

# The Tunisian-Libyan Jihadi Connection

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Jul 6, 2015

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## A relationship that dates back decades deserves closer attention, and could well lead to repeat Islamic State attacks on Tunisian soil.

It should have come as no surprise that Seifeddine Rezgui, the individual who attacked tourists in Sousse, Tunisia, more than a week ago, had trained at a camp in Libya. The attack represented the continuation of a relationship between Tunisian and Libyan militants that, having intensified since 2011, goes back to the 1980s. The events in Sousse are a stark reminder of this relationship: a connection that is set to continue should the Islamic State (IS) choose to repeat attacks in Tunisia in the coming months.

## Brief History on the Tunisian-Libyan Militant Nexus

Although Ennahda did not explicitly call for individuals to fight against the Soviets during the Afghan jihad, militants in the mujahedeen were regularly involved in facilitation and logistical networks that brought Libyans to the region. Additionally, according to Noman Benotman, a former shura council member of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Libyans alongside Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, the Afghan leader of Ittihad-e-Islami, attempted to help the Tunisians create their own military camp and organization. This would not come to fruition until 2000, when future leaders of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), Tarek Maaroufi (based in Brussels) and Sayf Allah Bin Hassine (moved from London to Jalalabad, Afghanistan; also known as Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi), cofounded the Tunisian Combatant Group.

Following the Afghan jihad, many Ennahda members were exiled to Europe in the late 1980s and early 1990s by former president Ben Ali. While some returned home, the committed were drawn to the jihadi and foreign fighter networks that had spread across Europe, especially in Milan, Italy. Milan became a central hub for recruitment, logistics, and facilitation of foreign fighters going to the Bosnian war as well as assisting the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in the Algerian jihad. While the Egyptian Anwar Shaaban led the network, the group surrounding him was made

up largely of Tunisians and Libyans, with some Algerians and Moroccans, working together. This milieu helped build interesting relationships among the individuals, along with other cells in Europe. One in particular was between Sami Essid bin Khamis, a future leader of AST, and the Libyan Lased Ben Heni, who was based in Frankfurt, who worked together to plan the 2000 Strasbourg Cathedral Plot (along with the London Algerian jihadi network).

Following 9/11, the successor group to the GIA in Algeria was the Groupe Salafiste pour la Predication et le Combat (GSPC; which would eventually become al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghrib in 2007). In 2003, Nabil Sahrawi, the leader at the time, was attempting to regionalize the jihad beyond Algerian borders and emphasize recruitment from Tunisia and Libya. While the organization was still dominated by Algerians, the Tunisians and Libyans worked together in GSPC's "Zone 5," which was close to the border with Tunisia and under the banner of El-Fatah El-Moubine. Because of this, there were a number of cases in the mid to late 2000s where groups of Algerians, Tunisians, and Libyans would get arrested together, either on the Algerian or Tunisian side of their respective borders. In many ways, this formation was a precursor to the now AQIM splinter group Katibat Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN), based in the Chaambi Mountains on the Tunisian-Algerian border. Around the same time, GSPC networks in Algeria and remnant LIFG networks in Libya were providing logistics and facilitation to fighters going to Iraq in the mid-2000s to fight with al-Qaeda (the precursor to IS). There were a number of routes that Tunisians took to get to Iraq, but one was through the Libyan support networks, which was a reversal of the 1980s trend. Here many relationships were forged, which would be important after 2011 since a number of Iraq jihad veterans then became involved with AST, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), and then eventually the Islamic State in Libya. One such case was Abu Radwan al-Tunisi, from Bizerte, who came to Iraq via Libya and eventually died fighting the Badr Brigades.

## After the 2011 Tunisian Revolution

Over the past four years, many of the prior trends continued and, at times, accelerated, in reaction to the opening up of Tunisian society and to Libya becoming a relative safe haven for foreign militants. AQIM continued to play a role, especially with smuggling weapons through Tunisia from Libya. Therefore, as with the last decade, a number of Tunisian and Libyan AQIM members have been arrested on Tunisian or Libyan soil, either together or by themselves, in relation to smuggling or plotting terrorist attacks set to occur on: May 2011, June 2011, February 2012, February 2012, December 2012, May 2013, May 2013, June 2013, May 2014, May 2014, June 2014, August 2014, August 2014, and August 2014. Then, in the fall of 2014, more people got arrested for similar reasons, except this time with relation to IS: September 2014, October 2014, December 2014, March 2015, and June 2015.

Besides the many arrests (of which many were likely not made public), there was also a strengthening relationship between Tunisian and Libyan militants through their sister organizations Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Libya. ASL learned from the AST dawa model, with Tunisians providing assistance on how to implement it. There were already signs that Tunisians were training in Libya as early as the spring of 2012. These camps are likely where the original failed Sousse suicide bomber of October 2013 trained. Within Libya, many attacks against Tunisian diplomatic facilities, such as against its embassy and twice against its consulate in June 2012, were connected with ASL. There is even the case of the Tunisian Ali Ani al-Harzi, who was recently killed in an American airstrike in Iraq fighting for IS. He was one of the ringleaders of the infamous Benghazi U.S. Consulate attack in September 2012, which is most associated with ASL. Moreover, following the Tunisian government's designation of AST in late August 2013, those who did not quit the movement, get arrested, or join up with the jihad in Syria or with KUIN in the Chaambi Mountains, fled to Libya and ASL, including AST's leader, Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi. Further, as a result of the breakdown in AST, a short-lived integration between Tunisian and Libyan militant networks took place through the rebranding of AST to Shabab al-Tawhid.

Beyond the AST and ASL networks, since the fall of 2014, there has been increased Tunisian activity in Libya with IS. According to the Tunisian government, it is believed that up to 1,000 Tunisians are currently fighting or training in Libya. Even as dozens of Tunisians have died on the battlefield in Libya, a Tunisian was one of the attackers of the

Corinthia Tripoli Hotel in late January 2015. Additionally, a number of these Tunisian IS operatives have been dispatched back home and been involved in a spate of low-level insurgent attacks since early April 2015. Of course, most recently the two most high-profile attacks in Tunisia, first in March at the Bardo Museum in Tunis and less than two weeks ago at the beach resorts in Sousse, were all trained in Libya, at the same camps, by IS.

Therefore, with the continued Tunisian government security concerns as well as the difficulty in securing the Tunisian-Libyan border over the past four years, it is likely that we will see future IS attacks that emanate from or are connected with Libya. What we have seen already did not come out of nowhere; it has a history that stretches back decades and represents a problem too often ignored, taken lightly, or blamed on others by Tunisian officials prior to and after the 2011 revolution.

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