

# Jihadi Schadenfreude Over al-Nahdah in Tunisia

by [Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Aaron Y. Zelin \(/experts/aaron-y-zelin\)](#)

Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy where his research focuses on Sunni Arab jihadi groups in North Africa and Syria as well as the trend of foreign fighting and online jihadism.



Articles & Testimony

## Whether or not Tunis repeats its past security mistakes, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State may see the president's destabilizing power move as an opportunity to prod the government's capabilities.

**O**n July 25, President Qays Sa'id of Tunisia dismissed Prime Minister Hisham al-Mishishi and suspended the activities of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People by invoking emergency powers under Article 80 of the Tunisian Constitution. The rationale was an out-of-control Covid crisis, continuing economic problems, and political dysfunction within the al-Nahdah-led parliament. Some analysts in the West have called Sa'id's maneuver an autogolpe, while many Tunisians locally, according to polling data, have backed Sa'id's move. It would not be a crisis, however, if the jihadi talking heads did not weigh in.

It is important to note that jihadi activity in Tunisia has been on a [decline](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisian-jihadist-movement-ten-years-after-prisoner-amnesty) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tunisian-jihadist-movement-ten-years-after-prisoner-amnesty>) in recent years due to counterterrorism and military efforts locally against al-Qaeda (AQ) and the Islamic State (IS), as well as the waning fortunes of foreign fighting endeavors in Iraq, Libya, and Syria as IS lost territory. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the issue given the large-scale [mobilization](https://www.amazon.com/Your-Sons-Are-Service-Missionaries/dp/0231193777/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=) ([https://www.amazon.com/Your-Sons-Are-Service-Missionaries/dp/0231193777/ref=tmm\\_pap\\_swatch\\_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](https://www.amazon.com/Your-Sons-Are-Service-Missionaries/dp/0231193777/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)) seen in Tunisia over the past decade, and since any form of instability is seen as an opportunity by the jihadi movement. Plus, what initially might appear as rhetoric, as was the case with jihadis [speaking](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/01/jihadists-the-wallflowers-of-the-tunisian-uprising/69789/) (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/01/jihadists-the-wallflowers-of-the-tunisian-uprising/69789/>) on the 2011 Tunisia uprising and having no part in it, could lead to a re-energized mobilization, in the same way that Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) was able to take advantage of new conditions following the

overthrow of former president Bin 'Ali.

## How Jihadis Have Framed the Crisis

Much of the [messaging \(https://tunisianjihadism.com/2021/07/26/initial-jihadi-reactions-to-kais-saied-invoking-article-80/\)](https://tunisianjihadism.com/2021/07/26/initial-jihadi-reactions-to-kais-saied-invoking-article-80/) from jihadi thinkers surrounding the latest political events in Tunisia boils down to gloating over the embarrassment that al-Nahdah has suffered as a consequence of the freezing of parliament. In their telling, this is another example of democracy failing Islamist parties and further evidence that fighting jihad and instituting sharia are the only way to push back against local deep states and perceived anti-Islamic authoritarian forces. The Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-affiliated cleric Shaykh 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Mahdi also views what happened through the prism of a conspiracy from outside forces, in this seeing similarities with what happened in Egypt under 'Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi and the Muslim Brotherhood: "[Sa'id] is leading a coup with the support of France, Sisi, and [the Crown Prince of the UAE] Ibn Zayed...if the lunatic is able to he will do as Sisi of Egypt."

Meanwhile, the Syrian-based Tansiqiyyat al-Jihad's Abu al-'Abd Ashida, seeking to undermine democracy as a legitimate form of governance, rhetorically and cynically states and then asks the following: "Bloody red democracy. Coup in Tunisia. Coup in Egypt. Coup of [Libyan strongman Khalifah] Haftar. So this is considered democracy?" Abu Mahmud al-Filastini, a London-based ideologue and acolyte of Abu Qatada al-Filastini, argues that "no change will come without an effective force that loosens the joints of the deep state and undermines its pillars. The path of democracy cannot lead to the rule of sharia and the building of an Islamic state." His mentor, Abu Qatada, gets to the point and bluntly states: "Jihad is a necessity. Almost all Muslims commenting today, from all walks of life, in their comments on what happened in Tunisia agree that jihad has become a necessity...They have no other choice."

Alluding to what has become of al-Nahdah, the leader of Jaysh al-Ummah in Gaza, Abu Hafs al-Maqdisi, quotes a saying of the second caliph ' Umar Ibn al-Khattab: "We are a people whom God has honored with Islam, so whenever we seek honor through anything else, God will humiliate us." Adding onto the critiques of al-Nahdah is the London-based ideologue Abu Basir al-Tartusi, who addresses the party saying, "You will not find anyone crying for you...this is the reward of those who raise the slogan 'separating *da'wa* from politics' and the slogan 'freedom before Islam, and before applying the teachings and laws of Islam.' You have neither achieved freedom nor supported the religion!" Al-Tartusi goes on to call al-Nahdah out for having tried to build relations with France while the latter is, in his view, domestically attacking Islam. Therefore, "[al-Nahdah] paid the price of this stance of vacillation and dilution...and this is the fate of every movement or group that follows this false and vacillating approach of theirs!"

As for the Tunisian ideologue in HTS who goes by the name al-Idrisi, his approach is more localized since he is originally from Tunisia: "The Tunisian revolution is paying the price of not purging the country of the remnants of the former regime, from the security [services], the army, influential businessmen, and the media. The parties are paying the price of living in an illusion and wishful thinking." Of course, since al-Idrisi is with HTS and based in Syria now, he heavily criticizes on a regional level al-Nahdah's and the Muslim Brotherhood's role in failing the revolution: "Peoples' relying on the Brotherhood in leading the Arab Spring revolutions is like relying on a mirage." This leads to a key point in buttressing his own position on leaving Tunisia, which is that the best model today is that of HTS in Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan. "The success of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and the Taliban," he says, "calls for the *umma's* reconsideration of the moderate jihadist movements that have proven their political and military sophistication in managing conflict, establishing existence, and seizing freedom from the clutches of evildoers."

Beyond specific ideologues, the pro-AQ news agency Thabat and the official IS newsletter al-Naba' also commented on the events in Tunisia. The Thabat article was penned by an Abu al-Bara' al-Libi, who portrays the recent experience of al-Nahdah as part of a long history of Muslim Brotherhood organizations being used and betrayed by local regimes they had engaged with. He points in particular to what happened to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt

under Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir and more recently in the coup of ‘Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi. Sudan and Turkey are mentioned as cases too. Whereas Brotherhood organizations, including al-Nahdah, do not heed the lessons of the past, he claims, the jihadis are never fooled since they have “a firm and unchanging stance regarding every tyrant (*taghut*) who substitutes God’s law and accepts democracy.”

Tracking with the rest of the aforementioned critiques, IS’s editorial in al-Naba’ directly attacks al-Nahdah’s embrace of democracy: “And among those who have most opposed God and His Messenger in this time are the seekers, advocates, and followers of democracy, who have believed in it and taken it as a path and course, and thus have contravened the Sunna and the precepts. God has imposed on them humiliation, destitution, and becoming lost, and that has become appended to them in all of their circumstances like a collar around their necks. This is the very thing that has happened today to the apostate Ikhwan in Tunisia after they contravened the path of the believers, followed democracy, sought help in it, glorified it, and made it a judge among them and a guide for them to the path of Hellfire. The result resembled what happened to them before, when the one they were content with as a *taghut* for themselves turned on them.”

The IS editorial also uses the downfall of al-Nahdah as an opportunity to win points with AQ and its supporters, since in the past Abu Qatada al-Filistini, whom IS sees as a pro-AQ ideologue, had commended Qays Sa’id when he won the 2019 Tunisian presidential election. Recalling the former praise of “some of the theoreticians of al-Qaeda” for Sa’id, the editorial notes: “Indeed the stance of the dimwits of al-Qaeda regarding the Tunisian *taghut* is no less than the stance of the apostate Ikhwan in its naivete.” It is possible that Abu Qatada and others favored Sa’id because of the latter’s traditional views on the death penalty, criminalization of homosexuality, and opposing equal inheritance between men and women.

## Will These Words Amount to Anything?

It is hard to believe that Sa’id would follow the mistakes that were made in the aftermath of the revolution as it relates to the jihadi movement. There have been too many hard-fought lessons learned by the state. It will not repeat the mistake of doing a prisoner amnesty like the transitional government did in February 2011 or having a light touch policy vis-a-vis AST as al-Nahdah did following its coming to power in the October 2011 Constituent Assembly election. That said, it would not be surprising if either AQ or IS attempted to prod the capabilities of the Tunisian state if these groups foresee some opening for themselves in the medium term. If Sa’id goes full authoritarian, however, it is likely that dynamics will play out as they did under former Tunisian dictator Bin ‘Ali: suppression of local mobilization, with much of Tunisian jihadi activity occurring outside its borders in Europe or the latest foreign fighter destination—potentially Afghanistan again in light of the Taliban’s methodical takeover of Afghan territory.

*Aaron Y. Zelin is the Richard Borow Fellow at The Washington Institute and a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University. This article was originally published on the Jihadica website (<http://www.jihadica.com/jihadi-schadenfreude-over-al-nahdah-in-tunisia/>). ❖*

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