

Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad

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How did a democratic bright spot in the Arab Spring become a leading source of Islamic State fighters? Read or watch an in-depth conversation with two jihadism experts.

On February 11, Aaron Y. Zelin and Rukmini Callimachi addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Zelin is the Institute's Richard Borow Fellow, a visiting research scholar at Brandeis University, and author of the new book [Your Sons at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad](#). Callimachi is a four-time Pulitzer Prize finalist who covers the Islamic State and al-Qaeda for the New York Times. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

AARON ZELIN

Many observers were unaware that Tunisians were disproportionately involved in jihadism prior to 2011, largely because much of this activity took place in foreign conflict zones. From the anti-Soviet Afghan jihad to terrorist attacks in Mali, they participated in the movement for thirty years prior to the Tunisian revolution, playing important roles as foreign fighters in Bosnia, Algeria, Iraq, and other locales. They were also key cogs in a logistics, facilitation, and recruitment network based in Europe, mainly operating out of Milan but also present in Paris, Brussels, and London. These examples help explain why so many Tunisian foreign fighters have joined the fight in Syria over the past few years.

Meanwhile, many hardened Tunisian jihadists with past terrorist experience have been released back into the public due to several factors, including the transitional nature of the post-revolutionary government, inadequate supervision over the prisoner population, and pressure from revolutionaries. The transitional government had little domestic legitimacy during its tenure, a situation that gave Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) room to formally organize itself and spread its ideas.

Post-revolution elections did not resolve this problem: the Ennahda-led government became more engaged than its predecessor in dealing with AST, but its gamble on a light-touch policy proved costly. AST exploited this with a *dawa*-first approach instead of a jihad-first approach. Focusing on outreach activities, religious education, charity, and relief efforts allowed the group to reach a broader audience than if it had been a typical clandestine organization like al-Qaeda. One of AST's messages resonated particularly well with Tunisians looking for something new post-revolution: "Your sons are at your service," a slogan intended to show citizens that the group was giving back to the community.

What happened in Tunisia from 2011 to 2013 helps explain why so many citizens subsequently joined the Islamic State (IS). Many were shaped by their experiences with AST, whose fall spurred a shift in the country's jihadist movement. No longer was it a cohesive entity run by Tunisians and primarily focused on domestic issues—rather, it became more globalized again by big-brand groups like IS. Tunisian jihadism was returning to its historical roots,

with individuals joining up as foreign fighters and helping to facilitate and plot attacks. Additionally, Tunisians helped build the IS *dawa* program—Abu Waqas al-Tunisi was the program’s public face, appearing in six of its videos by the end of 2013.

The failed takeover of Ben Gardane in March 2016 proved to be the turning point for IS power inside Tunisia, greatly boosting the government’s political legitimacy and military campaign after a year of high-profile IS attacks. Since then, Tunisian authorities have been able to slowly degrade the movement. Jihadism is now at its lowest level since the revolution, while the state has gained a great deal of experience and understands the movement better.

Challenges persist, however. The jihadist movement is not a vanguard anymore—it is a social movement with its own subculture, and dealing with it solely from a military and law enforcement standpoint is no longer sufficient (though still necessary). Many of the individuals who got involved with IS and AST did so not for violent reasons, but to participate in social projects and help their neighbors out, just as these groups advertised. Accordingly, local and Western officials need to provide alternative avenues that resonate with such people, including a greater focus on supporting younger Tunisians and bringing them into the fold.

In all, around 3,000 Tunisians joined IS in Iraq and Syria, and about 1,500 joined IS in Libya. According to the Tunisian government, at least 1,000 of them have returned home. In response, the government has implemented pilot projects inside the prison system over the past two years, partnering with civil society associations on rehabilitation and reintegration. It has also sponsored a series of workshops with local officials and associations that will hopefully provide a communal backbone for returnees, so they can begin to reintegrate after serving their prison sentences.

RUKMINI CALLIMACHI

During AST’s initial evolution, the organization was not violent at all. It was primarily interested in providing services, from caravans full of clothes to medical clinics, charity drives, and more. This illustrates how terrorist organizations can learn from their past, despite often being seen as fixated on purely violent tactics. The well-known al-Qaeda leader Atiyah Abd al-Rahman al-Libi once talked about the failure of jihadists in Algeria during the 1990s, when the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) made important gains at first but then became very brutal and extreme. The atrocities it carried out—including on its own members—eventually backfired. AST leader Abu Iyad al-Tunisi grew up in this broader movement and was very much influenced by these lessons learned.

Debate continues over whether AST was truly an affiliate of al-Qaeda. Yet Abu Iyad is known to have exchanged letters with the organization’s current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and with the heads of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Boko Haram, and al-Shabab. Furthermore, documents seized in Osama bin Laden’s Abbottabad compound indicate that around the time AST was emerging, al-Qaeda was deciding whether to stop naming its affiliates “al-Qaeda,” perhaps due to the U.S. Treasury Department’s intense efforts to expose and designate such groups. For example, AQAP was locally calling itself “Ansar al-Sharia in Yemen” at the time.

Regarding European terrorist plots such as the January 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* shooting, the Paris attacks of November 2015, the Brussels attacks of March 2016, and so forth, there seems to be a prevalence of Moroccan French and Tunisian French ancestry among the perpetrators. In many cases these individuals are born in North Africa, come to Europe as children, and then seemingly get caught between two worlds, unable to escape the mark of being immigrants even when they learn to speak French fluently. At the same time, few Algerian French or Libyan French individuals have been involved in such plots, raising numerous questions about the Tunisian and Moroccan jihadist milieus.

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