

Meeting a Returned Tunisian Foreign Fighter from the Syrian Front

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

The ongoing war has changed not only Syrian society, but also the lives of many young men from other countries who are willing to die in the name of God.

In a small town in Nabeul governorate, east of Tunis, on the last day of August 2013, I sat down with a Tunisian who fought in Syria for six months and has since returned home. It was clear that Khalid (not his real name) was uncomfortable talking about his experience. He looked at the ground during the entire conversation, playing with a wrapper in his hand, and he never made eye contact. He was also not interested in providing too many details, stating that it was because "I believe in God." However, he did provide some interesting insights as a result of what he did and did not say, along with conversations with those who knew him in the town.

Khalid comes from a humble background. His parents run a stand on the side of the road selling candy, crackers, chips, gum and soft drinks. It is possible that one of the motivating factors for going to Syria was economic, as well as prestige for his family. When he returned home via Istanbul, he bought nice clothing for his parents, using money either from the coffers of the rebel group he fought with (likely Jabhat al-Nusra) or his patron, a Salafi businessman from the same town as Khalid who has business ties in Saudi Arabia, who helped pay for his passport and plane ticket to Turkey. Further, there are reports that fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra make \$250-300 a month while fighting, which could also benefit his family.

There are also important religious and ideological pulls as well. Following the revolution in 2011, he became more religious. He first dabbled in support for Ennahda, but later ditched them and joined the Salafi camp. He began attending the local Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) mosque, which is run by an Egyptian imam who had previously lived in Saudi Arabia. Khalid first went to the AST mosque to pray, then befriended other mosque attendees, and over time adopted the Salafi lifestyle.

Although Khalid would not state which group he joined in Syria, due to his ties to an AST mosque, it was highly likely to be Jabhat al-Nusra: a member of AST who lives in Tunis' southeastern suburbs told me that those in or associated with AST fight in Jabhat al-Nusra. This member also stated that the leader of AST, Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, provides *tazkiyya* (assurance) for the fighters, which Jabhat al-Nusra requires. All other Tunisians fighting in Syria unaffiliated with AST are believed to be fighting with the Free Syrian Army. Khalid went to Syria with three others from his town, and one died while they were fighting there.

When Khalid returned home from Syria, he was immediately arrested at Tunis-Carthage International Airport and imprisoned for three and a half months. He says he was not tortured. Some of his colleagues from his village believed that he had been traumatized from his experiences in Syria since he no longer had a beard or wore a *thawb* (clothes typically found in Gulf Arab states and also associated with Salafis). He now gels his hair and wears jeans with a T-shirt and a leather jacket.

Khalid actually changed his looks for more tactical reasons, saying: "I was stupid to have one [a beard] so they [the Tunisian security] can easily identify me, and for that reason they arrested me in the airport." Further, in response to those that believe he had been traumatized from his Syrian experience, he said, "This does not make sense. I am with my friends [while in Syria] who want to fight and do something for a purpose." He still views the cause as just, and has not become disillusioned by his time in Syria.

Whether Khalid will return to Syria for a second tour remains to be seen, but he now has an experience that has changed his life, and he is committed to the cause. He also stated that he has no belief in the Tunisian state or security, and does not recognize its laws. Khalid embodies some of the challenges that countries will have when fighters eventually return home, especially if any returnees decide to take up arms at home with their newly acquired military skills. The war in Syria has not only altered Syrian society and its people, but also has changed the course of many young men from other countries who are willing to die in the name of God.

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

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