



Articles & Op-Eds

Know Your Ansar al-Sharia

[Aaron Y. Zelin](#)

Also available in [العربية](#)

Foreign Policy

September 21, 2012

From Sana to Benghazi, Cairo to Casablanca, new jihadist groups have adopted the same name in recent months. Is it all just a coincidence?

There is a new trend sweeping the world of jihadism. Instead of adopting unique names, groups increasingly prefer to call themselves *ansar*, Arabic for "supporters." In many cases, they style themselves Ansar al-Sharia -- supporters of Islamic law -- emphasizing their desire to establish Islamic states. Yet despite the fact that these groups share a name and an ideology, they lack a unified command structure or even a bandleader like the central al Qaeda command (or what's left of it), thought to be based in Pakistan. They are fighting in different lands using different means, but all for the same end, an approach better suited for the vagaries born of the Arab uprisings.

The name Ansar al-Sharia shot into the news last week in the aftermath of the attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, Libya, when the local organization Katibat Ansar al-Sharia was accused of perpetrating it -- charges the group denied. Many reports seem to have confused Benghazi's Ansar al-Sharia with another Libyan group, based in Derna.

The naming trend actually started in Yemen, when al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the powerful and ambitious local al Qaeda branch, established the front group Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen in April 2011. It is possible this was born out of Osama bin Laden's musings over whether to rebrand al Qaeda. None of the names in the documents captured from the late al Qaeda leader's compound mentioned Ansar al-Sharia as a potential example, however. More recently, one of the preeminent global jihadi ideologues, Shaykh Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, put his stamp of approval on the new wave of Ansar al-Sharia groups.

Shinqiti, who is of Mauritanian origin, published an article in mid-June titled "We Are Ansar al-Sharia," calling Muslims to establish their own *dawa* (missionary) Ansar al-Sharia groups in their respective countries and then to unite into one conglomerate. It should be noted

that most of the Ansar al-Sharia groups were already created beforehand. The most prominent of these organizations are the ones in Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya, along with newer versions in Egypt and Morocco to a lesser extent.

The rise of these Ansar al-Sharia groups points to an end of al Qaeda's unipolar global jihad of the past decade and a return to a multipolar jihadosphere, similar to the 1990s. One key difference, however, is that jihadi groups are now more ideologically homogenous -- in the 1990s, jihadis thought locally and acted locally, while many now talk globally and act locally. These newer groups are also more interested in providing services and governance to their fellow Muslims.

Distinguishing between these differing groups is crucial for better understanding the new landscape of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as the trajectory of new salafi-jihadi groups that are not necessarily beholden to al Qaeda's strategies or tactics. Although there are no known formal or operational links between these disparate organizations, it is possible they may try to link up in the future based on ideological affinity and similar end goals. For now, though, conflating them would be premature. Here's a guide to the major groups going by this name.

ANSAR AL-SHARIA IN YEMEN

While the other Ansar al-Sharia groups have no known operational links to al Qaeda, the Ansar al-Sharia group in Yemen (ASY) is part of a rebranding effort by AQAP. Shaykh Abu Zubayr Adil bin Abdullah al-Abab, AQAP's chief religious figure, in April 2011 first voiced this change by explaining that "the name Ansar al-Sharia is what we use to introduce ourselves in areas where we work to tell people about our work and goals." The group has since become a major local player in southern Yemen, having taken over parts of the southern Yemeni governorates of Abyan and Shabwa in the late spring of 2011 and only relinquishing its emirate in June 2012 after a counteroffensive by the Yemeni government and local militias, backed by U.S. airstrikes. While ASY was driven out of the cities, it is not dead and will likely come back.

One of ASY's greatest successes was its ability to provide services, filling a vacuum left by the central government's inability or unwillingness to do so. ASY boasted about providing electricity, water, security, justice, and education in its newsletter and video series "Eyes on the Events," which it released via its news wire service Madad News Agency. Although ASY's law and order was based on a very narrow and rigid interpretation of the sharia, its provision of governance was reasonably popular. So while ASY's extremist message may not always resonate in cities like Azzan or Zinjibar, desperate citizens might welcome the group nonetheless.

ANSAR AL-SHARIA IN TUNISIA

In March 2011, after the ouster of President Zine El-Abdine Ben Ali, a variety of political prisoners and convicted terrorists were freed in a pardon by Tunisia's transitional government. One of the individuals was Sayf Allah bin Hussayn (better known as Abu Iyyadh al-Tunisi), formerly the co-founder of the Tunisian Combatant Group in Afghanistan, which helped facilitate the assassination of Ahmad Shah Messud two days prior to the Sept. 11 attacks. After being freed from prison, Abu Iyyadh organized the first of what is now an annual conference in April 2011 that founded Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST). The

conference attendees grew from a few hundred in 2011 to upward of 10,000 in 2012, suggesting its popularity has grown, though still at the margins.

Since its founding, AST has had a schizophrenic ideology: calling people to the "correct" path of Islam in Tunisia and inciting individuals to join jihad in foreign lands. It appears that while AST has not claimed responsibility for the embassy attacks this past Friday, many of its members were at the very least participants in the protests. AST had been involved in some of the more aggressive Salafi actions in Tunisia over the past year and half, including the "Day of Rage" over a local channel's decision to air the film *Persepolis*; some AST members were also involved with the attack against the U.S. Embassy in Tunis and an American school nearby. AST has also provided services in many Tunisian cities, from water to clothes to Ramadan gifts.

ANSAR AL-SHARIA IN LIBYA

In Libya, a number of groups use a variation of the name Ansar al-Sharia. Two of the more prominent groups are Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi (ASB), which is viewed as the prime suspect in the recent attack on the consulate, and the more shadowy Ansar al-Sharia in Derna (ASD), led by former Guantanamo Bay inmate Abu Sufyan bin Qumu. Both groups were established after the death of former Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi, but are not connected to one another. ASB first announced itself February 2012 and is led by Muhammad al-Zahawi, who had previously been an inmate of Qaddafi's infamous Abu Salim prison. ASB hosted the first of what it hopes to be an annual conference in June, whose roughly 1,000 attendees included a number of other smaller militias, all calling on the Libyan state to implement sharia. A few hundred of those attendees are likely members of ASB.

Like the Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia, ASB has been providing local services. ASB members have cleaned and fixed roads, provided aid during Ramadan, and most recently were helping with security at a hospital in Benghazi. Although the group admits to destroying Sufi shrines and graves in Benghazi, ASB has attempted to carve out a niche locally as defenders of a strict interpretation of Islam, while helping with the basic needs of the community. Based on its statements -- which evolved from suggestions that members were involved in an individual capacity in the attack to flat-out denials of any involvement -- ASB seems it understands it overreached and is attempting to salvage its reputation.

ANSAR AL-SHARIA IN EGYPT AND MOROCCO

Unlike the groups in Yemen, Tunisia, and Libya, Egypt's Ansar al-Sharia (ASE) has not publicly announced itself as an organized group on the ground, while the Moroccan organization was only created a mere 10 days ago. ASE has only used the Ansar al-Sharia name online when providing releases for al-Bayyan Media Foundation, which is connected with the jihadi ideologue Shaykh Ahmad Ashush, who recently published a fatwa calling for the death of those involved in the making of the film *Innocence of the Muslims*. Ashush has a deep history in the jihadi movement, having been involved with the anti-Soviet jihad in the 1980s as well as being a member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). He was arrested in the early 1990s in an anti-terror sweep against 150 members of EIJ and was only released from prison after the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime. Based on known evidence, it would be premature to consider ASE a fully fledged group yet.

Ansar al-Sharia in the Maghrib (ASM) is a nascent organization that is only interested in *dawa* activities. ASM noted in its first and only statement thus far that it is not connected with the groups in Yemen, Tunisia, Libya, or Egypt. ASM's raison d'etre is to spread the word of God and his law, provide social and economic services to the downtrodden, and expose the West's decadence and to free society from its grip.

Like the other radical groups across the region that share the Ansar al-Sharia name, it is very much worth watching carefully.

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow fellow at The Washington Institute.