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Tunisian Salafism: the rise and fall of Ansar al-Sharia

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›› Tunisia's democratic evolution over the past four years has been flanked by the rise of jihadist formations, which in 2015 culminated in the terrorist attacks at Tunis' Bardo museum on 18 March and on the beach of Sousse on 26 June. The attacks have raised many questions about how radical jihadist ideology has been able to grow in a country hailed as the Arab world's only true democracy. What has enabled these groups to gain ground?

The biggest and most influential Jihadi-Salafi group since the 2011 revolution has been Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia ('*Supporters of Islamic Law in Tunisia*', AST). AST was quickly able to take advantage of both the country's new freedoms and its disillusioned revolutionary youth. AST's success did not last, however: after quickly establishing itself as one of Tunisia's most successful Salafist movements, the group is today outlawed, and its limited remaining support base is forced to operate underground. Yet, the 2015 terrorist attacks, both perpetuated by young Tunisians, suggest that youth radicalisation remains a challenge, which requires not only short-term security based counter-terrorism measures but also youth focused long-term policies that address the very grievances that AST was able to take advantage of.

THE SALAFIST SURGE

Salafism is a strict religious methodology aspiring to practice Islam in accordance with Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims through *dawa* (missionary work), *hisba* (practices to enforce religious ethics, often through assaults) and *jihad* ('struggle', which to

HIGHLIGHTS

- Two major terrorist attacks earlier this year show that Tunisia's process of democratisation has been flanked by the rise of jihadist groups.
- Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST) was the biggest and most influential Jihadi-Salafi group, but has been driven underground by a government crackdown.
- The rise and fall of AST shows the need to balance short term counter-terrorism measures with longer-term youth-focused policies.

AST and other jihadist groups includes the use of warfare). Following years of strict control and repression of Islamist movements under the regime of Ben Ali, the 2011 revolution brought increased liberties but also less government control, allowing jihadi Salafi groups such as AST to grow freely and mainly without state interference.

AST's structure is clandestine and public information about its leadership is scarce. Saifallah Ben Hassine, better known as Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, a veteran jihadist who co-founded the al-Qaeda linked Tunisian Islamic Combatant Group in Afghanistan 2000, was sentenced to 43 years in prison by a Tunisian court in 2003 under the Ben Ali regime's anti-terrorism laws. While in prison, Abu Iyadh laid the ground work for today's AST movement, by building its network from as early as 2006.[1] Following the 2011 revolution, Abu Iyadh was among 300 jihadists who were pardoned and released with an amnesty. While some of these Islamists chose to join the political party *Ennahda*, others with more radical leanings rejected the new political system and sided with Abu Iyadh. On 15 May 2011, a Facebook page named *Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia* was published and an announcement was released about the group's first conference on 21 May, which about 5,000 people attended. As its goal, the Tunisian branch of Ansar al Sharia proclaimed to establish an Islamic caliphate and introduce Sharia law in Tunisia's nascent democracy.

Despite sharing the name Ansar al-Sharia with counterparts in Libya, Egypt and Yemen, AST says it acts independently. The movement supports the global agenda of al-Qaeda but claims to operate separately from the terrorist network; however its relationship to other al-Qaeda linked groups and the central command of the international terrorist network remains unclear. While rejecting the new political system, the group took advantage of democracy's new freedoms. Benefitting from the increased civil liberties, the newly founded AST did not openly reject the revolution. Instead, Abu Iyadh thanked revolutionaries for freeing the jihadists from repression and prison and giving the jihadi movement a chance to prosper.

FILLING THE GAPS

AST's recruitment success is typically ascribed to a combination of factors, most notably filling the government's social services gap via humanitarian work – such as providing food, medicine and other necessities to people living in the country's marginalised areas. Thus, AST quickly gained ground among a part of the population sidelined by the state in areas suffering from high poverty and low-levels of education, most notably in the southern and interior parts of the country. The movement's appeal was also considerable in marginalized neighbourhoods of bigger cities such as Douar Hicher, a socially and economically deprived Tunis suburb and a key recruitment area for AST.[2] The movement occupied public space in cafés and marketplaces there and arranged preaching tents on school yards. Charity work and a strong on the ground presence allowed AST to convincingly show people they were better at providing for their citizens than the state.

Besides gaining popularity among the country's disillusioned youth, the movement was also able, through a broad width of activities, to mobilise a wide range of Salafi sympathisers. AST was also more visible in the media than other groups, and more efficient in quickly increasing its influence in mosques. Shortly after Abu Iyadh's release, he visited mosques all over the country to preach and lecture. About 400 mosques quickly came under AST influence. In addition, influential Tunisian clerics such as Shaikh Khattab Idriss embraced the movement, giving the group legitimacy both domestically and internationally. By 2014, the group claimed it had attracted around 70,000 members – a considerable number in a country of 11 million inhabitants.[3]

SYRIA'S CALL

Proselytising at home, jihad abroad initially stood at the core of the movement. While Abu Iyadh and other AST members preached in Tunisia, they simultaneously encouraged followers to go overseas, especially to Syria to fight President

Bashar al-Assad. AST's influence is likely to have contributed to the large number of Tunisian jihadists fighting in Syria. The country's number of foreign fighters was estimated in 2014 to be around 3,000.[4] With this, Tunisia, the smallest country in the region, outnumbers most other countries in the region in absolute terms (in contrast, the figure from Saudi Arabia was estimated at about 2,500, with about 200 from Algeria).

The country's large number of jihadists is usually traced back to a number of underlying factors. These include AST's successful mobilisation with the group's heavy promotion of jihad in Syria; its control over mosques; the country's history of jihad to Afghanistan and Iraq dating back to the 1980s; and the ongoing conflict in neighbouring Libya, where the assailants of the Bardo and Sousse attacks are believed to have been trained; and the post-revolutionary Tunisian socio-economic environment. Another factor that is believed to have contributed to young people's vulnerability to Salafi ideology is related to identity: after years of religious oppression, religion could be practiced freely, but what influence would it have in contemporary Tunisian society? At the same time, Tunisia's public debates were dominated by polarising dichotomies, like religion versus secularism and conservatism versus modernism, which painted a black-and-white picture of Tunisia's future options with little room for nuance.

Significantly, the broader downfall of AST coincided with the rise of Islamic State

Following AST's initially heavy promotion of jihad to Syria, in February 2013 Abu Iyadh started advising Tunisians not to migrate to Syria or other jihadi battle grounds but to remain in the country and carry out charity work to increase the member base at home. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) also told Tunisians, on 17 March 2013, to fight secularism on their ground rather than leave for jihad abroad, making an exception for fighters with so-called 'special skills' – a change of rhetoric that can be presumed to have been unpopular with more hardcore elements within the movement.

A SHIFT TOWARDS VIOLENCE

As the movement gained popularity, violence increased. There were reports of attacks on artists, teachers, civil society activists and journalists around the country. Educational institutions such as the Manouba University were under attack after the school decided to ban the wearing of the *niqab* (full veil), arguing it obstructed student's identification during exams.

The violence cumulated in an attack on the United States (US) embassy and the neighbouring American school on 14 September 2012, which led to the death of four people. An arrest warrant was issued for Abu Iyadh, who was reportedly present during the attack and presumed to be involved in its organisation, but he was never caught. Prior to the attack, AST had encouraged members through its social media channels to participate. Hassen Brik, head of AST's *dawa* committee, said that young AST supporters were involved in the attack, albeit without orders from the group's leadership.[5] The attack marked AST's shift towards lethal violence, thereby taking confrontation with the Tunisian government to a new level.

After the attack on the US embassy, the relationship between AST and the Tunisian state, and in particular the then governing *Ennahda* party, grew ever more tense. Eventually, the year 2013 radically changed the operational conditions for the movement. The assassination of the leftist politician Chokri Belaïd in February 2013 in Tunis by unknown assailants caused an outcry among Tunisians, pressuring the government to act. Two months later, the government banned AST's annual conference in Kairouan, due to be held on 19 May. According to AST spokesman Seifeddine Rais, the meeting would have attracted 40,000 members, including internationally well-known jihadists coming from abroad. Leading up to the

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conference, Abu Iyadh reacted on Facebook: "The young people who showed bravery in defending Islam in Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia and Syria will not hesitate to sacrifice themselves for their religion in the land of Kairouan… God knows that all those countries are not dearer to our hearts than our own motherland".[6]

On 25 July 2013 another opposition politician, Mohamed al-Brahimi, was assassinated, like Belaïd, outside his Tunis home. Shortly thereafter, a militant ambush left eight soldiers brutally killed close to Chaambi Mountain, the mountain area bordering Algeria where Uqba Ibn Nafi, an AQIM affiliate network targeting the Tunisian security and state personnel, is believed to be operating. The accumulated violence plunged the country into political chaos.

LOSING GROUND

The Tunisian state claimed that AST was behind the two politician assassinations but the group never claimed responsibility for the killings. Most analysts agree that while the assassinations were unlikely ordered by the leadership of AST, some members or supporters of the group may have been involved. Yet, in light of the two assassinations, on 27 August 2013, AST was designated a terrorist group by the *Ennahda*-led government.

The government crackdown on terrorism forced the organisation underground and many members were detained. The crackdown also brought an end to the movement's successful proselytising practices as the group was not prepared to operate clandestinely. After the crackdown many members are believed to either have left to Syria or Libya, while others are believed to have left the group all together. Abu Iyadh fled Tunisia, and his current whereabouts remain unclear. Rumours have circulated about his alleged death, including that he had been killed by American airstrikes, but these claims have not been substantiated with evidence. But the crackdown and Abu Iyadh's public retreat have largely signified the demise of the group. Even though AST still exists, it is believed to be largely inactive. Online conversations between current and former AST members who remained in Tunisia indicate a sense of lacking a leader.[7]

Significantly, the absence of Abu Iyadh and broader downfall of AST coincided with the rise of Islamic State (IS) and its groundbreaking social media propaganda across the world, thereby allowing IS to take advantage of the vacuum left by AST. AST sympathizers who decided to stay in Tunisia could turn to peaceful social activism, adhere to AQIM-linked Uqba Ibn Nafi (that operates in the mountainous border region near Algeria, targeting primarily the Tunisian security apparatus), or join the jihadists drawn to the more radical IS-agenda. Those remaining loyal to Abu Iyadh were more likely to side with an al-Qaeda affiliate than IS, as the AST leader has/had close ties to high-level al-Qaeda members. Additionally, there has been information suggesting that members of Uqba Ibn Nafi have left the brigade to pledge allegiance to IS. Whether to remain loyal to AST or swear allegiance to IS has been discussed by AST members on online fora.[8] The exact degree to which IS has been able to benefit from AST's institutional weakness by recruiting its members and sympathizers for its cause, however, remains unclear.

CONCLUSION

AST was essential for the establishment of a Tunisian post-revolutionary Jihadi-Salafi movement, thanks to its broad social engagement and clever outreach. Similar to other Islamist movements across the region, by addressing youth grievances and remaining present on the ground, AST filled a vacuum left by the political elite in the early stages of the democratisation process, and offered an alternative to many young people who felt abandoned by the politicians and were disappointed with the revolution.

While the Tunisian government rightfully stepped up its security focused counter-terrorism measures, these containment efforts need to be flanked by appropriate measures to address the root causes of why the country's youth has been

prone to radical ideas. The Tunisian government should not ignore youth grievances (such as 33 per cent youth unemployment and the lack of opportunities provided by the state) while enforcing a security clampdown - including a state of emergency (which has only just been lifted) - that has given the country's security forces extended powers. All this, while simultaneously limiting citizens' rights - such as the right to public assembly, resulting in the disruption of peaceful demonstrations - risks contributing to the already large gap between the young and the state. It may prove counterproductive and spur yet another dichotomy, security versus personal liberty.

The terrorist designation forced AST to give up its open on-the-ground presence of charity and preaching. The crackdown meant that there was no longer a future for members primarily interested in these activities, leaving members with a more long-term vision and possibly more radical agenda to either continue organizing underground or leave Tunisia for Libya or Syria. As long as AST remains a designated terrorist organization by the Tunisian state, the organisation is unlikely to be able to return to the success it enjoyed shortly after the revolution, unless under a new leadership, appearance, and focus.

Nevertheless, the network built by Abu Iyadh needs to remain under scrutiny. Online conversations between AST-members and sympathizers suggest that Abu Iyadh lost influence with his disappearance. Young members who questioned his leadership have been increasingly confronted with and attracted to the powerful social media outreach apparatus of IS. The 2015 Bardo and Sousse attacks, for which IS claimed responsibility, signified a worrying surge in terrorist activity in the fragile democracy, targeting the country's foreign tourists and its heavily tourism-dependent economy. Regardless of the potential (but unconfirmed) connections between the Bardo and Sousse attacks and AST's network, the attacks show that despite AST's decreasing influence, Tunisian youth remain highly vulnerable to the appeal of extremism. Without flanking the immediate containment measures with appropriate measures to tackle root causes, it is possible that the crackdown on AST will have opened a vacuum that may prove to become IS's red carpet into Tunisia.

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7. Based on the author's interview with Tunisian security analyst Habib M. Sayah.

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