

Standoff Between the Tunisian Government and Ansar al-Sharia

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.



Brief Analysis

Whichever way the latest tensions unfold, Tunis is unlikely to return to its "light touch" of old, and further confrontations with the Salafists could become the norm.

On May 10-11, Tunisian security services and police launched an unprecedented offensive against local Salafist group Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), cracking down on members who were delivering public lectures or passing out their literature on the street. In response, AST leader Sheikh Abu Ayyad al-Tunisi made a veiled threat that youths would defend Islam in Tunisia just as they have in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria -- an indirect warning of potential full-blown jihad. Such a development would be a major break from Abu Ayyad's public strategy over the past two years, in which he has argued that Tunisia is a land of *dawa* (i.e., proselytizing and associated Islamic outreach activities), not armed jihad. AST's third annual conference in al-Qayrawan this weekend could help determine if the latest incident becomes a tipping point toward open conflict or an opportunity for both sides to back down.

WHY NOW?

It is unclear whether government actions are driving AST toward militancy or the group has simply been biding its time to wage jihad since its inception. The issue is further complicated by AST's dual message of acting as missionaries at home while endorsing jihad abroad and allowing its members to fight with extremist groups in Syria, Algeria, Mali, and other conflict zones. When proselytizing on the ground in Tunisia, the group uses mainstream Saudi Salafist literature, but its official Facebook page includes content from al-Qaeda, Syrian jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra, and popular global jihadist ideologues. This bipolar strategy could crumble under increasing pressure from Tunis.

The timing of the government's show of force is likely a product of continued operations in the northwestern Jebel

Chaambi area along the border with Algeria, where Tunis hopes to flush out Uqba ibn Nafi, a militant battalion linked to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The battalion has been using the area for storing weapons and training; its presence was discovered when more than a dozen Tunisian security personnel were injured by mines. Given the lack of progress in finding and engaging these militants, the government is now going after AST in order to show that it has things under control, arguing that some members may have links to AQIM.

Such efforts contrast with the light touch and more conciliatory approach that an-Nahda -- Tunisia's mainstream Islamist ruling party -- used with the Salafists in the past. The government's willingness to arrest group members has gradually increased since last September, when some AST activists participated in the attack on the U.S. embassy along with other radical Islamists. Whether AST members are connected to the violence in Jebel Chaambi has yet to be determined, but by going after the heart of the group's *dawa* activities and implicating the entire movement, Tunis could push normally nonviolent activists into action.

POTENTIAL FOR RADICALIZATION

Although AST's leadership sympathizes with the global jihadist worldview, its public image is tied in part to its provision of social welfare, similar to the ideologically different groups Hizballah and Hamas. But AST does not overtly call for violence against its rivals in Tunisia. Some members have been involved with vigilantism in an individual capacity, which suits the group's broader agenda even if the leadership does not order such actions. Some members have also been recruited to fight in jihads abroad.

Because AST is partly a social movement, individuals join up for differing reasons. Some do so out of purely ideological motivations, but others are attracted by more tangible benefits. AST is a community organizer, providing food and medical services, cleaning up neighborhoods, fixing roads and buildings, and so forth. The youths involved in these activities are empowered by their participation; the volunteer work allows them to exert their independence, help their community, and reclaim their dignity through social action. Yet instead of focusing on individuals actually involved in violent action or recruitment into AQIM or foreign jihads, the government is now casting a wide net against AST and its *dawa* efforts, which involve tens of thousands of members and even more sympathizers. If the situation continues to escalate, Tunis risks radicalizing individuals and spurring AST to openly target government security forces.

POLITICAL CALCULATIONS

Since AST's inception, group leaders have argued that *dawa*, not jihad, is what Tunisia needs. In their view, former presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali gutted Islam, so AST's role is to educate Tunisians and bring them back into the fold. They also learned lessons from the Iraq war and its aftermath, believing that the best way to consolidate their Islamic state is through missionary work and other nonviolent action. Until recently, this strategy allowed them to operate overtly.

AST's approach is different from that of AQIM, which still pursues a violence-first strategy despite becoming more discriminate in its target selection. Yet AQIM's continued training, smuggling, and mine-laying in the border region have brought the potential threat of Salafism/jihadism into the public eye and seemingly spurred the government crackdown. This could derail AST's efforts to achieve an Islamic state peacefully, especially if Tunis decides to equate the two movements instead of focusing on individual AST officials or members who have purportedly been recruited into AQIM.

Abu Ayyad would prefer that AST be permitted to continue openly proselytizing, since it has gained much benefit from such activity over the past two years. Yet he and other AST figures have frequently characterized the current government leadership as "tyrants" who do not allow them to fully practice Islam. Therefore, if Abu Ayyad sits idly by in the wake of the crackdown, more-hardline AST members may begin to question his authority and credibility. This

is why his recent statement about youths rising up to defend Islam is so alarming -- it shows that the tipping point may be near. Abu Ayyad is not averse to violence and will use it again if need be. From 2000 to 2002, for example, he cofounded and fought with the Tunisian Combatant Group in Afghanistan and was involved in the assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud two days before 9/11.

For now, AST is still planning to hold its annual conference this weekend despite government efforts to cancel or moderate aspects of the event (e.g., calling for a ban on the black flag associated with jihadist groups). In a statement last night, senior AST official Abu Jafar al-Hattab warned members to be careful, remain humble, and not allow themselves to be provoked. AST is busing followers from many parts of the country and is expecting upward of 35,000 attendees. The event will therefore be a major test of the government's seriousness about cracking down on the movement as a whole. If Tunis takes action against attendees, it could spark open insurrection, with profoundly destabilizing consequences for Tunisian society. Alternatively, the government could back down, especially in light of past tensions; AST has already resumed its *dawa* events since the crackdown without being openly harassed.

THE U.S. ROLE

Whichever way the current situation unfolds, Tunis is unlikely to return to its "light touch" of old, and further confrontations could become the norm. Therefore, the U.S. government should watch the situation closely, particularly since AST members were involved in last year's embassy attack. This means continuing to work and share intelligence with the Tunisian government as it takes on violent Salafi jihadist elements within its borders. Washington should also push Tunis to forge ahead with its security reforms and alter its controversial 2003 counterterrorism law, which is not discriminate enough in its scope. Regarding AST, U.S. officials should advise Tunis to be precise in investigating the group, since most members are not terrorists. Washington could also help the government provide entrepreneurial avenues of engagement for youths, steering them toward improving their society in ways that do not involve connections with violent extremists.

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

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