

# Shabab al-Tawhid: The Rebranding of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Security crackdowns will not be enough to eradicate jihadist networks in Tunisia and Libya, which have the patience and ideological conviction to weather drastic reorganization.**

**E**ight months ago, the Tunisian government officially designated Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) as a terrorist organization. Since then, Tunis has cracked down on the group's activities, going after both its *dawa* campaign (i.e., proselytization and social-welfare efforts) and any links members have to terrorist plots. On the whole, AST's public response has been to keep relatively quiet. Yet recent developments indicate that the group may be rebranding itself as Shabab al-Tawhid (ST; the Youth of Pure Monotheism), a shift that would have important implications for efforts to counter Tunisian jihadists and their associates in Libya.

## SHIFTING GEARS

**W**ithin a week of the August designation, AST largely ceased releasing updates about its *dawa* campaign in Tunisia. The group may still be conducting lower-level *dawa* in rural areas outside the state's reach, but if so, it is no longer publicizing such activity. The main messages it has put out via its Twitter account have been declarations of solidarity with arrested "brothers," repeated calls for patience, and quotes from both traditional Islamic sources (the Quran and *sunna*) and ideological figures (e.g., Ibn Taymiyah, Sayyed Qutb, and Abu Qatada al-Filistini).

Indeed, AST has kept a low profile compared to its modus operandi before the designation; its only prominent announcement was leader Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi's message of support for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the jihadist group deemed too extreme by senior al-Qaeda leaders and their official Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra.

Until recently, this relative silence made it difficult to discern what was going on within AST, but new information

indicates it might be rebranding itself under the Shabab al-Tawhid banner in Tunisia as well as Libya, where Abu Ayyad is now believed to be based. This shift could signal to exiled members in Libya that AST's command structures are increasingly coming under the purview of its sister organization, Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL).

## SHABAB AL-TAWHID MEDIA

On March 4, a new online media outlet was established called Shabab al-Tawhid Media (STM). Its main purposes thus far have been to serve as a "pulpit of the Sunni people in Tunisia" and express support for ISIS. Much of STM's early content consisted of reposted material from AST and ISIS (including English translations of ISIS releases), as well as information from Tunisian foreign fighters in Syria and ISIS-sympathetic messaging. For example, when the central division of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) expressed support for ISIS, STM highlighted the message. It also posted original content from online jihadist ideologue Abu Saad al-Amili, who has been a huge supporter of and advisor to AST since the organization was publicly announced three years ago. STM even released new exclusive content from AST spokesman Sayf al-Din al-Rayis. Such posts suggested that the new media group had ties to AST and the Tunisian foreign fighter network, which are themselves intertwined. The creation of a new outlet might also have been a soft way for AST to reemerge without the baggage of stating direct affiliation.

STM did not gain broad public notoriety until April 19, when it released a video showing Mohamed Bechikh, a Tunisian embassy employee kidnapped in Libya on March 21. In a caption introducing the footage of Bechikh, STM delivered a blunt message: "To the Tunisian government, as you capture from us we capture from you, as you kill from us we kill from you." The camera then turned to a crying Bechikh, who pleaded for Tunis to "negotiate seriously," saying "they can kill me...I want to go back to Tunisia." In releasing the video, STM was apparently seeking the release of Libyan militants captured by Tunisia in 2011. This suggests that while the media outlet was originally established by and for Tunisians, its "brothers" in Libya -- where part of the ST network is based -- have by now either joined or taken over certain parts of STM. A credible source inside Libya has confirmed this reading of the situation.

A day after releasing the video, STM voluntarily took down its Twitter and Facebook accounts, probably realizing that it did not want the high level of scrutiny the footage would invite. It reopened its Twitter account a few days later but deleted the tweet containing the video; it then took down its Twitter account a second time.

## ST AS AST?

While ST members in Libya have apparently been involved in operational actions such as the kidnapping and active media campaigns supporting the AST-ISIS nexus, members in Tunisia seem to be playing a more reconstructional/maintenance role. In a manner similar to how AST used to organize itself on Facebook, with separate pages for different branches throughout the country, ST has several layers of representation in Tunisia, including in individual towns, educational institutions, and mosques:

- *Towns:* Jebel al-Ahmar, Le Kram, Sfax, Sidi Hassine, Guettaya, Megrine, Subaytilah, Bou Salem, Mateur, El Fahs, Hammam Zriba, Hammamet, Jelma, Jemmal, Ksar Hellal, Nefza, Tebourba, Dougga, Foussana, Medenine, Sidi Bouzid, Menzel Hayet, and Kalaa Kebira.
- *Colleges and mosques:* Gafsa University, the March 2nd Institute, Bilal bin Rabah Mosque (in the Suroor neighborhood of Gafsa), the University of Sousse, the University of Sfax, the Higher Institute of Applied Science and Technology in Mateur, the University of Nabeul, the Higher Institute of Nursing Sciences in Sousse, the Vocational Training Center in Mateur, New Neighborhood Mosque in Tunis, the College of Medicine in Sfax, the Higher Institute of Computer and Communication Technologies, and the Higher Institute of Technological Studies in al-Qayrawan.

This highlights ST's diverse nature in Tunisia, showing how its network is national in scope just as AST's was prior to

the government crackdown.

The material on ST's Facebook pages is similar to STM's content: global jihadist in nature, with a pro-AST and pro-ISIS bent. While the pages appear to be run independently of any central messaging hub, it is unlikely that they are random grassroots efforts by disparate individuals across Tunisia -- their patterns of duplicate messaging are not seen in any other country when searching for "Shabab al-Tawhid" on Facebook. This suggests that they represent a highly coordinated effort to maintain AST's networks inside Tunisia even though the group itself is illegal. To be sure, these networks have been decentralized somewhat, but that is likely a deliberate security move to obscure the connections between them. The main purpose of this shift is to help adherents maintain solidarity and preserve their ability to organize and continue *dawa* work on a smaller scale, allowing them to reach out to local populations without the same level of scrutiny from the Tunisian state.

This plan is reminiscent of the approach taken by global jihadist networks that have been banned in other open societies such as Britain and the United States. For example, the British group al-Muhajiroun is well known for establishing multiple front names and obscuring its various affiliates in order to continue organizing and operating whenever the government outlaws branches of its network. Although AST leader Abu Ayyad was not known to be part of the al-Muhajiroun network when he lived in London in the 1990s, he is certainly familiar with this tactic and may now be applying it in Tunisia and Libya. Whatever the case, AST seems to have found an alternative route for expanding its reach despite being banned.

It is unknown how much the ST networks in Tunisia and Libya interact, or how much control Libyan members have over the messaging of exiled Tunisian AST members. What can be ascertained with confidence is that the network is still active, despite Tunis designating AST as a terrorist organization and conducting raids against its members for involvement in alleged terrorist plots. This illustrates that a completely securitized approach will not eradicate AST, since the group's adherents are true believers who have the patience to wait things out and organize on a much smaller scale.

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