

# Meeting Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## An expert on jihadist groups travels to Tunisia to see how one key faction is using a potent social-welfare approach to win hearts and minds.

I walk through a Tunisian market around midday, at the entrance to the fortress of Sousse, a town about 90 minutes southeast of the capital Tunis on the coast. A man is selling Salafi books and copies of the Quran from a maple wood table, 12 feet long, in front of a small masjid inside the old fortress walls, which were built in the ninth century by the Aghlabid caliph Ziyadat Allah I.

Two men are sitting nearby, at the edge of a dry, broken-down fountain, enjoying the sunny and mild weather. I approach them, along with three Tunisian friends, to ask for an interview. One dismisses me outright, gets up and leaves. He thinks I am in the American mukhabarat (intelligence). The other accepts. I sit next to him, shake his hand, and we both exchange salam alaykum pleasantries.

"Are You Muslim or a non-Muslim?" he asks.

This was the start of my conversation with Ramzi, a Salafi, who takes issue with the term since he sees himself as a Muslim. Based on the description of the activities he has been involved in, it is possible he is a member of Ansar al-Sharia in Sousse (AST), but he would not confirm. Ramzi has a traditional Salafi look, sporting a marine green thawb, black skullcap, and a fully-grown beard, but with a well-trimmed mustache. By his own account, he had spent six years in exile in Morocco before returning to Tunisia following the ouster of former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

"Bidun sura aw fidiyo" are his conditions for an interview -- no pictures or video. A couple of weeks prior, Ramzi had talked with the France 2 series Envoye Special, which did an expose titled "La Tunisie sous la menace salafiste" ("Tunisia, under Salafist Threat). He told them his name was Nasim. Ramzi promises only five minutes, though the conversation lasts 15.

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia is an organization that believes in al Qaeda's worldview, but primarily at this juncture only focuses on local recruitment and missionary activities. AST typically sets up lectures from prominent Tunisian Salafi clerics, passes out mainstream Salafi literature at weekly markets, provides food, medicine, and clothing in charitable convoys, and publishes about its activities on Facebook as well as highlights key news events and new releases relating to the global jihadi world.

Unlike al Qaeda and its like-minded groups around the greater Middle East and North Africa, on the whole, AST has been a non-violent organization -- besides alleged involvement in the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis in September 2012. Its main focus has been on dawa (missionary work). This is an under studied aspect of many current jihadi organizations. Much of this has come about as a consequence of the excesses of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and al Qaeda in Iraq last decade.

Groups like AST largely follow the ideas of Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi who has attempted to steer the community toward a more "pure" jihad. Maqdisi emphasizes the importance of consolidating power through education and dawa rather than focusing on fighting to damage the enemy. The groups working to change the emphasis on their actions, fostering the possibility of gaining a constituency in the same manner that ideologically different Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah have been doing for years. That being said, because AST believes in al Qaeda's ideology, it could be susceptible to engaging in violence in addition to dawa activities in the future if it sees it fit. It is difficult to predict if and when this might happen, but it should not be ruled out.

Ramzi explains that Ansar al-Sharia's activities within Sousse are completely funded from within the country by donations from individuals with jobs. He worked in the tourism industry, he explains. Although all this sounds nice, the economic climate in Tunisia is not thriving. Literature passed out by AST at weekly markets appears to come from Saudi bookstores. Its food and medical caravans appear to receive provisions from a Kuwaiti Salafi charity. It is not the complete truth.

The social welfare provisions of AST has been an important reason why it has had such a rapid growth since its founding in April 2011. Ramzi explained that he, along with his brothers, have been involved in dawa by helping clean streets, giving food, clothes, and medicine, as well as assisting in homes for old men. Based on publicly available information from AST's official Facebook page (which has been taken down only to reemerge under a different account more than 12 times in the past six months) it has been involved in more than 100 of these types of events spanning the entire country. This is why AST's framing of its work as Abna'kum fi Khidmatikum (Your Sons Are At Your Service) has sold well, especially for many disillusioned by the government and still feeling a level of neglect two years after the revolution, which was purportedly supposed to bring change.

Ramzi seems ready to launch into a speech about the importance of dawa and AST's mission of bringing people back to Islam, but he gets distracted, looks at his watch, and decides the interview is over. We shake hands, he gets up, says barak Allahu fik (may God's blessing be upon you), and walks away. The nice salutation cathe off guard due to the negative view Salafis have of non-Muslims, especially as it relates to the theory of al-Wala' wa-l-Bara' (loyalty only to the true Muslims, and disavowal to non-Muslims). It makes more sense a few hours later when I independently meet other members of AST in Sousse in the southern part of the coast in the town.

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As I sit in the back seat of my Tunisian friends black Audi, dusk settles in and overtakes the setting sun. We park across the street from the ocean in the southern part of Sousse right before Avenue Hedi Nouria bends back inland. We wait at a café filled with youth and middle-aged men sipping tea and coffee, smoking shisha (hooka) and playing cards. Hassan (not his real name), one of the three Tunisian friends and a secular student studying public law in

Sousse, is waiting for a call back from two self-proclaimed members of Ansar al-Sharia. He grew up with both of them.

After 10 minutes we get the call and walk inland on Avenue Hedi Nouira a quarter of a mile and wait in front of a small sporting goods shop on the left side of the road. Two men roll up on a moped. Both appear to be in their 20s. They open their tiny shop, 20 by five feet. A 1990s style black boom had been left on and was loudly playing a recitation of the Quran. I look around and I see on the walls are adorned with t-shirts, sweatshirts, tracksuits, and shoes with American brands like Nike.

A man takes out a plastic lawn chair from behind the counter and places it in the middle of the shop for me to sit on. One of the men is Khubayb bin Qasim, a big-boned, but not overweight guy wearing jeans, and a navy blue and red hoodie under a leather jacket. He had a plain blue baseball cap and a bushy black beard like Ramzi's. The other man, Ali Nawar, had a wiry figure and sported a full Adidas tracksuit from Adidas. His beard was thin.

They explained they had both joined the Salafi trend just prior to the revolution.

"Marhaban bik, ijlis, indana Makroud min al-Qayrawan lak." Welcome, sit down, we have makroud for you from Qayrawan (a city founded by Arabs around 670 which became a world leading center for Islamic learning). Makroud are small semolina cakes cut in the shape of lozenges filled with dates, honey, and sesame. I take a bite of this delicious treat and a swig of some orange soda, and we begin discussing their take on dawa and society.

Ali explains that the dawa is wajib (an obligation) within Islam and that Ansar al-Sharia is filling a gap of services that the government has failed to provide, "political parties failed because they couldn't control the Tunisian population because they are far from the Sunnah (sayings and actions of the Muslim prophet Muhammad." This according to Khubayb is also the reason why "the Arab and Muslim umma (community) relies on the West."

I ask how many individuals they think are part of their movement. They answered 90,000 to 100,000. This is dramatically higher than any previous estimate has reported, which at most has only stated there are about 10,000. It is difficult to assess the true extent of AST support since it is possible that officials are downplaying the numbers while members of AST are inflating them for their own gain.

Further, when speaking with an ex-Ben Ali regime official a few days earlier in Kram, a suburb of Tunis, he stated that during the Sulayman group incident in 2006, which was a series of attacks from Tunisian jihadists that had been trained by al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria and returned to Tunisia, he needed to relay information to the press, but stated he did not articulate the true nature of the threat downplaying the number of Salafis in the country. This official also said in a private conversation with Ben Ali that Ben Ali did not even have a true fix on how many Salafis there were in the country and was worried about how quickly they were able to convert individuals into this way of life.

The Salafi community in Tunisia is the inverse of the movement in Egypt, where the majority of Salafis have been bought into the system and have come to terms with democracy to a greater or lesser extent. The Salafi-jihadi trend is at the fringe of the Salafi spectrum in Egypt, likely a result of the failure of Gama'a al-Islamiyya and Egyptian Islamic Jihad to gain support during their terror campaign of the 1990s. Tunisia, unlike Egypt, Algeria, and Libya, never dealt with the consequences of jihadi violence in the 1990s after the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Many Tunisian jihadis were imprisoned or exiled in Europe and were involved with facilitation and documentation forgery. Tunisians played a historic role in the assassination of Ahmad Shah Messud, the leader of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan two days prior to 9/11.

For all these reasons, the Salafi-jihadi scene in Tunisia is more dominant than the relatively small political-Salafi

organization Jabhat al-Islah (JI), in terms of following and capabilities. Moreover, when comparing the AST's and JI's base, the breadth of events and variation in locales throughout the country as well as attendance shows that AST has far more support and range. Additionally, the members of AST are mainly youth, while JI is made up of older men, suggesting that the future will likely be with AST, too. This could become problematic if AST continues to grow -- they do not buy into the system and believe democracy is a separate religion from Islam.

At this point, a shorter guy walks in the door wearing flip flops, blue cargo shorts, and a white t-shirt and zip up hoodie with a dirty blonde beard. He comes in with a big smile, reaches out to me and shakes my hand and says, "You are always welcome in Tunisia."

Ali Nawar then goes on to explain that this guy goes by the nickname Ali Bin Laden (ABL) and that he had been arrested by the Ben Ali regime and detained for six months in 2005. ABL claims he was arrested only for this nickname and was not involved in any violence or disturbances. I asked him if he had been tortured and he responded that he hadn't, but was only slapped around. ABL then explains, "One of our brothers was really tortured badly in the prisons of Ben Ali and they took his teeth, tortured him with a snake, and removed his finger nails."

As ABL settled in, other "brothers" started to come up to this small shop due to curiosity about the discussion I was having with Khubayb and Ali or the crazy American who figured he could just walk right in. I was wondering their thoughts on Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi (Sayf Allah bin Hussayn), the leader of AST and former co-founder of the Tunisian Combatant Group, which was involved with the Massud assassination and spent time in prison in Tunisia from 2003 until after the revolution. They explain that he was an important figure because he helped connect grassroots followers with Shaykh al-Khatib al-Idrissi, the most prominent Salafi religious scholar for Tunisian jihadis. Al-Idrissi, who lives in Sidi Bouzid and is blind in one eye, had studied in Saudi Arabia under Bin Baz, one of the most renowned Salafi scholars of the 20th century.

Ali then parrots a line that Abu Iyadh has repeatedly noted: "Tunisia is a land of dawa not a land of jihad." He explains that the key reason for this is because Habib Bourguiba, the founder of the modern Tunisian state, and Ben Ali, gutted and destroyed Islam. As a result, it was their duty to bring Tunisians back into the fold of Islam.

I was wondering if their dawa is successful, what happens next? At this point, Hassan interjects to try and state his own opinion on what the AST guys are saying. He had done this a number of times before, and in response, Khubayb, his childhood friend, admonishes him, stating: "When someone speaks, you listen and allow others to listen and take turns. This is contrary to the left/secularists who don't respect dialogue."

Ali continues by stating that dawa is not just work in Tunisia, but global, and highlights Syria where he believes success is occurring: "The objective is to set up the Islamic system based on the Salaf. This will remedy the failure of communists and liberals."

The adhan (call to prayer) sounds for Isha' prayer, the last of the five during the day. All of the AST members perk up and get excited to pray. They ask if I want to join to watch them and I say, "Sure, why not?"

We leave the shop and walk farther inland on Avenue Hedi Nouria till we pass a roundabout that intersects with Avenue Ibn Khaldoun. There is a green light glowing in the minaret of the mosque in the near distance.

We approach a half paved, half dirt road and continue for two minutes until we reach Jama'a al-Hadayyah (the Guidance Mosque), AST's mosque of Sousse. I first notice that it looks brand new. We walk in, take our shoes off, and while the AST guys perform wudu (ritual ablutions), I enter the prayer room and sit in the back. The service had just begun. When Ali enters the room, he comes up to me and hands me a glass of water while I look on. I counted about 120 men and no women. All appear to be between the ages of 16 and 35. The inside of the prayer room is a beautiful white with a variety of Arabic calligraphy embedded in the walls and dome in red, green, and yellow.

It is the typical night prayer, but at the end there is a special dua (supplication) for the mujahidin of Bilad al-Sham (Greater Syria). The war in Syria has been crucial to the Tunisian jihadi movement. In many ways, Abu Iyadh has perfected a two-pronged strategy: missionaries at home and jihadists abroad. This provides an opportunity for varying roles for individuals. If one wants to help consolidate a base in Tunisia, stay and do dawa, but if one wants to fight, go to Syria, Libya, or Mali.

Based on my own personal archive, in the month of February alone, 26 Tunisians died in Syria, the most among all foreign national groups. The second highest was 10 from Jordan. Overall, during the entire Syrian conflict a conservative estimate, based on 45 sources from Western and regional media as well as jihadi forum martyrdom notices, Tunisians have likely accounted for 150 to 230 fighters or support personnel. This includes people that have been killed, arrested, or are still present.

Before we return to the shop, Khubayb takes me up to the top of the minaret. We both get embedded in the green glow and can see a view of southern Sousse as well as another glowing green minaret about a half a mile away. We descend the stairs, leave the AST mosque, and head back to sporting good shop to talk more.

On the way back, I ask Ali how old the mosque is since it looks so new. He responds that it was built after the revolution. Based on the quick turnaround and the economic situation in Tunisia it is highly likely that the mosque was built from Gulf funding, but Ali does not confirm. Additionally, one of the AST onlookers from before, who wore navy blue track pants, a white hoodie, and a black beanie, comes up to me and asks me about my background and why I am interested in this topic. He then says if I want an English version of the Quran he has an extra copy. This is because his wife is a British convert. Similar to members of the Ennahda party, some Tunisian jihadis spent some time in London. Abu Iyadh studied with Abu Qatada al-Filisti, currently under house arrest and control order and believed to be a key leader in al Qaeda in Europe in the mid-1990s, prior to 9/11, though he has never been charged.

When we return to the shop, Khubayb offers me more orange soda and makroud. The conversation resumes with Khubayb, Ali, my three Tunisian friends, and two AST onlookers, turning toward U.S. policy, Ennahda, Islam post-9/11, and relations with other jihadi groups in the region and globally.

"We don't worry about American politics before or after 9/14 (in reference to the attack on the embassy in Tunis in 2012). We are not afraid of U.S. policy. American politics is clear and it is to steal Arab riches. Whether in the past or present this is the same policy," Ali explains. This is clear with the case of Abu Iyadh's disregard for his status as a wanted man. Many people in Tunisia have said he still lives in Tunis, likely in the Wardia area, an AST stronghold.

Some believe Abu Iyadh can live freely without harassment because of Ennahda's light touch policy as it relates to Salafis, thinking that they can co-opt them. Ennahda is the main Islamist party that won the October 2011 Constituent Assembly election, which was charged with writing the country's constitution. It is in a coalition with to other non-Islamist parties: Congress for the Republic (CPR) and Ettaktol. During the 1980s and 1990s, Ennahda was suppressed at the hands of Former Presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Many were in prison (along with leftist opponents of the regime) for more than 15 years until an amnesty in 2006, while others were exiled in Europe until the revolution.

Ennahda takes this approach with the Salafis because it believes that being too aggressive will lead Salafis underground and to act out in violence. In theory dialogue could work, but based on past attempts in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Yemen, and Syria trying to control the future actions and trajectory of jihadis within one's country has failed.

Many within the jihadi movement are skeptical of Ennahda, which is the Tunisian version of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that al Qaeda Central leader Ayman al-Zawahiri wrote a scathing critique of entitled "The Bitter Harvest." However, the AST members that I was speaking with did not blame Ennahda for the troubles.

They point their fingers at liberals. Ali notes, "The Islamic system will soon replace the liberal system."

To institute this system and the supremacy of sharia, the AST guys note that they would be willing to work with anyone that agrees with their ideas. I question whether this would be the case also for Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and al Qaeda Central/Zawahiri, to which they answer, "If they have the same interests or goals [as us, there is] nothing to stop cooperation." Neither Khubayb nor Ali directly admits connections with any of these groups, though.

Ali continues by delving into his theory on post-9/11 support for the jihadi cause, a pretty incisive analysis not often heard: "After 9/11, fortunately, many became more educated in this field, even if we lost sympathizers, we gained new supporters ... We believe more in Islam through this time of crisis and more Islam is the key and the Islamic country is coming and we are sure about this."

"[The prophet] Muhammad was talking about what's happening now, about the secular parties, and the end of the world will bring them down, and the khalifa (caliphate) will be reestablished," concludes Ali on a millennial note.

The conversation begins to wind down, but Khubayb wants one final word for the U.S. government to hear: "If they [the US government] fight with Islam through the media, money, or politics, we will win because we have a solid base because as Shaykh Kishk [a well-know Egyptian cleric that died in 1996] said: 'Oh America, don't fight Islam because Islam has a God who is protecting it'."

The phrase "solid base (al Qaeda al-Sulba)" was a key idea for 'Abdullah 'Azzam, the godfather of global jihadism. Azzam's use of the phrase is believed to be the source of al Qaeda's name.

When our conversation closes, Khubayb asks me if I would say the shahada (the testament of faith to convert into Islam).

"Be honest with us, we won't mind either way," he says. "We wish that you will go with us to Mecca together [one day]. And when you see me in Tunisia again, Islam will be [a part of normal everyday] life and [we will be] safe [in practicing our religion]. I wish I will find you to be the first one in the mosque, and you are welcome in Tunisia anytime you want."

I decline his offer. There are no hard feelings. We all clean up the shop and leave. We say our ma'assalamas (goodbyes). Khubayb and Ali get on their moped and ride away, while my three Tunisian friends and I jump into the black Audi and drive to a cafe in the center of town for tea.

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While in some ways, my encounters with Ansar al-Sharia confirmed much I already knew, experiencing it in person provided me with a new level of appreciation for how it is able to gain a following. Of all the different partisans I met in Tunisia, they were the most welcoming and kind.

If they are like that with me, an American, imagine how they reach out to their countrymen, to individuals with little hope, who feel abandoned by their government. But they don't offer only words; they provide food, clothing, blankets, medical services, and other social welfare. However little it might be, it provides hope to them, and for AST in return, of a community of at the very least soft support or areas for new recruitment.

The exodus of Ennahda officials has also accelerated the growth of AST in the interior, in places like Sidi Bouzid. According to Mahmoud Kammoun, a former student president of Ennahda and the son-in-law of the now former Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, after the October 23, 2011 election, many individuals that were elected or parts of the campaign in areas of the interior moved to Tunis. This according to Kammoun, has weakened the party among this constituency.

This is not to say that AST is an unstoppable force, or that Tunisia is headed for a Taliban scenario, but while political parties fight over power in Tunis and the economy continues to sputter, AST is tapping into something and providing some concrete help, even if it's not at a large-scale. It provides redemption and a mission for many who feel lost. It's a potent combination.

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

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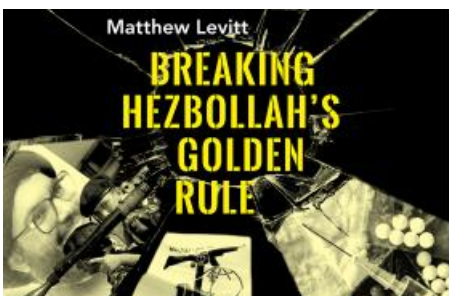
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