

Tunisia Arrests Leading Salafi Cleric

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Whether legitimate charges are announced or not, yesterday's arrest of a popular cleric will no doubt be another turning point in the relationship between the Tunisian government and local jihadists.

On October 24, Express FM reported that popular Salafist cleric Sheikh al-Khatib al-Idrisi had been arrested in Sidi Ali Ben Aoun, a town in Tunisia's Sidi Bouzid governorate. The previous day, militants and National Guard officers had exchanged fire in the town, leaving six guardsmen dead and four wounded.

Contrary to Express FM's description, Idrisi is not the founder of local jihadist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST); in fact, he is not even a member. He is, however, one of the most respected Salafi clerics in North Africa and, more important, a key unaffiliated spiritual guide for members of AST. In late August, the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization for alleged acts of violence over the past two years. Although the group maintains that it is only interested in *dawa* (missionary activities), its leaders have previously condoned fighting in what they view as legitimate jihads abroad.

Idrisi's arrest will likely galvanize AST members, hardening their belief that the state is at war with Islam and will never allow them to practice it as they see fit. The incident might also push AST away from its *dawa*-first approach and toward a terrorism-first approach, making it more like a classical jihadi organization.

IDRISI AND THE RISE OF TUNISIAN SALAFISM

According to the biography that Idrisi posted on [his official Facebook page \(https://www.facebook.com/AL.Khatib.AL.Idrisi/info\)](https://www.facebook.com/AL.Khatib.AL.Idrisi/info), he was born in either 1953 or 1954 in the city of Sidi Bouzid. In 1985, he traveled to Saudi Arabia to learn Islamic scholarship under Wahhabi clerics. There, he was influenced by the *sahwa* (awakening) movement. Believing the kingdom was adrift, the movement's adherents issued a series of stern letters in the early to mid-1990s about changes that needed to be made. When Idrisi returned

to Tunisia in 1994, he sought to apply the *sahwa* strategy to Tunisia.

Idrisi's homecoming has been viewed as the point where Salafism began to pick up a larger following in Tunisia, especially around universities. Unlike with violent Salafi trends, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's regime tended to look the other way with regard to nonviolent movements. Yet after the December 2006-January 2007 showdown between security forces and the jihadist cell Jund Asad ibn al-Furhat (more famously known as the Suleiman Group), the state arrested Idrisi for allegedly penning a fatwa that sanctioned jihadist activity (though many believe the charges were made up, and that Idrisi actually opposed the cell's violence). Sentenced to two years in prison, he was released in January 2009.

AFTER THE REVOLUTION

Since the fall of the Ben Ali regime in 2011, Idrisi appears to have gained even more popularity within Tunisia and among Salafis worldwide. His work [has been posted to Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad \(http://www.tawhed.ws/a?a=aledrese\)](http://www.tawhed.ws/a?a=aledrese), an online library of Salafi-jihadist primary sources run by leading Jordanian Salafi ideologue Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Idrisi has also been loosely affiliated with al-Qayrawan Media Foundation, established in April 2011 and accredited by premier global jihadist forum Shamukh al-Islam in January 2012. His recent interactions with Salafi-jihadist scholars suggest that while he promotes and sympathizes with the global jihadist cause, he is more interested in the intellectual and scholarly aspects of the movement rather than joining the battlefield.

RELATIONS WITH AST

One of the first things that AST's original core leaders did after being pardoned from prison in March 2011 was reach out to Idrisi. Today, there is more public distance between them, but when AST first emerged, Idrisi promoted its existence and early activities via his official Facebook page. The group's initial outreach to him shows that it wanted strong backing from Muslim legal scholars to legitimize its cause.

Since spring 2012, Idrisi has been less vocal in his support for AST. There are rumors that he and group leader Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi differed over strategies and tactics, with Idrisi regarding him as too activist and political. Apparently, the cleric is now viewed as an unaffiliated outside spiritual guide, with Abu Ayyad serving as the link between him and grassroots AST members. Whatever the case, the group's adherents view Idrisi as one of the few legitimate clerics out there and clearly look to him for religious advice.

WHAT'S NEXT?

It is important that the Tunisian government provide evidence for any crime Idrisi has committed, since arresting a well-regarded cleric who has not publicly called for violence in Tunisia will only further stir the passions of many young Salafis. In all likelihood, online campaigns for his release will soon emerge, not only from AST and other jihadists, but also from more mainstream Salafis who respect him as a scholar. If the charges stick and result in a longer detention, it could further push AST up the chain of radicalization and into more overt violence. Although it is still too early to know exactly how the situation will play out, it will no doubt be another turning point in the relationship between AST and the state.

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