

Ansar al-Shariah (Tunisia)

AT A GLANCE

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SUMMARY

Formed: April 2011

Disbanded: 2015

First Attack: September 14, 2012: Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, the leader of AST, organized riots and looting targeting the U.S. embassy and a nearby American school in Tunis, following an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi (4 killed, 29 wounded).¹

Last Attack: July 16, 2014: Militants used rifles and grenades to attack Tunisian soldiers at military checkpoints near the Tunisian border with Algeria (14 killed, unknown wounded).²

OVERVIEW

Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia (AST) was a Salafi-jihadist militant organization established in 2011 that combined community service, proselytization, and violence to promote its Salafi ideology and goals in Tunisia. The group aimed to establish Shariah law in Tunisia and promoted the idea of global jihad. The group targeted the Tunisian government and armed forces, utilizing a dawa, or charitable works, campaign to gain trust among Tunisian communities. Since its establishment, AST supported Al Qaeda; however in 2014, multiple AST leaders, including AST spokesman Seifeddine Rais, swore loyalty to IS. Many left the group to fight in Syria. It is unclear whether the group continues to operate secretly or its members have dispersed to join other jihad groups.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia (AST) was a Salafi-jihadist militant organization established in 2011 that combined community service, proselytization, and violence to promote its Salafi ideology and goals in Tunisia. The group aimed to establish Shariah law in Tunisia and promoted the idea of global jihad. AST was not formally affiliated with the Ansar al-Shariah organizations operating in Libya, Yemen and Egypt. However, AST and Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL) reportedly shared operational, financial, and logistical links.³

Plans to create AST arose in 2006 in a Tunisian prison, when future leader Seifallah Ben Hussein conceptualized the organization with twenty other Islamist prisoners. After the Tunisian revolution in 2011, the prisoners were freed and began to build the group; AST officially became active in April 2011. AST had support from Shaikh Khattab Idriss, one of the most influential Salafi clerics in Tunisia and began meeting with the powerful political party al-Nahda. (The two later grew apart when al-Nahda gained power in the government and its connection to the increasingly violent militant group became a liability.⁴) AST quickly established a public relations system, creating a Facebook page and the “al-Qayrawan Media Foundation,” which helped it grow to a reported 40,000-50,000 members by 2012.⁵

AST’s flexible membership system bolstered the group’s recruitment. Individuals pursued AST’s mission in a variety of ways, from joining military operations to teaching religion classes in their communities. AST typically sent its fighters to operate outside Tunisia. For example, several thousand militants reportedly participated in training camps in Libya and joined the Syrian Civil War.⁶ However, AST members more frequently promoted its ideology through lectures, charity, publications, and online posts. According to AST leader Tunisi, the group was organized around the idea that “Tunisia is a land of dawa (charity in the name of Islam), not a land of jihad.”⁷

While AST claimed responsibility for few attacks, the Tunisian government and the media implicated the group in multiple suicide bombings, small arms attacks, and kidnappings in Tunisia. Most infamously, the U.S. government confirmed that Hussein orchestrated rioting and attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Tunis on September 14, 2012, which killed 2 and wounded 29, following the riots at the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi.⁸ The Tunisian government blamed AST for the assassination of two Tunisian politicians in 2013 and subsequently designated the group a foreign terrorist organization.⁹

Following this designation, the Tunisian government cracked down on both the organization’s dawa activities and purported militant operations. Hussein went into hiding and AST shifted from highly publicized dawa events and social media publications to declarations of solidarity with other Salafis around the world and calls for cooperation among militant groups.¹⁰ In light of its designation as a foreign terrorist organization, AST also confirmed its loyalty to Al Qaeda (AQ).¹¹ In order to avoid the Tunisian military, in 2013, Hussein fled to Libya, where he began calling for reconciliation and cooperation between the Islamic State (IS) and other Islamist militant organizations throughout North Africa.¹²

In 2014, AST began targeting the Tunisian government and military in its attacks and further developed its relationship with IS. Multiple AST leaders, including AST's spokesman, Seifeddine Rais, swore loyalty to IS, and many left the group to fight in Syria.¹³ Although AST has backed IS on social media in past years, the extent of its connection to the group is unknown.¹⁴

In August 2014, AST also began to operate under the name Shabab al-Tawhid, reportedly to conceal its actions from the Tunisian government and media. However, the media continued to refer to the group as Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia.¹⁵ The Tunisian government's crackdown and the alleged death of AST leader Hussein in June 2015 forced AST to move its operations underground.¹⁶ The Tunisian government allegedly deployed 100,000 security forces to limit militant activity and defend tourist sites. Following deadly attacks in 2015 in Sousse and Bardo by Ajnad al-Khilafah, a militant group which emerged from AST, the government reportedly launched 700 security operations, arrested hundreds of suspected militants, and closed over 80 mosques suspected of supporting jihadism.¹⁷ It is unclear whether the group continues to operate secretly or its members have dispersed to join other jihad groups.¹⁸

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A. LEADERSHIP

Seifallah Ben Hussein (2011 to June 2015): Hussein, more commonly known as Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, was a Tunisian militant who trained and fought in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, becoming a top AQ lieutenant in 2001. After escaping Tora Bora with Osama bin Laden in 2001, he was arrested in Turkey and imprisoned in Tunisia. He was released following the 2011 revolution in Tunisia and immediately formed AST. The State Department implicated Hussein as the mastermind behind the September 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis.¹⁹ Following Tunisia's designation of AST as a terrorist organization, Hussein went into hiding in Libya. He was reportedly killed in an airstrike in Libya in June 2015.²⁰

Seifeddine Rais (Unknown to July 2014): Rais was the spokesman for AST. He declared his loyalty to IS on July 8, 2014.²¹

Kamel Zarrouk (Unknown to 2014): Allegedly AST's second-in-command, Zarrouk was pursued by the Tunisian government before reportedly traveling to Syria to fight alongside IS in 2014.²²

Shaikh Khattab Idriss (Unknown to Present): Idriss, also known as al-Khatib al-Idrissi, was one of the most influential Salafi clerics in Tunisia. There are conflicting reports on his position in the group. At the very least, he advertised for the group, appeared at events, and served as a spiritual inspiration for the organization.²³

Sami Ben Khemais Essid (Unknown to Unknown): Essid was a senior leader in AST.²⁴ He fought in Afghanistan for two years and trained as a recruiter for AQ before the U.S. identified him as the head of AQ operations in Italy, where he plotted an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Rome. He was sentenced in an Italian court and

deported to Tunisia in 2008, but was subsequently freed from prison after the 2011 Tunisian revolution.²⁵

Mehdi Kammoun (Unknown to Unknown): Kammoun was a senior AST leader and an AQ operative in Italy along with Essid. He had previously been a member of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later became AQIM. After being convicted and sentenced for organizing an AQ cell in Italy, he served part of his sentence in Tunisia before being freed after the Tunisian uprising.²⁶

B. NAME CHANGES

August 2014: Shabab al-Tawhid. AST reportedly began to operate under a second name in an effort to conceal its actions, after the Tunisian government designated it a terrorist organization. The media continued to refer to the group as Ansar al-Shariah in Tunisia.²⁷

C. SIZE ESTIMATES

- 2012: 30,000-40,000 (New York Times)²⁸
- 2013: 1,000 (Foreign Policy)²⁹
- 2014: 70,000 (The Economist)³⁰

D. RESOURCES

AST received most of its funding from revenue from goods smuggling, private Tunisian donors, and support from AQIM.³¹

E. GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS

Disclaimer: This is a partial list of where the militant organization has bases and where it operates. This does not include information on where the group conducts major attacks or has external influences.

AST was active throughout Tunisia. The group carried out attacks in Sousse, Sidi Bou Zid, and Tripoli and organized community outreach campaigns in Tunis, Sousse, Sidi Bouzid, al-Qayrawan, and Bizerte. Some sources suggest the Tunisian city of Kairouan served as AST's center of operations until 2015.³² After the Tunisian government designated AST a terrorist group in August 2013 Hussein went into hiding but continued to direct the organization from Benghazi and Tripoli, in Libya, until 2015.³³

STRATEGY

A. IDEOLOGY AND GOALS

AST was a Salafi-Jihadist militant organization that aimed to establish Shariah law in Tunisia and promote global jihad.³⁴ The group combined community service, proselytization, and violence to promote its Salafi ideology and goals in Tunisia. While AST supported AQ's goal of inspiring Muslims globally to attack enemies of Islam, it focused initially on missionary activities and local recruitment.³⁵ The group had close ties to Shaikh Khattab Idris, one of the most influential Salafi clerics in Tunisia.³⁶

B. POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

At its outset, AST had close ties to the political party al-Nahda, formed when future members of both groups were imprisoned together under the Ben Ali regime in 2006. The groups reportedly held meetings after they were released from prison in 2011. However, as al-Nahda gained power in government and AST began to rely on more violent tactics, the relationship became a liability for al-Nahda. The political party designated AST a terrorist organization in August 2013.³⁷

C. TARGETS AND TACTICS

The group combined community service, proselytization, and violence to promote its Salafi ideology and goals in Tunisia, while maintaining positive relationships with Tunisian communities. The majority of its member typically proselytized and performed public services such as providing religious education and social services, rather than engaging in terrorism.³⁸ Although AST claimed responsibility for few attacks, the Tunisian government and media implicated the group for various suicide bombings, small arms attacks and kidnappings. The militant organization claimed responsibility for the assassination of two politicians left-wing politicians. AST reportedly targeted the Tunisian government, security forces, Tunisian political figures, religious sites, and groups representing Western influence, such as tourists and foreign consulates.³⁹ AST also recruited Tunisian youth to fight in Syria.

MAJOR ATTACKS

Disclaimer: These are some selected major attacks in the militant organization's history. It is not a comprehensive listing but captures some of the most famous attacks or turning points during the campaign.

September 14, 2012: Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, leader of AST, organized riots and looting targeting the U.S. Embassy and a nearby American school in Tunis following the attack on the U.S. Embassy in Benghazi (4 killed, 29 wounded).⁴⁰

February 6, 2013: AST shot and killed secular, leftist politician Chokri Belaid, creating political turmoil in the government (1 killed, 0 wounded).⁴¹

July 25, 2013: AST assassinated another left-wing politician, Mohamed Brahmi. The Tunisian government blamed AST for the attack and designated the group a terrorist organization as a result of its participation in both this attack and the earlier assassination of Chokri Belaid. AST later claimed responsibility for this attack and the assassination of Belaid in a video published in December 2014 (1 killed, 0 wounded).⁴²

October 23, 2013: Militants attacked the Tunisian National Guard in Sidi Ali Bin Aoun, Sidi Bou Zid, Tunisia, killing 8 soldiers (8 killed, 0 wounded).⁴³

October 30, 2013: Two suicide bombers targeted a hotel beach in Sousse, Tunisia. Only one detonated his bomb, and he was the only casualty. Five AST members were arrested in relation to the bombing (1 killed, 0 wounded).⁴⁴

March 21, 2014: AST militants allegedly kidnapped the secretary of the Tunisian ambassador, Mohamed bin Sheikh in Tripoli, Libya. Sheikh was ultimately released on June 29, 2014 (no casualties).⁴⁵

July 16, 2014: Militants used rifles and grenades to attack Tunisian soldiers at military checkpoints near the Tunisian border with Algeria (14 killed, unknown wounded).⁴⁶

INTERACTIONS

A. DESIGNATED/LISTED

- Tunisia's list of designated terrorist organizations: August 2013 to Present.⁴⁷
- U.S. State Department Specially Designated Global Terrorist: January 10, 2014 to Present.⁴⁸
- United Kingdom Home Office Proscribed Terrorist Organization: April 2014 to Present.⁴⁹
- UNSC "ISIL (Da'esh) & Al-Qaida Sanctions List:" September 23, 2014 to Present.⁵⁰

B. COMMUNITY RELATIONS

AST earned much of its popular support through its *dawa*, or charitable work, campaign for the communities of Tunisia. The group provided food and medical services for the poor, organized Islamic lectures for the general public, and ran religious classes for local children.⁵¹ AST also exploited widespread frustration with the Tunisian government in order to attract recruits.

AST distributed its printed propaganda in markets and published its materials online, establishing itself as a charitable rather than violent organization. AST's media branch, the al-Qayrawan Media Foundation handled the group's social media and propaganda.⁵²

C. RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER GROUPS

Like many groups in North Africa, AST had ties to Al Qaeda (AQ). AST leader Hussein reportedly had relationships with AQ leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Two other AST leaders, Sami Ben Khemais Essid and Mehdi Kammoun, were convicted for participating in and running AQ operations in Italy before returning to Tunisia and joining AST.⁵³ Although it was not formally affiliated with AQ, AST publicly stated its loyalty to the group on its social media pages.⁵⁴

Hussein swore an oath of allegiance to the emir of AQ-affiliate group, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The AST leader also worked with Mokhtar Belmokhtar, a former AQIM commander and founder of the Al Mourabitoun Battalion (AMB).⁵⁵

Unlike most other jihadi groups, AST maintained positive relations with both AQ and the Islamic State (IS), which are known to use their regional affiliates to compete and fight one another. AST publicly supported IS and encouraged members to go to Syria to fight

with the group.⁵⁶ In a 2013 audio message, Hussein encouraged AQ and IS leaders to settle their disputes in an amicable manner.⁵⁷ In July 2014, AST's spokesman, Seifeddine Rais, swore loyalty to IS; it is unclear whether he spoke on behalf of AST. Following his pledge, a number of AST leaders left to fight in Syria and dedicated themselves to IS. Although AST backed IS on social media, the extent of their connection is unknown.⁵⁸

AST was not formally affiliated with the Ansar al-Shariah organizations operating in Libya, Yemen and Egypt. However, all groups employed methods of *dawa*. AST and Ansar al-Shariah in Libya (ASL) reportedly shared some operational, financial, and logistical links, but the extent of their relationship is unclear. ASL allegedly sold weapons to AST.⁵⁹

D. STATE SPONSORS AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

There are no publicly available external influences for this group.

MAPS

- North Africa
- Global Islamic State

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