the mastermind behind the disturbances that resulted in the death of ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other American citizens. [21]

The assassination of the well-known leftist-secular Chokri Belaid on February 6, 2013 was another example of declining public security throughout the country. The opposition leader's death caused disturbances, which were used by some as a cover for looting. Although the police arrested the majority of these individuals in short time, Ansar al-Sharia considered this the opportune moment to mobilize its private army, the so-called Neighborhood Committees.⁹ At AST's call to action, its adherents appeared within a few hours both in big cities and in smaller villages, which clearly illustrated the effectiveness of the organization. The activists patrolled on streets in 10–50 member groups waving al-Qaeda's black flag, and administered summary justice arbitrarily against anyone whose behavior they regarded substandard. Although the crisis passed with a few scuffles and the arrest of a thief, the patrols' presence made a big impression on locals who were disappointed with the cabinet's

9 The Neighborhood Committees were set up on October 06, 2012 in order to fill the security vacuum and protect inhabitants in case public security was to decline within the country. Originally this private organization, which could be considered a de facto non-state controlled martial law force, was to be activated on the first anniversary of October 23 2011 Constituent Assembly Election. Public security was not compromised when the date came, so the committees were not called out.

policy. This, together with social activity for the public welfare showed explicitly that AST would soon form a separate state within the Tunisian state. Ennahda had to do something, because co-operation was growing stronger between the party's hard-line elements and AST, due to the concessions to the secularists in the writing of the constitution. [22]

The Proscription of the Movement

In the beginning the moderate Islamist Ennahda adopted an extremely tolerant policy towards Ansar al-Sharia after winning the National Assembly elections on October 23, 2011. The party made no secret of its hope that co-operation could emerge between them. It took the initiative and suggested a national dialogue with the salafist's. With this step it expected to prevent the radicalization of fundamentalists who posed a dangerous threat with their illegality and commitment to terrorist acts in the long run. However, the positive proposal had little effect on the Jihadist movement, because several members have viewed Ennahda with considerable skepticism from the beginning. Against these positive efforts the first conflict occurred in 2011, when Ennahda formed a coalition with such non-Islamist parties as Congress for the Republic and Ettakol. The situation became more and more critical in 2012. The number of Salafist demonstrations increased on the street where the marchers protested with violent acts against government policy. The tension culminated in December when Salafists attacked alcohol vendors and mobbed a hotel where they caused serious damage to the furniture. At the end of the month the cabinet responded by inviting those Salafist groups that rejected violence to a new dialogue. It emphasized the importance of the gesture, and at the same time it stressed that it was not going to enter into discussions with those who disturb public order and promised serious sanctions against them. [23]

The relation between Ennahda and Ansar al-Sharia worsened, because the movement's ideological affinity to al-Qaeda, as well as its missionary activities soon became suspect. In government circles AST's ability to recruit adherents in such respectable numbers during a short period caused growing anxiety.¹⁰ The program called *Abna'ukum fi Khidmatikum* (Your Sons Are at Your Service) impressed particularly deeply those who were disillusioned by the government's policies. These people, who had been disappointed by the revolution, observed the work of the organization with growing interest. They more and more saw the care in AST that they had previously expected from the government.

As the charity works of the organization became known throughout the country, the government first targeted its propaganda. Its Facebook-profile was banned on 12 occasions between September 2012 and March 2013, with no effect. The movement emerged again and again to inform its adherents continuously. [3] After the attack on the U.S embassy the cabinet was forced to accept the demand of the political opposition, and numerous Jihadists – among them several Ansar al-Sharia members – were detained to restrain extremists. However, it was soon obvious that the show of force did not have the expected results. Instead of deterring the extremists, it only encouraged them. Many imprisoned Salafists began a hunger-strike as a protest against what they considered an injustice. Two of them died in prison in November, so instead of crushing the Islamists, the cabinet unwittingly gave martyrs to their movement. [25]

10 It was a clear indication of the organization's fast growing popularity that only a few hundred persons attended the 2011 conference, whereas one year later the participants' number reached 10 000 people. [24]

Despite the growing danger, the government was still wary of open confrontation with Ansar al-Sharia. Whereas several members of the organization participated regularly in demonstrations against blasphemous issues and acts, according to the authorities' suspicions others did more than this and were linked to violent incidents and weapon smuggling in March 2013. However, they could not prove the charges for a long time, and the organization kept up its activities. Then, without any warning, on 10–11 May the security forces cracked down on members of the organization, who were distributing their books and pamphlets on the streets. In his response Abu Iyad obliquely threatened the government that he would give up his peaceful stand and initiate open violent jihad against it. [25] In its reaction the cabinet banned Ansar al-Sharia's imminent annual congress. Tunis justified the ban by the need to prevent incitement for violent attacks against state institutions. The membership of the organization was highly indignant both at the decision and at the explanation. The disaffected AST members clashed openly with security forces in Tunis and Kairouan on May 19. The protesters threw stones and Molotov cocktails at the policemen, set an armored vehicle on fire, attacked a National Guard posts, closed roads, burned a national flag and engaged in looting. The government gave up its tolerant rhetoric once and for all after the clashes that caused at least one protester's death and injured 15 policemen. Prime Minister Ali Larayedh declared Ansar al-Sharia an illegal organization and for the first time he spoke about AST's alleged terrorist ties and activities when he commented on the events. [27] [28]

The opposition politician Mohamed Brahmi's death on July 25, 2013 and the following mass-demonstrations were a turning-point. On 27 August Prime Minister Ali Larayedh announced at a press conference that there was proof that Ansar al-Sharia was the mastermind behind killing Brahmi and Chokri Belaid and held them responsible for the internal crisis.¹¹ He also blamed them for the October 2011 assault on the Nessma TV station, the action against the contemporary art exhibition in June 2012 as well as the attack on the U.S. embassy and American school in September 2012, when the lives of more than 100 American citizens' were put in danger. Above all, he emphasized that AST had close links with al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb.¹² Regarding the murder of the two politicians he added that the murderers were senior leaders of AST and acted with Abu Iyad's knowledge and approval. To justify the terrorist designation, he stated that the organization was part of the international al-Qaeda network which trained its volunteers in Libya and Syria and received financial support from such Arabic countries as Yemen, Libya and Mali.¹³ He accused AST of supporting the armed jihadist cell which was active on the Algerian-Tunisian border region and was the target of the army's month-long operation around Mount Chaambi. Next day the Director of Public Security announced that there was evidence that the secret military wing of the organization planned to assassinate 19 public figures.¹⁴

11 According police's sources, both assassinations were carried out with the same weapon that they seized during a raid. [29]

12 Prime Minister Ali Larayedh's announcement was based on a handwritten document, an Allegiance Act, between Abu Iyad and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb leader Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud. [30]

13 Later Ansar al-Sharia was linked to the group that bombed the vehicles of the National Guard in La Goulette in July. The police managed to arrest two of the perpetrators in Marnaguia in September. During the raid the authorities seized many home-made bombs and a considerable quantity of TNT. [31]

14 Later Tunisian government sources estimated that about 16 individuals constituted the military wing of the organization. It included six who prepared the operations, eight people who executed them, and two others responsible for mobilization and for obtaining weapons.

In its response, announced on September 3, the organization denied the charges and stressed its independence and innocence. It found the terrorist designation an “honor” and threatened the “tyrants” who ruled Tunisia that it would wage war against them. [32] [33] Abu Iyad, who was accused of instigating the U.S. embassy siege and a warrant was issued for his arrest, went underground after the attack on the embassy. Nowadays he is supposedly living in Libya, where he enjoys the protection of Abdelhakim Belhadj, a former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) commander. [30] The United State also accepted the Tunisian cabinet's view in relation with Ansar al-Sharia in the beginning of 2014. According to their judgment, the organization became the most dangerous threat against American interest in Tunisia. Therefore the United States government designated the group and its leader terrorists on January 10. [34] [35]

The End of the Policy of Non-Violence

The jihadist cell, hiding in the Mount Chaambi region (with which AST was accused of co-operating with) was identified by the Tunisian authorities as the Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade. The exact structure and the size of the terror-group as well as its leadership are unknown. Nowadays it seems to consist of at least two serrya (company) with rather flexible structures. This was the reason why the group was not paralyzed despite the considerable damage it has sustained during the elapsed month. The injured militants were taken away immediately by their companions during clashes. If the latter was impossible, they decapitated the bodies to avoid identification. Like the Afghan Taliban, the Peruvian Shining Path or the Algerian Armed Islamic Group, they also hid booby-traps under the abandoned bodies to cause further casualties among the security forces. [36]

The cell, whose strength was estimated about 20 jihadist fighters in May 2013, was originally composed mainly of foreign volunteers from the neighboring countries – primarily Algerians and Libyans. Later many Islamist veterans, fleeing the French military intervention in January in North-Mali, joined it.¹⁵ The situation worsened when Ennahda increasingly turned against Salafist groups and reached out to secular opposition parties as a counterweight to the extremists. In response al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb issued a statement on March 17, 2013, calling on Tunisian volunteers in foreign countries to return home and reverse the unfavorable developments in the religion. Many Tunisian veterans, who had earlier fought in Iraq and/or Syria, returned and joined Okba Ibn Nafaa. Others set up another group, estimated 12–15 persons, in the area of el-Kef, 160 kilometers to the north. [38]

There are indicators that the group has been closely linked to the terror-organization al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb from the beginning. According to Interior Minister Ali Larayedh's announcement in December 2012, the cell came under the leadership of three Algerians, who were closely linked to Abdelmalek Droukdel, leader of al-Qaeda's North-African wing. He said that their main goal was to set up camps in the Kasserine region, where recruits could get initial training before sending them to one of al-Qaeda's bases in Algeria

15 Interior Minister Ali Larayedh announced at a press conference on December 21, 2012 that the authorities had arrested 16 individuals after multiple incidents against Tunisian security services. The detained individuals, including three Algerians and a Libyan, were allegedly linked to the al-Qaeda in the Islam Maghreb and Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade terrorist-groups. [37]

or Libya.¹⁶ His statement was subsequently confirmed by terrorists equipped with Kalashnikovs, heavy weapons and sniper rifles. They used – and still use – the same tactics in their raids around Mount Chaambi as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb had practiced in the Kabylie Mountains against the Algerian army: surprise raids against mountainous military posts, then mutilating the bodies of dead soldiers and looting their weapons and uniforms. [39]

The terrorist-group (which had been named after an Umayyad general), first came to the attention of the authorities at the end of 2012. During a raid in Jendouba on December 8 that year the police arrested two individuals, who were supposed to be members of a Salafist group. They also seized a large quantity of explosives and weapons, so an increased alert was ordered along the Algerian border. Two days later the Tunisian National Guard was alerted about infiltration by four armed men in Kasserine Governorate, who sought temporary shelter in the forest near Derneya. They were not willing to surrender when the soldiers called on them to do so, and opened fire when they saw the small strength of the detachment and killed adjutant Anis Jelassi. The Tunisian authorities began an extensive investigation after the death of the officer and arrested seven individuals. On the basis of their interrogation, Interior Minister Ali Rayadh, on December 21, identified the cell for the first time by its exact name and outlined its relationship to al-Qaeda as well as its smuggling and secret military training activity. [38] [40]

Following the incident in which a road-sided bomb injured the leg of a soldier on patrol in the National Park, the Tunisian Army launched a military offensive to eliminate them. There was practically no contact with the group in the first month of the two months-long operation. Before the patrols arrived the terrorists would always escape, leaving behind some booby-traps. The Army's casualties were caused solely by these primitive, home-made devices that had been built using ammonium nitrate fertilizer. Based on the explosives and documents seized in the abandoned camps it was clear that the terrorists had extensive foreign relations and considerable reserves for continuing the fight. The Army's only solution was to pound dangerous areas with mortar fire. The Army declared the mountains cleared at the end of the operation, in which several hundred soldiers took part, three individuals were killed and 27 wounded in the 10 explosions that occurred. [38] [41]

Unfortunately, the Army's announcement was premature. They certainly caused serious damage to the terrorists, but they did not succeed in eliminating them definitively. The cell struck again in the Mount Chaambi area in July 2013. They killed eight soldiers and cut the throats of five of them. The Army launched a new wide offensive against them as revenge, but the offenders again managed to escape. [42]

Open Jihad Against Security Forces

The Tunisian authorities started an intensive hunt for Ansar al-Sharia and Islamist militants after the proscription of the organization. During 2013 alone 1,347 persons were brought to trial in connection with terrorism-related charges, and more than 8,000 young men and women were prevented from going to Syria to fight. [43] During a police raid in the Raoued area outside Tunis, Kamel Gadhghi, the main suspect of Chokri Belaid's assassination was

16 He also alleged that the members of the group consisted of inhabitants of Kasserine region and Ansar al-Sharia volunteers. His statement amounted to an open accusation against a legally functioning organization, without any proof. For this reason many people questioned the validity and accuracy of the statement.

killed along with six other terrorists. The clash, in which one member of the National Guard was also killed, gave a lot of useful experience to the security forces. When the suspects were surrounded they not only rejected the offer of surrender, but two of them tried to cause casualties among the policemen with explosive vests on their body. The security forces also found a large quantity of weapons when they searched the building. This suggests that the terrorists probably planned to carry out an attack. [43] A further six members of the banned organization were detained by the antiterrorist unit in the center of Sidi Bouzid on July 10. Two weeks later the security forces arrested Mohamed Anis, “the Prince of Ansar al-Sharia”, who had in his possession considerable funds as well as documents containing terrorist plans.¹⁷ According to the reports, the security forces killed several more members of the organization during October. Due to their intervention, the suicide attempt against French and American embassies at the end of the month also failed. Abdelmalek Droukdel had ordered sleeping cells of Ansar al-Sharia to carry out the attack as revenge for French military action in Mali and the liquidation of al-Qaeda leaders. The security forces also managed to disarm a suicide bomber who wanted to blow up the mausoleum of Habib Bourghiba in Monastir with a considerable quantity explosives in his rucksack on October 30. Unfortunately they could not prevent his companion from carrying out another attack. His bomb, which was concealed in a suitcase, was activated by a mobile phone on the beach outside the Riad Palm Hotel in Sousse on the same day. [46] Luckily no one but the suicide bomber was killed.

Soon after these events the Tunisian authorities began an extensive investigation. They soon arrested five individuals and confiscated a considerable quantity of explosives in Monastir. The suspects revealed during their interrogation that on Abu Iyad's order they had planned to attack the center of the security services, police stations as well as four supermarkets where alcohol was sold. [8] The security services managed to foil another attempt when they arrested a terrorist cell. The six terrorists allegedly wanted to target hotels or bars during New Year's Eve celebrations on Djerba Island, a favorite tourist spot. [47]

Despite these undoubtedly significant results the struggle against terrorism proved to be a remarkable challenge for the Tunisian armed forces. Their limited experience and lack of adequate equipment were serious problems.¹⁸ Their position became even more difficult when they had to divide their limited strength and redeploy forces to the Libyan border region that had suddenly become a danger zone after the revolution in that country. Neither the air strikes, nor the July 2013 offensive could completely eliminate the al-Qaeda group in the Mount Chaambi area. What is more, the militants killed at least 15 soldiers and policemen by October 2013 and killed two policemen in Beja (about 160 km north of the Chaambi region) on October 15, 2013. The security forces lost their confidence in the cabinet as a result of

17 The actual influence of the banned organization was well illustrated by the fact that the companions of the activists arrested in July started a spontaneous demonstration on the same day at the police headquarters and demanded the detainees' release. The police used tear gas and fired warning shots to disperse the mob. Also on the same day, Salafist extremists clashed with policemen in El Kef. They threw stones at police vehicles and attacked the police station with Molotov cocktails. [44] [45]

18 Rachid Ammar, the commander in chief of the Tunisian army, voiced his concern over the situation. According his point of view, Tunisia, unlike other countries, lacked the economic resources to fight terrorism, so it could easily become a second Somalia. He resigned shortly after making this statement. The Defense Ministry also admitted that the army was lacking equipment with which it could safely clear the mountainous region of the mines placed by the jihadists. [48]

growing casualties. Their unions have organized several demonstrations, demanding the necessary resources to combat jihadist elements as well as laws to protect policemen.¹⁹

The danger of terrorism increased on January 14, 2014 when Okba Ibn Nafaa merged with Ansar al-Sharia, whereby it transformed itself unofficially into al-Qaeda's Tunisian wing. Abdelmalek Droukdel, the Algerian chief of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, appointed another Algerian, Khaled Chaieb (aka Lokman Abou Sakhr) as the leader of a new organization that was soon being referred to as al-Qaeda in Tunisia in the press. The new emir, a former chemistry student turned explosives expert, was among those responsible for the July 2013 Mount Chaambi massacre according to the Tunisian Interior Ministry. In his new position he faced a serious challenge. First of all he had to re-organize the militants who suffered serious losses in the operations of the Algerian and Tunisian Armies during the previous months. In addition, he had to halt the chaos that had developed within Ansar al-Sharia in Abu Iyad's absence. [39] In the last six months he seems to have managed to realize his goals. He recruited and trained new volunteers and managed to avoid capture at the same time. The militants, equipped with rocket-propelled grenades and rifles, made an assault on two military checkpoints near Mount Chaambi on July 17, 2014. The casualties – 15 soldiers lost their lives and at least 20 were wounded in the attack – were the heaviest toll registered by the army since independence in 1956. [49]

Following these events the government set up a crisis group and closed the unlicensed Al-Ensan television and Nour Radio stations, as well as certain mosques, which they claimed had been promoting violence and jihad. [50] Above all, the Tunisian cabinet intensified its cooperation with neighboring Algeria and launched a joint operation to round up Islamists. Despite these preventive measures another raid occurred on July 26, when some 40 Islamists ambushed two vehicles of the army near Djebel Urgha, in Kef Governorate. In response to the attack (in which two soldiers died and four were wounded), the army reacted quickly and arrested more than 10 perpetrators two days later. [51]

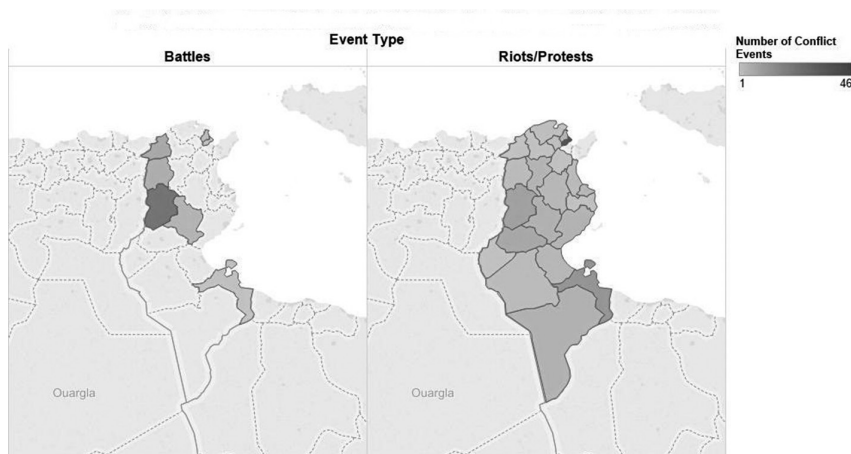


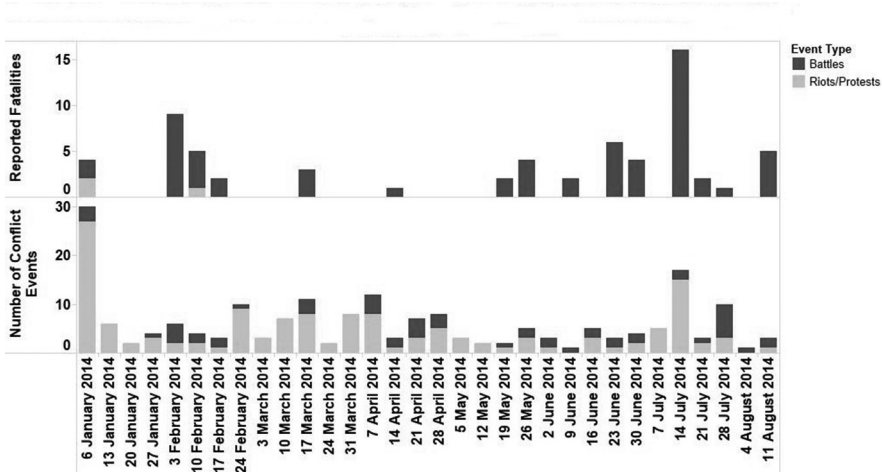
Figure 1. Battles and Riots/Protests in Tunisia by Province, 1 January 2014 – 11 August 2014. [52]

19 The growing disaffection of policemen was openly shown on October 18, 2013, when they did not allow President Moncef Marzouki, Prime Minister Ali Larayedh and parliamentary speaker Mustapha Ben Jaafar to attend the funeral ceremony for the two comrades, who were killed three days earlier by extremists.

Conclusion

This study has shown how the relationship between Ansar al-Sharia and the Tunisian government gradually worsened. The main reasons were a series of successive incidents, as well as responses and reactions. We can consider Anis Jelassi's killing in December 2012 as the beginning of the war against the state. The attacks on soldiers, together with the deterioration of public order, the murder of the politician Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013, as well as the killing of eight members of security forces some days later put considerable pressure on the cabinet. The Tunisian cabinet had no choice but to designate Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist-organization and declare an open struggle against it.

Today many factors make the fight against terrorists difficult. The jihadists are indistinguishable from the people in appearance and dress, and they enjoy the maximum support among them. They build close cooperation with local smugglers in the barely controlled mountainous region, so they can build up reserves without any problems. The police have lost their prestige after the fall of Ben Ali's regime, so now eliminating the terrorists has become an army task. No wonder that the simultaneous tasks of securing public institutions, keeping public order, controlling a border of several hundred kilometers and fighting against terrorists have proven to be an enormous challenge. The problem is heightened by the lack of such technological resources (eg. enough fixed-wing aircraft, helicopters and suitable monitoring devices) that could compensate for their disadvantage in their personnel strength. Accordingly, in the current situation the measures against the jihadists are not effective. This carries with it the risk that the jihadists will set up bases in the region, where they can train the volunteers unmolested by the security forces, and deploy them later against the institutions and symbols of the Tunisian state.



Graph 1. Battles and Riots/Protests in Tunisia by Number of Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities, 1 January 2014 – 11 August 2014. [52]

The failed attempts in the second half of 2013 are also a cause for concern. In particular, the selection of targets implies that the terror-organization has adopted the tactics employed earlier by Jamal al-Islamiyya's, when it wanted to force its ideas on the state by attacking tourism. Successful pursuit of this strategy would deprive the government of its main source of public revenue, which it needs in order to stabilize the troubled economy – as soon as possible.

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