

Maqdisi's Disciples in Libya and Tunisia

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Articles & Testimony

Jihadist groups do not buy into the democratic process and are attempting to consolidate Islamic rule in their countries one charitable act at a time.

Ever since the attacks on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi and U.S. Embassy in Tunis in September, there has been a large spotlight on the Islamist groups viewed as the main culprits -- Katibat Ansar al-Sharia in Benghazi (ASB) and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST). While much of the understandable focus has been on the violent actions of individuals in these organizations, much of the scope of their activities lies outside violence. A large-portion of the activities of these groups is local social service provision under their particular *dawa* (missionary) offices. This broader picture is crucial to better understanding emerging trends in societies transitioning from authoritarian to democratic rule.

ASB and AST can broadly be considered jihadi organizations based on their ideological outlook. However, these jihadis are different than past incarnations. Jihadis have a good track record in fighting and less so in governing or providing social services. The only example of jihadi governance has occurred when the Somali-based Harakat al-Shabab al-Mujahidin and Yemeni-based al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) held actual territory. What sets ASB and AST apart is that they are providing aid to local communities in a non-state actor capacity, which has been unheard of previously.

While many analysts view jihadism only through the prism of al Qaeda, it misses the influence of independent jihadi religious scholars. Since the excesses of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and al Qaeda in Iraq last decade, Minbar al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (the Pulpit of Monotheism and Jihad) -- a library of jihadi primary source material founded by Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who is currently imprisoned in Jordan -- has attempted to steer the jihadi community to a more "pure" jihad. To do this, Maqdisi established a sharia committee of like-minded scholars in 2009 for Minbar that provide fatwas answering questions along a range of topics from the mundane to political to jihad. This has been well documented by Dutch scholar Joas Wagemakers.

One of the main critiques Maqdisi presents, and hopes to create a course correction within the jihadi movement, is his differentiation between the idea of *qital al-nikayya* (fighting to hurt or damage the enemy) and *qital al-tamkin* (fighting to consolidate one's power), which he expounds upon in his book *Waqafat ma' Thamrat al-Jihad* (Stances on the Fruit of Jihad) in 2004. Maqdisi argues the former provides only short-term tactical victories that in many cases do not amount to much in the long-term whereas the latter provides a framework for consolidating an Islamic state. In this way, Maqdisi highlights the importance of planning, organization, education, as well as *dawa* (calling individuals to Islam) activities. As Wagemakers has noted, the creation of the Minbar sharia committee was to forward these views to "protect" the jihad and to better advance the pursuit of a true Islamic state based on the sanctity of the *tawhid* (monotheism) of God.

The formation of Ansar al-Sharia groups in Benghazi and Tunisia are likely a logical conclusion and implementation of Maqdisi's ideas, changing emphasis on the groups' actions. One of the main avenues for advancing ASB's and AST's ideas has been through their social services programs. This provides an outlet for advancing the consolidation of a future Islamic state that cultivates followers in a broader fashion than the more vanguard-oriented organizations that have been involved in jihadism in a local, regional, or global capacity over the past 30 years.

Since both groups were founded after their respective uprisings, they have posted hundreds of pictures and tens of videos related to their various social service and charity events to their official Facebook pages. Both of their pages have been kicked off of Facebook a few times since the attacks in September. As a consequence, they do not re-upload the older content when they create a new page, yet I have retained all of this content in my archives.

In Libya, ASB, officially established in February 2012, has publicly featured at least five *dawa* events in Benghazi and its environs according to their Facebook page. The first activity was in June 2012 when members of ASB visited sick individuals in a Benghazi hospital. A few months later, ASB was even brought in to provide security at the hospital and were the first ones to create a level of normalcy there.

On two occasions, in July and September, members of ASB also helped clean and fix roads as well as picked up trash in a couple of neighborhoods in Benghazi. Additionally, in the lead up to the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, ASB members collected money from local residents to buy sheep to slaughter for the needy so everyone could perform the ritual duty. For those outside of Benghazi in smaller villages including Dariyyana, Tilmitha, Barsas, and al-Marj, ASB members provided delivery service of the sheep. Most recently, ASB announced it will soon open a medical clinic for women and children that will also provide dental care and will be exclusively run by female doctors.

As for Tunisia, AST has been far more active as well as geographically dispersed in its activities across the country. In total, AST has publicly released information on 20 events. The first one was even before the organization was officially established in April 2011 -- though the idea of AST was created while many members were imprisoned during the era of former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. In March 2011, individuals provided aid and set up tents and shelter for Libyan refugees at the Tunisian and Libyan border after the start of the revolution against Muammar al-Qaddafi.

One of AST's larger social services efforts is in driving food aid as well as medical services to cities or smaller villages in rural areas. AST has done this charity work in Haydra, Jinduba, Sijnan, al-Miknasi, al-Qayrawan, al-Kif, Sidi Buzid, and Tunis. It has also set up water tents in local *suqs* (markets) during exceedingly hot days. AST even helped with a soccer practice for young boys in Matar.

Similar to ASB, AST members have also provided assistance to the needy during the holidays. During Eid al-Fitr, along with food, AST provided presents for children, which is a tradition at the end of Ramadan.

While this should not obscure the violent aspects of these two movements, it speaks to the potential challenges the United States, other countries, or local governments might face in attempting to contain the growth of these

movements. By providing charity, care, and aid, ASB and AST are acting similarly in their operations to (though should not be confused for allies with or having ideological connections to) the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah. Providing social services has provided leverage for these groups to gain wider popularity and support within the local community.

The ties to the local community were evident after ASB was kicked out of its base in Benghazi 10 days after the attack on the consulate. Doctors and nurses at the hospital that ASB was guarding pleaded that they return to provide the necessary security at the hospital. This service vacuum that ASB and AST are beginning to fill in areas that have lesser government reach will have profound consequences on the future of these two transitioning countries. ASB and AST do not buy into the democratic process and in spite of it are attempting to consolidate their future Islamic State one small act of charity at a time.

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

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