

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game:

Dawa, Hisba, and Jihad

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross

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In May 2013, the most significant clashes since the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali occurred between the Tunisian government and the country's largest salafi jihadist organisation – Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST). ICCT Visiting Fellow Daveed Gartenstein-Ross argues that AST's future in the country is highly uncertain. Combining a research visit to Tunisia with more traditional research, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross analyses AST's current strategy and potential future transition from missionary work to jihad. He takes into consideration the group's leadership, outlook, structure, size, and international connections. Concluding, he provides recommendations for engagement in Tunisia and the prevention of a long-term security problem connected to AST.

About the Author

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is a visiting research fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) – The Hague, and a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, D.C. While at ICCT, he is working on a major project that will examine the security implications of the Arab Uprisings, with a focus on Tunisia. The project will explore the strength of transnational jihadist networks in the wake of regional revolutions, the salafi jihadist strategy for exploiting developments, the influence of economic and ecological factors, and the likely impact of counterterrorism strategies forged by regional governments.

Gartenstein-Ross's academic and professional focus is on the impact of violent non-state actors on twenty-first century conflict. Studies that Gartenstein-Ross has authored examine the economic aspects of al Qaeda's military strategy; the radicalization process for jihadist terrorists; and theaters of conflict of particular relevance to the fight against al Qaeda. He is the author or volume editor of eleven books and monographs, including *Bin Laden's Legacy* (Wiley, 2011), and has published widely in the popular and academic press, including in *The New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Atlantic*, *Reader's Digest*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *The Yale Journal of International Affairs*, and German political science journal *Der Bürger im Staat*.

Gartenstein-Ross is a Ph.D. candidate in world politics at the Catholic University of America, where he received a M.A. in the same subject. He earned a J.D., magna cum laude, from the New York University School of Law, and a B.A., magna cum laude, from Wake Forest University.

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Contact

ICCT – The Hague
Koningin Julianaplein 10
P.O. Box 13228
2501 EE, The Hague
The Netherlands

T +31 (0)70 800 9531

E info@icct.nl

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1. Introduction

In May 2013, Tunisian security forces undertook intensive operations around the Jebel Chambi mountain on the Algerian border against a jihadist group known as Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi, which is said to be comprised of Algerians, Tunisians, and Libyans.¹ During the fighting, Tunisian forces bombarded the militants with heavy artillery and allegedly uncovered jihadist training camps. But these forces also absorbed a fair amount of damage, including five soldiers requiring limb amputations after being hit by improvised explosive devices. After about two weeks of operations – easily the most significant fighting between the government and jihadist forces since the fall of Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011 – the Tunisian state began to turn inward, clamping down on the country’s largest salafi jihadist organisation, Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST).²

The government’s crackdown began with the interruption of public lectures and other AST *dawa* (missionary) activities, and culminated in the state announcing the cancellation of the group’s annual conference, which is held in Kairouan. The conflict between AST and the government is increasingly entering uncharted territory, and several observers were concerned that this cancellation could signal the beginning of open military conflict between AST and the state. Although AST emir Abu Iyad al-Tunisi threatened the government with just that, his group in fact blinked first: AST told members to stand down in Kairouan and advised supporters to gather in the Tunis suburb of Ettadhamen. Hundreds of salafists did meet there and ended up clashing with police on May 19 – a date on which the Kairouan conference originally had been scheduled to run. All of this left the relationship between the Tunisian state and AST in an apparent downward spiral: while Abu Iyad ramped up his threats in unprecedented ways, Prime Minister Ali Larayedh did something that Tunisian officials had until then refrained from – openly linking AST to terrorism.³ All of this suggests a significant risk of increasing violence.

AST is unlikely to recede as a political issue within Tunisia and in fact will almost certainly continue to grow in importance. In assessing the likelihood of an escalating conflict, it is worth noting an intriguing tension: while the group’s ideology (which is unapologetically aligned with that of al-Qaeda) is progressively pushing it toward conflict with the state, entering into open conflict in the short term will hurt its strategic interests, undermining a strategy that it carefully cultivated in the wake of Ben Ali’s fall. This Paper explores how we came to the present situation, and assesses the prospects for future conflict, through an examination of AST’s leadership, organisational structure, international connections, and the strategy that it has been in the process of following since the change in regimes ushered in a freer environment in which it could operate.

AST’s organisational structure is intricately connected to its strategy. This structure is filled with ambiguity. The salafi jihadist group has frequently been described as “decentralised”,⁴ and to external observers it

Daveed Gartenstein-Ross is a visiting research fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)—The Hague, where he undertook this project, and a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies in Washington, D.C. He conducted field research in Tunisia in April 2013. Mr. Gartenstein-Ross is the author or volume editor of eleven books and monographs, including *Bin Laden’s Legacy* (Wiley, 2011). He is a Ph.D. candidate in world politics at The Catholic University of America, and holds a J.D. from the New York University School of Law.

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¹ For a description of these operations, see Andrew Lebovich, “Confronting Tunisia’s Jihadists”, *Foreign Policy* (16 May 2013), http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/16/confronting_tunisia_jihadists.

² See Aaron Y. Zelin, “Standoff Between the Tunisian Government and Ansar al-Sharia”, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy Policywatch* 2077 (14 May 2013), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/standoff-between-the-tunisian-government-and-ansar-al-sharia>.

³ Antoine Lambroschini, “Tunisia PM Vows Firm Action After Islamist Unrest”, *AFP* (20 May 2013), <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/May-20/217720-tunisia-salafist-leader-says-group-cannot-be-defeated.ashx#axzz2UDe2JhBI>.

⁴ See, for example, Fabio Merone, “Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia”, *Jadaliyya* (11 Apr. 2013), <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11166/salafism-in-tunisia-an-interview-with-a-member-of->; Daniel Nisman, “Tensions with

is unclear which actions taken by AST members – if any – are dictated or sanctioned by such senior leaders as the group's emir, Abu Iyad. These uncertainties about which actions could be attributed to the organisation have existed from the time of the AST's inception. However, they have grown over time – particularly since the AST-led assault on the United States (US) embassy in Tunis in September 2012, after which Abu Iyad became a fugitive from Tunisian authorities. This empowerment of local leaders creates some rather obvious problems for AST's implementation of strategy. For one thing, allowing the grassroots to act independent of the senior leadership increases the chance that strong local leaders will emerge who may not see eye-to-eye with senior leaders, and are willing to flout their advice or directives. Moreover, local groups may make decisions that undermine what AST's senior leaders are trying to accomplish.

While it is easy to discern how a largely decentralised structure that shrouds senior leaders' decision-making role might complicate strategy, it is perhaps more important to understand the advantages that AST derives from this structure. These advantages can be understood through their relationship to AST's strategy, which is based around *dawa*, *hisba* (a concept denoting "forbidding wrong", which for AST entails the enforcement of religious norms within the Tunisian Muslim community), and *jihad*.⁵ Of these, *dawa* (its missionary work) is overt, and AST benefits from being able to undertake it legally and openly – a dramatic change from life under Ben Ali, when such activities by jihadist groups were suppressed. In contrast, AST's violence is not meant to be connected to the organisation, because such involvement could jeopardise the group's ability to engage in *dawa* openly. A structure that disguises the leadership's role allows the group to engage in violence while simultaneously denying that it is doing so. After all, any given act of violence linked to salafi jihadism could have been carried out by individuals unaffiliated with AST; and even if it were proven that AST members carried out an attack, it is entirely possible that they were acting of their own volition rather than pursuant to guidance from above.

The vast majority of violence that AST has undertaken within Tunisia can be categorised as *hisba*, directed at other Tunisians who are seen as opposing the movement's ideals or mores. Targets have included liberals, secularists, and civic activists; educators; and security officers. The group's violence that can be categorised as *jihad* – warfare against enemies, rather than internal cleansing of the Muslim community – has generally been directed abroad, including large numbers of Tunisian fighters who have taken part in the raging conflicts in Syria and (to a lesser extent) Mali. Tunisians also played a role in the January 2013 assault on Algeria's In Amenas gas plant, and the September 2012 attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, that killed Ambassador Christopher Stevens.⁶ At least one AST-orchestrated act of violence within Tunisia – an attack on the US embassy in Tunis on 14 September 2012 – can be best categorised as *jihad*. A further aspect of AST's relationship to *jihad* violence can be seen in its preparatory work for future confrontation, such as its likely stockpiling of weapons.⁷

There have been two constraints, so far, on AST's use of violence. First, the organisation has tried to keep its levels of violence within what we might term "acceptable bounds": at a level that will not trigger a major crackdown by the state. AST has seemingly been attempting, over time, to *ratchet up* the amount of violence that might occur without the state cracking down. Second, the organisation is trying to undertake violence without alienating the population to which it is trying to appeal. In other words, independent of the state security apparatus, AST is wary that its *hisba* or *jihad* activities may interfere with its *dawa*.

Though salafi jihadists are an extremely small minority within Tunisia, they are a movement on the rise – and AST should be seen as an organisation on the rise – for two reasons. First, salafi jihadism enjoys influence beyond its numbers. AST has been very effective at maintaining visibility, a tactic that has been enhanced by its

Tunisia's Jihadists: Who Will Blink First?", *Huffington Post* (2 Apr. 2013), <http://www.freeinews.com/global/daniel-nisman-tensions-with-tunisia-jihadists-who-will-blink-first>.

⁵ All three of these terms – in particular *hisba*, which will be unfamiliar even to some specialists – are defined in greater depth in Part 2.

⁶ See "Algeria Siege: 37 Foreigners Died, PM Says", *BBC News* (21 Jan. 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-21127646>; John Newland, "Suspect in Benghazi Consulate Attack Released by Tunisian Judge", *NBC News* (8 Jan. 2013), <http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/news/2013/01/08/16414138-suspect-in-benghazi-consulate-attack-released-by-tunisian-judge?lite>.

⁷ AST's preparations for *jihad* are discussed further in Part 4.

provision of social services to neglected areas as well as the willingness of salafi jihadists to engage in violence. The second reason salafi jihadism should be viewed as on the rise is that it has very effectively positioned itself as an anti-system movement, standing opposed to a system that is not meeting the most fundamental needs of Tunisians. Thus, the movement's numbers are growing, as are AST's.⁸ In short, the *dawa* strategy is, to a certain extent, working.

At some point, AST is likely to transition from its focus on *dawa* to a greater emphasis on *jihad*. Many observers believe that this change is imminent, given the escalating tensions between AST and the Tunisian state. But as this study will show, both AST and also the state see themselves as having a great deal to lose from a short-term confrontation. Thus, they are engaged in a delicate dance as they enter uncharted territory in their dealings with each other.

2. Key Definitions

AST openly acknowledges that it is a *salafi jihadist* organisation. Salafism is not a monolithic phenomenon, and salafists can be defined broadly as individuals who belong to a movement that embraces an austere religious methodology striving for a practice of Islam that it believes to be consonant with that of the Prophet Muhammad and the first three generations of Muslims.

Monica Marks contends that there are three major divisions of salafism within Tunisia: *salafiyya 'alimiyya* (usually translated as scientific salafism, but which Marks believes is better understood as scripturalist salafism), political salafism, and salafi jihadism. She explains that for those who can be categorised as *salafiyya 'alimiyya*, democracy is "a tempting, but ultimately dead-end street". Thus, people belonging to this current focus on "apolitical lives of quietist piety". Adherents to the second category, political salafism, have much in common with those who identify as *salafiyya 'alimiyya*, but believe that participation in democratic politics is justified despite its flaws because it "could serve as a vehicle to attain a more caliphate-like, shariah-based polity". The third division, salafi jihadism, rejects both participation in democracy and also "the non-engagement of scripturalist Salafis". This division is primarily comprised of young people.⁹ Quintan Wiktorowicz notes that salafi jihadists "take a more militant position" than other salafi strains, arguing "that the current context calls for violence and revolution".¹⁰ Similarly, Stefano Torelli, Fabio Merone, and Francesco Cavatorta define this form of practice as "a form of violent opposition to 'unjust rule', aimed at establishing an Islamic state".¹¹

As mentioned previously, AST intends to advance its salafi jihadist agenda through *dawa*, *hisba*, and *jihad*. While the concepts of *dawa* and *jihad* are likely familiar to most readers, many are likely to be unfamiliar with *hisba*. Thus, this concept will be explored first. The obligation of "commanding right and forbidding wrong" is an important Islamic concept, discussed in the Qur'an itself.¹² As Michael Cook explains in a comprehensive study, the well-known Sunni scholar Ghazzali (d. 1111) "adopted the word *hisba* as a general term for "forbidding wrong".¹³ While groups like AST believe that *hisba* necessitates violence, this kind of violence can be distinguished from *jihad*, which is carried out against external enemies of the faith. In contrast, the idea of "forbidding wrong" suggests that the objects of these efforts are already a part of the Muslim community. *Hisba* will be further discussed subsequently, and examples in the Tunisian context will be provided.

⁸ The growth of both salafi jihadism and AST are discussed in Part 4.

⁹ Monica Marks, "Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current", *Mediterranean Politics* 18, no. 1 (2013), p. 109.

¹⁰ Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006), p. 208.

¹¹ Stefano M. Torelli, Fabio Merone, and Francesco Cavatorta, "Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization", *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 4 (2012), p. 145.

¹² See Qur'an 3:104, 3:110, 9:71.

¹³ Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Dawa and *jihad* should be more familiar concepts than *hisba*. As one Malaysian academic has noted, *dawa* “refers to calling or inviting people to embrace Islam. Though not an article of the Islamic faith, Muslims are urged to be actively engaged in *dawa* activities”.¹⁴ Most frequently, salafi jihadists’ *dawa* efforts are focused not on leading non-Muslims to Islam, but on persuading other Muslims to accept their particularised version of the faith. This focus on other Muslims can be seen, for example, in the statement of Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, an influential jihadist sheikh believed to be of Mauritanian origin, who warned of the need to “concentrate on the aspect of preaching” in Tunisia due to the ignorance about religion that Ben Ali’s regime had inflicted upon the population.¹⁵

And *jihad* is quite obviously a critical concept for salafi jihadist groups, as even the name of the movement suggests.¹⁶ The Arabic word *jihad* literally means “struggle”, and it is an Islamic religious concept with multiple connotations, but to jihadist groups warfare is the most important meaning. Groups like AST have a conception of *jihad* that is closely aligned with that of al Qaeda. This conception includes “defensive *jihad*” designed to push the US and other Western countries out of the Islamic world,¹⁷ but ultimately salafi jihadist groups want to re-establish the caliphate by force, and their conception of warfare has an existential dimension to it.¹⁸

3. How AST Functions: Leadership and Outlook, Structure, Size, and International Connections

Many critical aspects of AST, including its structure and operating principles, are seemingly informed by the discussions of salafi jihadist strategists (some of whom have close relations to AST) within the first year of the Arab Uprisings. During this period, strategists were able to reach a rough consensus about what the developments meant for their movement.¹⁹ They agreed that the changes gripping the region were good for their cause. In addition to producing the kind of widespread instability that is necessary for a utopian movement to attain its grandiose goals, strategists foresaw unprecedented opportunities to undertake *dawa* – opportunities that, of course, did in fact emerge.²⁰ No less a figure than al Qaeda emir Ayman al-Zawahiri noted the “opportunity for advocacy and statement” in both Tunisia and Egypt.²¹

Though new opportunities to undertake *dawa* factored heavily in early salafi jihadist strategic thinking about the Arab Uprisings, this movement has never been satisfied with constraining itself to nonviolent activism. Jihadist writer Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam, while urging a focus on *dawa*, also articulated the ultimate

¹⁴ Munawar Haque, review of Sohirin M. Solihin, *Islamic Dawa: Theory and Practice* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2008), published in *Intellectual Discourse* 17, no. 1 (2009), p. 119.

¹⁵ Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti, “Answers to Questions from Our Tunisian Brothers”, *Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad* (15 Dec. 2011), trans. Open Source Center.

¹⁶ For a scholarly treatment of *jihad*, see David Cook, *Understanding Jihad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Michael Scheuer, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing the War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2004), p. xviii.

¹⁸ For discussion of the goal of re-establishing the caliphate, see Asim Umayra, “The Destruction of the Khilafah: The Mother of All Crimes”, talk given at Najah University, Nablus, West Bank (15 Apr. 2000), quoted in Mary Habeck, *Knowing the Enemy: Jihadist Ideology and the War on Terror* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 8; Ayman al-Zawahiri, letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (July 2005), full text reprinted in “English Translation of Ayman al-Zawahiri’s Letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi”, *Weekly Standard* (12 Oct. 2005). For discussion of the existential dimensions of the salafi jihadist conception of warfare, see Lawrence Wright, “The Master Plan”, *New Yorker* (11 Sept. 2006), http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/09/11/060911fa_fact3; Fouad Hussein, “Al-Zarqawi: The Second Generation of al-Qaeda”, part 15, serialized in *Al-Quds Al-Arabi London* (30 May 2005), trans. Open Source Center.

¹⁹ For an in-depth discussion of early salafi jihadist perceptions of the Arab Uprisings, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Tara Vassefi, “Perceptions of the ‘Arab Spring’ Within the Salafi-Jihadi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35 (2012), pp. 831-48.

²⁰ See Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam, “Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia”, *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah* (11 Feb. 2011), trans. Open Source Center; Atiyatallah Abd al-Rahman, “The People’s Revolt... The Fall of Corrupt Arab Regimes... The Demolition of the Idol of Stability... and the New Beginning”, distributed by the Global Islamic Media Front (16 Feb. 2011).

²¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “And be Neither Weakened nor Saddened”, *Al-Sahab Media* (15 Aug. 2011), trans. Open Source Center.

need for the movement to engage in violence. Without violence, he reasoned, salafi jihadism would find itself as just one of a number of different “intellectual trends”.²² In other words, even while the movement gathered strength through preaching, it should see violence as its eventual trump over other competing visions.

AST has largely adhered to these strategists’ basic framework for gaining from the Arab Uprisings, though its activities also highlight questions that the strategy raises, and the tensions within it. At what point is it appropriate for salafi jihadists to transition from *dawa* to the violence that strategists eventually foresee it embracing? Should salafi jihadists carry out low-level acts of violence aimed at forcing their norms on Tunisian Muslims in the interim, or does this risk alienating the public? How should salafi jihadists respond if authorities crack down on part of their movement or activities: should they escalate, or should they attempt to maintain calm in order to preserve their opportunities to undertake *dawa* publicly? Such questions have gained particular relevance in the wake of the escalating clashes between the Tunisian government and salafi jihadists in May 2013.

3.1 Leadership and outlook

AST’s head is 45-year-old Abu Iyad al-Tunisi, who was born Saifallah Ben Hassine. Abu Iyad has longstanding ties to international jihadism, which he established during his exile from Tunisia. He spent time in the United Kingdom (UK), where he associated with the jihadist figure Abu Qatada al-Filastini (who will be discussed in more detail later). Some jihadist forums have described Abu Iyad as Abu Qatada’s “disciple”, and one AST member said that Abu Qatada is “probably the most influential” of the theorists who have the group’s ear.²³ Abu Iyad also spent time in Afghanistan, and in 2000 was one of the founders of the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), which facilitated the assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmad Shah Massoud in Afghanistan just before al Qaeda executed the 9/11 attacks.²⁴ Abu Iyad was arrested in Turkey in 2003, after which Turkish authorities extradited him to Tunisia. There, Ben Ali’s regime sentenced him to 43 years of imprisonment. Abu Iyad was released, however, following the revolution.

Beside Abu Iyad, few of the group’s other core leaders have been named publicly. Those who are known include 35-year-old Hassan Ben Brik, who heads AST’s *dawa* committee; Ahmed al-Akrami, the coordinator for AST’s medical and humanitarian convoys; and 31-year-old Sayf al-Din Ben Rayes, who has produced sermons and statements on AST’s behalf. Additionally, several individuals with longstanding militant ties – including Tarek Maaroufi, Sami bin Khamis Essid, and Mehdi Kammoun – likely have non-public roles in AST that are related to its violent activities.²⁵

According to Ben Brik, the founding members of AST have been active in Tunisia since 2003.²⁶ Ben Brik referenced their “experiences abroad” prior to their return to Tunisia – a clear reference to their activities as part of the transnational jihadist movement. This founding group was imprisoned after returning to Tunisia, and, said Ben Brik, “we got to know each other in prison, and we began our work from there”.²⁷

Ben Brik described the group’s political project as bringing *sharia* to Tunisia, and ultimately to “the Arab world” beyond it. But although Ben Brik described *jihad* as “certainly part of our political project”, he noted that AST has “no interest currently in embarking on violent initiatives, or acts of terrorism”. This statement is consistent with that of others within AST who have spoken to academics and journalists. As one young leader told Italian researcher Fabio Merone, AST has not “eliminated the idea of *jihad* from our philosophy”, but it is not

²² Al-Bassam, “Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings” (2011).

²³ Fabio Merone, “Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia”, *Jadaliyya* (11 Apr. 2013).

²⁴ For a description of the assassination, see Gary C. Schroen, *First In: An Insider’s Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), pp. 1-7.

²⁵ Aaron Zelin, “Who’s Who in Tunisia’s Salafi-Jihadi Community: A Look at Key Leaders of Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia”, *Militant Leadership Monitor* 6, no. 4 (Apr. 2013), p. 10.

²⁶ The information from Ben Brik can be found in Sergio Galasso, “Intervista ad Hassan Ben Brik: ‘Non crediamo nella democrazia, ma senza appoggio del popolo niente jihad’”, *Limes* (11 Oct. 2012).

²⁷ *Ibid.*

currently engaged in revolutionary violence due to the unprecedented freedom the group enjoys to undertake *dawa*.²⁸

The clear implication that can be drawn from both individuals' statements is that the time for *jihad* will come eventually, but has not yet arrived. The group's commitment to *jihad* can be also discerned from a wide array of additional evidence. For one, AST has frequently expressed affinity for al Qaeda and its affiliates. After Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) released a statement on 17 March 2013, calling for salafi jihadists in Tunisia to pursue the fight against secularism at home rather than going to Mali or elsewhere to fight, high-level AST activist Mohamed Anis Chaieb praised its "calls to preserve the gains of the Tunisian revolution".²⁹ Although the meaning of Chaieb's statement with respect to the relationship between AST and AQIM was blown out of proportion by at least one news outlet,³⁰ it is part of a broader trend of AST praising and expressing allegiance to jihadist figures. Merone's interview further reinforces this, as the young man to whom he spoke named thinkers strongly associated with al Qaeda and its affiliates – including Abu Qatada, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi, Abu Basir Tartusi, Hani al-Siba'i, and Anwar al-Awlaki – as the group's key influencers.³¹

AST has also praised jihadist figures and militancy through its ubiquitous social media activities. This has included the promotion of *jihad* abroad, especially in Syria and northern Mali. A recent example is AST's cheerleading in April 2013 for the announcement by Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi that AQI and the jihadist Al-Nusra Front would begin operating under a single umbrella in Syria.³² AST also distributes its multimedia propaganda on jihadist web forums that are regularly used by al Qaeda and other jihadist groups.

3.2 Organisational structure

Though AST operates legally, many of its activities either verge on or are outright illegal (specifically, its *hisba* and *jihad* activities), and AST believes that eventually a stage of confrontation with the state will arrive. Hence, maintaining the clandestine nature of the organisation is important to its survival.³³ Ben Brik said this directly to an Italian interviewer, stating that he would not speak of the group's structure because "all the members of Ansar al-Sharia are being targeted by the government, and by the international community".³⁴ However, researchers have been able to tease out some aspects of the organisation – although certain details they were given are of questionable merit (as will be explained).

The fact that Abu Iyad is the head of AST is well established; he and other senior leaders can be placed at the top of the organisation. It is clear from AST's social media postings and interviews that researchers have conducted with the group's members that several other divisions – at least four – fall below this senior leadership:

- The *dawa* office, which Ben Brik heads;³⁵
- AST's humanitarian activities, including its medical convoys;
- AST's media activities, including the Al-Bayariq Media Productions Foundation, AST's website and other online outlets for its propaganda; and
- A division that coordinates with local AST groups. Fabio Merone's interview subject told him that this coordination is divided geographically, into northern, central, and southern regions.³⁶

²⁸ Merone, "An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia" (2013).

²⁹ "Qiyadi bil-tayar al-salafi al-jihadi: musta-idoon lil-jihad did al-ilmaniyeen bi-tunis", *Al-Mogaz* (19 Mar. 2013).

³⁰ For more on Chaieb's statement, and how it was misreported in some outlets, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and Aaron Y. Zelin, "Did Tunisia's Salafi Jihadists Just Announce Their Allegiance to al-Qaeda?", *Al-Wasat* (23 Mar. 2013).

³¹ Merone, "An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia" (2013).

³² See Thomas Joscelyn, "Cheerleading Al-Qaeda's New 'Islamic State'", *Long War Journal* (9 Apr. 2013).

³³ See Derek Jones, *Understanding the Form, Function, and Logic of Clandestine Insurgent and Terrorist Networks* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2012).

³⁴ Galasso, "Intervista ad Hassan Ben Brik" (2012).

³⁵ Torelli, Merone, and Cavatorta, "Salafism in Tunisia" (2012), p. 149.

One further organisational division is likely to exist clandestinely. AST is clear about its commitment to *jihad*, and eventually believes it will enter a stage of outright confrontation with the state. Individuals such as Tarek Maaroufi, Sami bin Khamis Essid, and Mehdi Kammoun – men with impeccable militant credentials – are among AST's ranks. In addition to founding the TCG with Abu Iyad while in Afghanistan, Maaroufi was implicated in a number of terrorist plots during his time in Europe thereafter, including "the U.S. Embassy in Paris plot broken up in September 2001, the Kleine Brogel NATO Air Base plot in the fall of 2001 and the Philips Tower plot in 2002", as well as being associated with disrupted cells in both Frankfurt and Milan.³⁷ Both Essid and Kammoun served as an important part of al Qaeda's network in Italy, and Italian authorities arrested them for their involvement in a plot targeting the US embassy in Rome. It is highly likely that AST has a clandestine military wing in addition to its more overt divisions.

Two uncertainties should be noted. First, there are questions about how hierarchical the group is: that is, it is not clear to what extent Abu Iyad's orders or directives will be followed throughout the organisation, or to what extent local AST branches act of their own initiative. Some evidence suggests that the organisation is very decentralised. Merone's AST interlocutor told him, "You should not think ... that it is a top-down organisation that emerged. On the contrary, it is a lightweight and decentralised movement, with an extended autonomy for the local groups, which are the real core of the movement".³⁸

Local AST groups do in fact enjoy a great deal of autonomy, but this should not be confused with the group's senior leadership being irrelevant or lacking any means of control. It is worth noting that sources loyal to AST have an *incentive* to portray it as decentralised. As mentioned earlier, by emphasising this decentralisation, AST can engage in violence without triggering a state crackdown. Thus, the portrayal by sources within AST of a "very decentralised" organisation should be read with at least some scepticism. Moreover, sources portraying a decentralised organisation have not been specific about what decentralisation means. Even if they are entirely honest in their assessment, they could simply mean that local branches are able to take a great deal of initiative on their own – which would not preclude directives or orders being passed down from the group's senior leadership. Such a structure would be consonant with how al Qaeda functioned prior to Osama bin Laden's death, when "levels of command authority" were not always clear, "personal ties between militants" were particularly important, and al Qaeda's core leadership focused on "exercising strategic command and control to ensure the centralization of the organisation's actions and message, rather than directly managing its branch and franchises".³⁹ Though al Qaeda was not a perfectly centralised, hierarchical organisation during this period, its senior leadership still fundamentally directed strategy and guided the group – and the same could well be true of AST even if one gives full weight to the descriptions of its decentralisation. And one final point in this regard is that if it is correct that AST possesses an underground militant wing, it would not be visible to all members. The group might provide greater local autonomy for *dawa* and humanitarian efforts, but be more hierarchical in its militant activities.

To the extent that Abu Iyad and other AST leaders are able to issue directives throughout the organisation, "middle managers" are likely the critical conduit. One recent academic contribution concerning al Qaeda argues that within that organisation, middle managers "provide the connective tissue that links the top of the organisation with its bottom and, thus, makes it possible for al Qaeda to function as a coherent and operationally effective entity".⁴⁰ Middle managers who link AST's core to its grassroots would similarly be critical to AST's ability to maintain coherence.

³⁶ Merone, "An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia" (2013).

³⁷ Zelin, "Who's Who in Tunisia's Salafi-Jihadi Community" (2013), p. 10.

³⁸ Merone, "An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia" (2013).

³⁹ Leah Farrall, "How al Qaeda Works", *Foreign Affairs* (Mar./Apr. 2011), <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67467/leah-farrall/how-al-qaeda-works>.

⁴⁰ Peter Neumann, Ryan Evans, and Raffaello Pantucci, "Locating al-Qaeda's Center of Gravity: The Role of Middle Managers", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34 (2011), p. 826.

The second uncertainty is what it means to be a “member” of AST. Some young salafi jihadists in Tunisia will say only that they “like” or “support” AST, while others refer to themselves as members. It is not clear what distinguishes AST’s supporters from its members, particularly since there is no evidence that members take an oath when they join. Merone’s interlocutor suggested that membership is easy to attain, stating that “we think that everybody that shares the same objectives can identify himself under ‘Ansar al-Sharia’”.⁴¹ Despite this, attaining membership may not be as easy as just proclaiming oneself a member. Perhaps the dividing line between members and non-members comes down to *personal relationships* – in other words, one may effectively become a member after winning the trust of others with sufficient influence within the group. This hypothesis, though, is by no means clearly correct: the question of what it means to be a member of AST should be understood as an unknown about this secretive organisation, and a fine topic for future exploration by researchers.

3.3 AST’s size

There is no reliable estimate of AST’s size, and such an estimate would be difficult for several reasons. First, it can be difficult to visually distinguish salafi jihadists from other Tunisian salafis. Even in mosques with a significant salafi jihadist presence, it may not be possible to determine how prevalent salafi jihadists are among the congregants. Second, not all of Tunisia’s salafi jihadists are affiliated with AST; and even among those who have some affiliation, it is not simple to distinguish members from mere supporters.

Nonetheless, there are ways to fashion a very rough estimate AST’s numbers. One of the most visible spectacles that draws AST’s members, supporters, and fellow travellers is the annual event the group hosts in Kairouan (the same conference that the government cancelled in May 2013). The second annual Kairouan conference began on 20 May 2012. Estimated numbers of attendees ranged from 3,000 to 10,000 (AST’s own numbers). By the time the Tunisian state announced the cancellation of the 2013 conference, most media outlets placed the number of attendees at 4,000 for the 2012 event.

The Kairouan conference does not answer the question of how many members AST has, but it provides some evidence. In particular, the conference suggests that the most commonly cited figures regarding the strength of salafism and salafi jihadism in Tunisia are too low. These common figures hold that there are around 10,000 salafists in the country, with around 3,000 who are salafi jihadist.

In addition to the number of conference attendees, two further data points are worth considering when trying to estimate AST’s numerical strength. The first is the number of Tunisians who have gone to Syria as foreign fighters. Aaron Y. Zelin, a researcher at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy who has undertaken the most scientific open-source research on foreign fighters in Syria, estimates that there have been between 230 and 400 Tunisian foreign fighters.⁴² Zelin’s methodology is conservative: it is based on information that can be found online, such as martyrdom announcements, videos of foreign fighters, and similar evidence. When European governments, based on their own intelligence, have publicly provided estimates of the number of foreign fighters who travelled to Syria, his numbers have risen. For its own part, the Tunisian government has estimated that 800 Tunisians have gone to Syria as foreign fighters.⁴³ A second data point is the statement of Tunisian religious affairs minister Nourredine el-Khadmi that salafists now control around 400 of the country’s mosques, through such mechanisms as showing up, demonising the previous imams, and forcing them out.⁴⁴

These three data points suggest that the most prevalent numerical estimates of salafists and salafi jihadists in Tunisia are too low. The 2012 Kairouan conference drew about 3,000 people by the lowest estimates

⁴¹ Merone, “An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia” (2013).

⁴² Conversation with Aaron Y. Zelin, May 13, 2013. For an example of Zelin’s methodology in quantifying Syrian foreign fighters, see Aaron Y. Zelin, “European Foreign Fighters in Syria”, *ICSR Insight* (2 Apr. 2013), <http://icsr.info/2013/04/icsr-insight-european-foreign-fighters-in-syria-2/>.

⁴³ “Tunisia Says 800 Tunisian Islamists Fighting in Syria”, *AFP* (12 May 2013).

⁴⁴ AFP, “Extremists Control Hundreds of Tunisia’s Mosques: Religious Affairs Minister”, *Al Arabiya News* (31 Mar. 2012), <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/03/31/204431.html>.

(and the photographs that AST posted to its social media accounts make the numbers appear larger than 3,000). If there were only 3,000 salafi jihadists in Tunisia, essentially *every single one* would have had to show up at Kairouan. The foreign fighter figures are also suggestive, since if there were only 3,000 Tunisian salafi jihadists, then somewhere between 8 percent and 27 percent of the country's total has already travelled to Syria to fight. And if there are 400 mosques under salafist control, simple arithmetic suggests there are over 10,000 salafists in Tunisia.

3.4 AST's international connections

Another notable aspect of AST is its voluminous connections to transnational jihadism. Given Abu Iyad's personal history, which included time in Britain's jihadist scene, it is natural to begin an examination of these ties with the UK. Abu Iyad's connection to Abu Qatada al-Filastini was already mentioned above. During the 1990s, Abu Qatada served as a religious mentor to a wide array of jihadist groups, including Algeria's Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). He was regarded as an inspirational figure in several jihadist terrorist plots in Europe. As Petter Nesser notes in an academic study on jihadist ideologies in Europe, several members of the cell that carried out the 2004 Madrid train attacks were in touch with Abu Qatada, and cell member Mouhannad al-Mallah "said that Abu Qatada had the same position in Europe as al Qaeda had in the world: that he was the person in Europe calling for attacks, recruiting members, and giving them missions to fulfill".⁴⁵ There is also evidence that Abu Qatada influenced a cell that attempted car bomb attacks in Britain in 2007.⁴⁶

The BBC's monitoring service has also noted Abu Iyad's connection to prominent Egypt-born salafi jihadist scholar Hani al-Siba'i, who heads what he calls the "Al-Maqrizi Center for Historical Studies" from his perch in London.⁴⁷ Al-Siba'i's involvement in international jihadism runs long and deep. In February 1999, London's *Al-Hayah* reported that he served as the head of the media committee for Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), which was then run by Ayman al-Zawahiri.⁴⁸ Al-Siba'i has maintained his loyalty to Abu Iyad over the years, delivering a March 2012 video address sponsored by AST to a Tunisian salafi audience: his sermon attacked Muslim scholars whom he said misled the *umma* (body of believers) into serving as tools of Western powers. When AST held its Kairouan conference in May 2012, al-Siba'i was one of several foreign scholars to address the audience by video. He attacked the ruling government as "unbelievers and servants of France".

Several other prominent jihadist scholars who addressed the 2012 Kairouan conference were, like al-Siba'i, born in Egypt. Ahmad Ashush issued a written statement expressing his "endorsement and support" of AST, hoping that the group would bring rule based on *sharia* to Tunisia. The Egyptian cleric Marjan Salim issued a video address warning against discord amongst Muslims, and pointing to the disaster that befell the "Islamic state" that the Taliban had erected in Afghanistan. Salim's connections to the inner circles of transnational jihadism are even more impressive than al-Siba'i's. While al-Siba'i headed EIJ's media committee, Salim was in charge of its *sharia* committee, which *Al-Hayah* noted "involves preparing the group's views on and reactions to matters pertaining to the *sharia*, differences, and jurisprudence and responding to the criticism leveled against it".⁴⁹ More recently, Salim has been fingered as "directing aspiring jihadis" to training camps in Libya run by Muhammad Jamal Abu Ahmad, whose network has been implicated in the notorious September 2012 attack on the US embassy in Benghazi.⁵⁰

Major jihadist figures from several other countries also expressed their support for AST at the Kairouan conference. Moroccan clerics Umar al-Haddushi and Hasan al-Kattani travelled to Tunisia to attend, only to find

⁴⁵ Petter Nesser, "Ideologies of Jihad in Europe", *Terrorism and Political Violence* 23, no. 2 (2011), p. 179.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁴⁷ "Tunisian Salafi Ansar al-Sharia Gaining Hard-Line Jihadist Support", *BBC Monitoring in English* (24 May 2012).

⁴⁸ Muhammad Salah, "Jihad's Organizational Structure", *Al-Hayah* (13 Feb. 1999), p. 6, trans. Open Source Center.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Siobhan Gorman, and Matt Bradley, "Militant Link to Libya Attack", *Wall Street Journal* (1 Oct. 2012), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444549204578020373444418316.html>.

themselves turned away when they tried to enter the country: the government had placed them on a blacklist due to their involvement in terrorist attacks in Morocco. Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi, who has been heavily involved in spurring jihadists to flock to Syria's civil war, also contributed a video address. In it, he quoted bin Laden and urged a future revolution to spur a salafi takeover in place of the democratic system that is "the fetish of the modern era".

AST has also won the praise and endorsement of highly influential online jihadist clerics. Abu Sa'ad al-Amili has referred to both Tunisia and AST in several of his articles and messages. One 2012 article presented a roadmap for spreading salafi jihadist ideology in Tunisia. Though his article did not specifically name AST, that group is the most prominent one engaged in such work. Near the end of 2012, al-Amili issued a statement through AST's media arm, the Al-Bayariq Media Productions Foundation, that attacked Tunisia's ruling Islamist political party, Ennahda, for its embrace of democracy. Al-Amili told AST members to be prepared to fight with "sword and pen", a statement that represented somewhat of a reversal from his previous encouragement that Tunisian salafi jihadists should refrain from violence. In January 2013, al-Amili wrote an editorial in the Global Islamic Media Front's magazine *Sada al-Jihad* (Echo of Jihad) praising the challenge AST posed to Tunisia's "false" government. And when the Tunisian government cancelled AST's Kairouan conference in May 2013, al-Amili issued a statement in response entitled "Support of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia".

Abu al-Mundhir al-Shinqiti has been another of AST's boosters. An article he wrote appeared on the website Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad on 29 May 2012, entitled "We Are Ansar al-Sharia". It encouraged jihadists in Egypt, Jordan, and Libya to operate under the Ansar al-Sharia brand, and to vigorously undertake *dawa* in those countries. Less than two weeks later, in June 2012, al-Shinqiti issued a *fatwa* describing AST as "an exemplary model", and stating that joining the group "should be almost compulsory".

But most significant among major salafi jihadist figures who have weighed in on Tunisia is Ayman al-Zawahiri, who issued a message in June 2012 blasting Ennahda, and accusing it of creating a new practice of Islam designed to please the US and serve American interests. BBC's monitoring service noted that this message "could be interpreted as an appeal to the Tunisian people to support the Ansar al-Sharia alliance".⁵¹

AST's most operationally significant connection to another major jihadist group (albeit one where aspects of the connection remain characteristically obscured) is its ties to AQIM. AQIM has been extremely clear about its affinity for AST, and the fact that they share a common goal. In an April 2013 media release that answered a number of questions directed to the group over Twitter, the director of AQIM's Al-Andalus Media Foundation stated that AST were AQIM's "brothers, we are from them and they are from us".⁵² He further stated that "we appreciate the project of our brothers Ansar al-Sharia and bless it, and call the youth of Tunisia to support and cooperate with them".⁵³

Several of AQIM's other statements also related to AST. In October 2012, following the AST-led assault on the US embassy in Tunis and subsequent government arrests of hard-line salafists, AQIM released a statement. Though the statement adopted a conciliatory tone, stressing the need for all Tunisian Islamists to cooperate against a common, external enemy, the BBC's monitoring service noted that "it might be interpreted as a tacit warning to the Tunisian authorities".⁵⁴ In March 2013, AQIM released the aforementioned statement urging Tunisians to concentrate on fighting secularism at home rather than going to the battlefields of Mali. Following the May 2013 cancellation of the Kairouan conference, AQIM sharia committee member Abu Yahya al-Shinqiti released a statement urging Tunisians to support AST. Mauritanian AQIM member Abou Yahia Chenguitti also

⁵¹ "Al-Qaeda Leader Urges Tunisians to Support Islamic Rule", *BBC Monitoring in English* (12 June 2012).

⁵² Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, "Journalistic Encounter with the Director of Al-Andalus Media Foundation", posted at *Jihadology* (18 Apr. 2013), p. 17.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ "Al-Qaeda Maghreb Addresses Conciliatory Message to Tunisia Islamists", *BBC Monitoring in English* (24 Oct. 2012).

sent a message to AST urging it to be wary of the Tunisian government's "provocations", and to demonstrate "patience and wisdom" rather than being dragged into "random actions".⁵⁵

AQIM's connections to AST clearly run deeper than simple public expressions of support. While there have been allegations of operational ties between AQIM and AST leaders that are difficult to verify, the connection of individual AST members to AQIM is far clearer. With respect to leadership, a September 2012 report in Algeria's *El-Khabar* claimed that AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel had sent a representative to a meeting in northern Mali designed to establish a *shura* council between a variety of regional jihadist groups, including AQIM, AST, and the Ansar al-Sharia groups in Benghazi and Derna.⁵⁶ Many regional analysts are sceptical of the Algerian press due to concerns over its closeness with the country's security services, which can result in false information being disseminated for ulterior purposes. However, the other side of this relationship is that Algeria's media sometimes gets amazing scoops. Information about this intended *shura* council thus appears possible but unproven, as it is yet to be reported outside of the Algerian press.

Another report in the Algerian media, however, appears to be more reliable. When a reporter for *Echourouk El-Youmi* visited northern Mali while it was under hard-line Islamist control, he interacted with a number of foreigners whom he reported "talked about themselves" and their experiences with several regional jihadist groups, including AST.⁵⁷ There are two major reasons this report appears likely despite analysts' scepticism of the Algerian press. First, the reporter spoke with these jihadists directly while he was on the ground, rather than learning about them through intelligence sources. Second, Tunisian salafi jihadists are known to have considerable connections to other regional militant networks. The Tunisian Combatant Group has been associated with AQIM; Tunisians previously held at the *Guantanamo* Bay detention facility attended AST's second Kairouan conference (including being featured as speakers); and Tunisians have been well represented both amongst suicide bombers in the Iraq war and foreign fighters in the Syrian conflict. These connections underscore the likelihood that Tunisians affiliated with AST would end up in northern Mali.

4. AST's Strategy: *Dawa*, *Hisba*, and *Jihad*

4.1 *Dawa*

AST's strategy is, at present, primarily focused on *dawa*. In this capacity, the group emphasises *visibility*. AST makes its presence felt in some rather traditional ways: holding *dawa* events at markets or universities, holding public protests, and dominating physical spaces, such as cafés, near places of worship. But AST also has some innovative approaches to *dawa*, including provision of social services (something that other militant Islamic groups like Hizballah and Hamas have also done) and its use of social media.

AST's social services activity includes the distribution of food, clothing, and basic supplies, as well as sponsorship of convoys that provide both medical care and medicine. These efforts concentrate on areas of Tunisia that are typically neglected by the government, such as rural and impoverished areas, and AST has also provided emergency humanitarian assistance in the wake of such natural disasters as flooding. Typically, AST's provision of social services is accompanied by distribution of literature designed to propagate its ideology.

While AST is apparently constantly engaged in the distribution of social services, these efforts do not reach the same areas consistently. So even though AST regularly undertakes humanitarian work, it is not clear that any communities see AST as a services provider week after week. This is where AST's savvy use of social media is particularly relevant. Almost immediately after it has undertaken humanitarian efforts, AST posts

⁵⁵ "Mauritanian al Qaeda Leader Sends Message to Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia", *Nouakchott Sahara Media* (21 May 2013), trans. Open Source Center.

⁵⁶ "Al-Qaeda Regional Branch Leader Escapes 'Trap' Set by Algerian Security", *El-Khabar Algiers* (19 Sept. 2012), trans. Open Source Center.

⁵⁷ "Salafist Group in Timbuktu Wants Return of Islamic Caliphate", *Echourouk el-Youmi Algeria* (26 Apr. 2012), trans. Open Source Center.

information about its latest venture – including photographs – to its Facebook page and other websites. Social media serves as a force multiplier: although AST does not provide consistent services to a single area, its social media activity illustrates a rapid pace of humanitarian assistance, and thus helps the group achieve its goal of visibility.

Three things are worth noting about AST's *dawa* strategy. First is the context in which this *dawa* work is undertaken. The Tunisian economy is faltering, and has worsened since the revolution. The country's youth have been particularly hard hit. As Monica Marks writes, "[a]cross the ideological spectrum, from leftist communists to jihadi Salafis, young people speak of being neglected and deceived by their political leaders. Significant numbers of Tunisia youth hold college degrees but cannot find employment".⁵⁸ Because of this, she concludes that "the desperation and discontent that drove many young people to protest in the early weeks of the revolution are still present today".⁵⁹ Academic studies devoted to youth unemployment in Tunisia have reinforced these conclusions about the prevalence and importance of the phenomenon.⁶⁰ The pervasiveness of this desperation amongst the country's youth is reflected in the striking fact that, since street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation first sparked the protests that toppled Ben Ali, there have been an additional 178 self-immolations in the country.⁶¹

As Marks alludes to, it is not just dire economic conditions that have produced widespread frustration, but also the feeling that the system is unfair and failing. Tunisia has suffered from maldistribution of resources for some time: under Ben Ali, the coastal cities experienced relatively strong economic growth, while cities in the country's interior and south benefited little from this prosperity.⁶² Thus, even before the revolution, "marginalised areas" within Tunisia were the most "significant sources of recruits to the Islamist movement".⁶³ This structural problem of wealth maldistribution continues today, and AST has been able to win both sympathy and also recruits to its cause in some of these marginalised areas. Essentially, AST has positioned itself as a critic of the status quo writ large, and – fairly or not – portrays itself as a champion of those whom the system neglects. This has helped AST to develop into a movement that is clearly growing in size. If the political process seems unable to address the considerable challenges that the country faces, radical alternatives will appear more attractive to many Tunisians.

A second aspect worth noting is that AST's provision of social services has helped it to carve out something of a parallel state within Tunisia, and we can see other movements in this direction. For example, in the wake of politician Chokri Belaid's February 2013 assassination, AST mobilised what it called Public Protection Committees (PPCs) in various parts of Tunisia, allegedly to provide security on the ground by patrolling neighbourhoods, preventing looting, and making arrests.⁶⁴ Though reports of the PPCs' effectiveness have been mixed, AST utilised its sophisticated social media strategy to immediately post images of the PPC patrols. Regardless of on-the-ground reality, AST's propaganda was able to further the perception that it is in the process of creating a parallel state.

A third noteworthy aspect of AST's *dawa* is the likelihood that it receives foreign sponsorship for at least some of its activities.⁶⁵ Although AST has collected donations at mosques during Friday prayers, the economic climate in Tunisia is dim enough that these donations likely do not cover all of the group's humanitarian expenses,

⁵⁸ M. Marks, "Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism" (2013), p. 110.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Mongi Boughzala, *Youth Employment and Economic Transition in Tunisia* (Washington, DC: Brookings, Jan. 2013).

⁶¹ "178 Self-Immolations in Tunisia Reflect Despair of Jobless Mideast Youth, Including Vendor", *Associated Press* (11 May 2013).

⁶² Ahmed Jdey, "A History of Tunisia, January 14, 2011: The End of a Dictator and the Beginning of Democratic Construction", *boundary 2* 39, no. 1 (2012), pp. 83-84.

⁶³ Alison Pargeter, "Localism and Radicalization in North Africa: Local Factors and the Development of Political Islam in Morocco, Tunisia, and Libya", *International Affairs* 85, no. 5 (2009), p. 1036.

⁶⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Night's Watch: Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's 'Neighborhood Committees'", *Al-Wasat* (11 Feb. 2013), <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/02/11/the-nights-watch-ansar-al-shariah-in-tunisias-neighborhood-committees/>.

⁶⁵ This discussion of AST's probable foreign sponsorship is adapted from Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, and Aaron Y. Zelin, "Uncharitable Organizations", *Foreign Policy* (26 Feb. 2013), where the phenomenon of foreign sponsorship of jihadist groups—in Tunisia and beyond—is discussed in detail.

particularly those related to its distribution of medicine. The pictures, videos, and information that AST posts on its Facebook page suggest another source of funding: in at least one case, it received medical supplies from the Kuwaiti charity RIHS (the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society), which in Tunisia is known as the Society for Preservation of Islamic Heritage. The US Treasury Department designated RIHS in 2008 “for providing financial and material support to al Qaeda and al Qaeda affiliates, including Lashkar e-Tayyiba, Jemaah Islamiyah, and Al-Itihaad al-Islamiya”.⁶⁶ The Treasury designation also charged that RIHS provided financial support specifically for terrorist acts.

Nor does RIHS constitute AST’s only established connection to sympathetic foreign organisations. The literature it passes out at *dawa* events can be traced to at least three publishing houses in Saudi Arabia: Dar al-Qassem, based in Riyadh; Dar al-Tarafan, based in Taif; and the Cooperative Office for the Call and Guidance and Education Communities, based in Dammam. It is likely that AST, which has a significant amount of these publishers’ literature, either has a direct relationship with the publishers or else a designated intermediary. Often, Saudi religious publishers receive contributions from wealthy donors asking them to print as many copies of the desired literature as possible, and then deliver them to a specified country. In turn, the publishers frequently rely on intermediaries to distribute that literature. The two most plausible explanations for how AST ended up with a large quantity of Saudi religious literature are that it is serving as the intermediary in charge of distribution, or else it received a large quantity of literature from the publishers’ in-country intermediary. But the fact that a significant amount of AST’s literature originates from Saudi Arabia, a long-time supporter of salafist organisations, is likely a sign that it receives either direct or indirect assistance from the kingdom.

4.2 Hisba

This section details the phenomenon of salafist vigilantism in Tunisia, which can be classified as *hisba* violence.⁶⁷ Some of these incidents were almost certainly connected to AST, and may have been planned in advance by leaders within the group; while other acts of *hisba* violence were doubtless spontaneous, carried out by salafists but likely unconnected to AST altogether. But given the opacity of AST’s organisational structure, and hence the questions about what violent acts AST may be thought responsible for, this section examines salafi vigilantism as a complete phenomenon without distinguishing between AST-linked actions and those that are not attributable to the organisation. This will give the reader a sense of the scale of *hisba* violence within Tunisia, and how it plays into AST’s broader ambitions.

One group that has felt particularly targeted is Tunisian women, who believe that societal pressures directed at them are mounting. Though these pressures are not entirely attributable to salafi jihadists by any means – there are many other conservative segments of Tunisian society – salafi jihadists are a part of this picture.

Since its independence, Tunisia has had one of the most progressive legal systems in the Arab world with respect to women’s rights.⁶⁸ Until the 2011 revolution, the Tunisian state viewed “the presence or absence of hijab” as “a key component” distinguishing modernity from tradition.⁶⁹ In addition to imposing some legal restrictions on women’s ability to wear hijab, the state actively framed the covering as a part of the past that civil society was moving beyond. A study by Simon Hawkins examining the symbolism of the hijab under Ben Ali persuasively demonstrates that the state took great pains to associate the hijab with traditions that, while deserving of respect, society would inevitably leave behind as it embraced modernity: young women who did not

⁶⁶ United States Department of the Treasury, Press Center, “Kuwaiti Charity Designated for Bankrolling al Qaeda Network” (13 June 2008).

⁶⁷ This section is adapted from Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Springtime for Salafists”, *Foreign Policy* (26 Mar. 2013).

⁶⁸ Nagwa Megahed, and Stephen Lack, “Colonial Legacy, Women’s Rights and Gender-Educational Inequality in the Arab World with Particular Reference to Egypt and Tunisia”, *International Review of Education* 57 (2011), pp. 397-418.

⁶⁹ Simon Hawkins, “Who Wears *Hijab* with the President: Constructing a Modern Islam in Tunisia”, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 41 (2011), p.38.

wear hijab were portrayed as central to the country's more enlightened and liberated future.⁷⁰ Since the revolution, however, many Tunisian women perceive increasing societal pressures and harassment directed at their manner of dress. Some women have consequently changed the way they dress unwillingly, including donning the hijab as a protective measure.⁷¹

Tunisia's earliest known post-revolution act of vigilante violence targeted female prostitutes. Though *maisons closes* (brothels) have been legal in Tunisia since 1942, in February 2011 a crowd of "several hundred outraged citizens" gathered near a *maison close* in Tunis on a Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, to protest the presence of prostitutes. The protesters came armed with "sticks and torches in hand", but were stopped by both the Tunisian military and "a militia of pimps, porters and day laborers".⁷² Though an unsuccessful attack on prostitutes – whether or not their activities were sanctioned by law – might elicit little sympathy from many observers, these attacks quickly spread, with *maisons closes* being set aflame in Kairouan, Médenine, Sfax, and Sousse. During some of these attacks, the prostitutes were beaten.

Other women have been physically attacked for lesser affronts to public morals than prostitution. In the working class Tunis neighbourhood of Intilaka, a street vendor scolded journalist Zeineb Rezgui for wearing a sleeveless summer dress, referring to her as a prostitute.⁷³ As Rezgui recounted, "I tried to talk to him, but all of a sudden he jumped and slapped me hard on my neck. I fell on the ground, he started kicking me. About five other men, also with long beards, some wearing long tunics, joined him. They were kicking and punching me all over my body. The rest of the people were just watching and nobody dared to approach". Similar attacks have occurred in the north-western city of Jendouba.⁷⁴

Though violence targeting women was the first sign, salafi vigilante violence rapidly spread to other sectors of society. Perhaps the most critical battlefield relates to the debate over free expression. The ability to discuss vital issues robustly is critical to any democratic society. But an array of salafist groups have moved to short-circuit the conversation; they have launched attacks and intimidation campaigns against artists and public intellectuals whose work they think transgresses the moral standards appropriate for an Islamic society.

One of the earliest attacks occurred on April 9, 2011. Nouri Bouzid, a film director with outspoken anti-Islamist views, was stabbed in the head by a bearded student who shouted "*Allahu Akbar!*" (God is great) before delivering the blow. Bouzid fortunately survived the attack, which he attributed to his "pro-secular stands and rejection of [extremist Islamic] culture".⁷⁵ Subsequent attacks on artists abound. In June 2011, an art-house cinema in Tunis planned to show a movie about secularism that many salafists viewed as heretical. In response, "a gang of salafists forcibly entered", and "sprayed tear gas and roughed up the management".⁷⁶ The cinema has been closed ever since.

An even more striking series of incidents occurred in October 2011, when the TV station Nessma showed *Persepolis*, an animated film that many conservative Muslims found blasphemous because it contains a scene depicting God, which is anathema to stricter interpretations of Islam. After the controversy flared up, the head of the station, Nebil Karoui, issued an apology for broadcasting the film. Nonetheless, a number of preachers devoted their Friday sermons to denouncing Nessma, after which a mob of about 300 people attacked its studios in an attempt to set fire to them.⁷⁷ This violence was followed a week later by an assault on Karoui's home by an

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

⁷¹ Jamie Dettmer, "Tunisia's Dark Turn", *Daily Beast* (17 Mar. 2013).

⁷² Alexander Smoltczyk, "Islamist Intimidation: The Battle for the Future of Tunisia", *Der Spiegel* (5 Dec. 2012),

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/salafist-intimidation-campaign-threatens-young-democracy-in-tunisia-a-870680.html>.

⁷³ This incident was reported in Sarah Leah Whitson, "Letter to Tunisian Minister of Interior and Minister of Justice", Human Rights Watch (14 Oct. 2012), <http://www.hrw.org/es/node/110818>.

⁷⁴ Sana Ajmi, "Clashes Between Salafists and Police in Northwestern City of Tunisia", *Tunisia Live* (22Feb. 2012), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/02/22/clashes-between-salafists-and-police-in-northwestern-city-of-tunisia/>.

⁷⁵ Andrew Gilligan, "Tunisia: Birthplace of the Arab Spring Fears Islamist Resurgence", *Telegraph UK* (28 May 2011).

⁷⁶ Smoltczyk, "Islamist Intimidation" (2012).

⁷⁷ "Protesters Attack TV Station Over Film *Persepolis*", *BBC* (9 Oct. 2011), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15233442>.

armed mob of “about a hundred men, some of whom threw Molotov cocktails”.⁷⁸ About twenty were able to get inside. Karoui’s family was home at the time, though he was not, and they barely managed to escape. In a disturbing footnote, the government’s response was to call for “respect for sacred things”, and in May 2012 it was Karoui who ended up being fined by a Tunisian court for “disturbing public order and attacking moral values” for showing the film in the first place.

As salafists try to leave their imprimatur on the art world, they are also seeking to dominate discourse in the civil and religious spheres. As already noted, there have been numerous instances of salafists showing up in mosques and demonising the previous imams, accusing them of being collaborators with the old regime. This has helped to facilitate the salafi takeover of an estimated 400 of Tunisia’s mosques. Another aspect of attempting to control the religious sphere has been targeting Islamic practices regarded as deviant. A sufi shrine in the small town of Akuda, 85 miles south of Tunis, was set ablaze by salafists in January 2013 – making it the 35th such attack in a seven-month period.⁷⁹

Salafi vigilante violence has also extended to non-Islamic faiths. In September 2011, a group of salafists occupied the Christian basilica in the northwestern city of El Kef with the intention of turning it into a mosque.⁸⁰ In March 2013, salafists physically attacked two Italians and two Tunisians in the southeastern coastal town of Zarzis, under the erroneous impression that they were promoting Christianity.⁸¹

Education has been another heavily contested area. At Manouba University, outrage boiled over into violence after university administrators decided to reaffirm the presidential decree, issued in 1981, prohibiting female students from wearing the *niqab* (face covering) in class. Salafists denounced the ban, and also demanded an end to mixed-sex education for good measure.⁸² During the course of several extremely contentious months, salafists briefly took Habib Kazdoghli, the dean of the college of letters, as a hostage. “Salafists are not letting us do our job. Whenever us professors try to apply the university’s law, we get physically attacked”, said English professor Radhia Jaidi. “The Faculté des Lettres is no longer a safe environment for us to teach in”.⁸³ During the ongoing dispute, a salafi ripped down the Tunisian flag and replaced it with a black flag bearing the *shahadah*, Islam’s declaration of faith.

Similar to the Nessma case, Dean Kazdoghli found himself prosecuted after this ordeal due to a confrontation he had with two veiled female students in March 2012. He told *Der Spiegel* that they “loudly demanded that they be allowed to attend lectures”, and one of them angrily swept the papers on Kazdoghli’s desk onto the floor.⁸⁴ He and his staff “forcibly removed the two furious women”, after which they sued him for assault. The trial, which served as a lightning rod in Tunisia’s culture wars, eventually resulted in an acquittal for Kazdoghli.

Other Tunisian universities have seen similar open confrontation between secularists and salafists,⁸⁵ and such incidents have not been confined to the university level. A group of salafists broke into a secondary school in Menzel Bouzelfa in April 2013, and physically and verbally assaulted the principal – who had barred entry to a female student wearing *niqab*. The principal was hospitalised thereafter.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ “Tunisia Salafist Autumn: Extremists Attack Nessma TV Chief’s House”, *Middle East Online* (15 Oct. 2011), <http://middle-east-online.com/english/?id=48548>.

⁷⁹ “Series of Attacks Against Tunisia Shrines Continues: Sufis Accuse Wahhabis”, *Middle East Online* (23 Jan. 2013), <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=56615>.

⁸⁰ “Muslims Bid to Turn Christian Site into Mosque”, *AFP* (16 Sept. 2012).

⁸¹ “Tunisie—De nombreuses agressions à Zarzis dont celle de deux Italiens”, *Businessnews.com.tn*, (21 Mar. 2013).

⁸² “Salafists Besiege Tunisian University: Dean, Professors Taken Hostage”, *Middle East Online* (29 Nov. 2011), <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=49271>.

⁸³ Nura Suleiman, “The Disintegrating Fabric of Tunisian Politics: The Niqab Ban and Tunisian Flag Desecration at Manouba University”, *Jadaliyya* (13 Apr. 2012).

⁸⁴ Smoltczyk, “Islamist Intimidation” (2012).

⁸⁵ “Sousse University Attack: Armed Group Attacks Tunisian College Because of Face Veils”, *Huffington Post* (6 Oct. 2012).

⁸⁶ “Tunisie: Lycée de Menzel Bouzelfa—Un directeur agressé par des salafistes”, *All Africa* (11 Apr. 2013).

Another sphere that salafi vigilantes have attempted to control is that of private vice. There have been numerous attacks on hotel bars and alcohol vendors. In a September 2012 incident, about fifty activists burst into a bar in Sidi Bouzid's Hotel Horchani, where they smashed bottles and chased customers, while yelling "*al-saharab haram*" (drinking is a sin). "A young man who tried to film the raid was beaten by members of the group and taken to an unknown location", AFP reported.⁸⁷

A final category of attack has been directed at civil society activists – those who are most likely to present an alternative course for Tunisian society. A harrowing letter that Human Rights Watch (HRW) sent to the Tunisian interior minister and justice minister last summer documents these assaults.⁸⁸ Rajab Magri, who was part of a group that disrupted the aforementioned salafi occupation of the basilica in El Kef, told HRW that he was targeted by salafists thereafter – first on Facebook and then in person. In May 2012, a number of salafi activists ambushed him on an El Kef street. "They started kicking and punching me all over my body, they grabbed me by the hair and started hitting my head on the pavement", he reported. "I was almost unconscious. They were insulting me, calling me a *kafir* [infidel] and shouting that they will kill me".

Other activists had similar stories. Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, a spokesman for the secular political list Doustourna, recounted how salafis vilified his party's activists on Facebook after they began planning a series of meetings in southern Tunisia. The war of words led to a Doustourna meeting in a southern village being attacked by 40 to 50 bearded men. "They started beating people in the room at random, throwing chairs at people, and kicking them", Ben Mbarek recounted. "When they saw me, they left everybody else and rushed towards me. They surrounded me, and started kicking me. Two of them forced me to kneel, someone grabbed me by the hair and shouted, 'where is the knife?' as if he wanted to slaughter me".

Unfortunately, the police response to acts of salafi violence is often tepid at best. Human Rights Watch has reported on police inaction following multiple attacks. In Magri's case, police took no action after two separate assaults against him, and one officer told him that they could not arrest one of the attackers because "his emir threatened to set the city on fire if they do". Zeineb Rezgui, the female journalist who was attacked in Tunis, reported a similar explanation for police inaction. An officer said that her attackers "threatened him and vowed to burn his house and kill his family if they did anything against him".⁸⁹ A HRW researcher in Tunis who has worked on the issue of salafi vigilante violence told me that in the intervening period Tunisian authorities had not taken action to prosecute the perpetrators of the numerous assaults that HRW has documented.⁹⁰

In one sign of the security forces' belief that they lack the upper hand against salafi vigilantes, Tunisian security forces held a rally in November 2012 denouncing attacks against them. They demanded more equipment, as well as the right to use "all means necessary" when confronted by physical attacks.

Again, it is impossible to say with certainty which of these salafi *hisba* attacks can be attributed to AST. Some of violence was almost certainly *unconnected* to the organisation – such as the assault on Zeineb Rezgui due to her allegedly skimpy attire, which was spontaneous in nature. The *hisba* violence where the hand of AST's leadership was most likely present are those attacks that involved mass mobilisation that would be extremely difficult without an organisation coordinating it. The attacks on the Nessma station appear particularly likely to have had an AST hand (a conclusion shared by local observers),⁹¹ as well as the attack on the Doustourna meeting described by Jaouhar Ben Mbarek. Further, the intimidation of police – and retaliation when salafists have gotten into legal trouble – has strategic benefits for AST, expanding the boundaries of acceptable violence, making security forces understand that there are costs to going after salafi groups, and eroding citizens' confidence in the security services.

⁸⁷ "Islamists Attack Tunisia Hotel Bar", *AFP* (4 Sept. 2012).

⁸⁸ Whitson, "Letter to Tunisian Minister of Interior and Minister of Justice" (2012).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Author's interview with HRW Researcher, Tunis (3 Apr. 2013).

⁹¹ Habib M. Sayah, "Qui a attaqué l'ambassade des Etats-Unis: retour sur Ansar al-Chari'a, Abou lyadh et ses relations avec Ennahdha", *Institut Kheireddine* (14 Sept. 2012).

4.3 Jihad

Abu Iyad has, on multiple occasions, affirmed that Tunisia is a land of *dawa* rather than a land of *jihad* (an affirmation that is fully consistent with Tunisia eventually *becoming* a land of *jihad*). But AST has also made no secret of the fact that it supported *jihad* abroad, at least until Abu Iyad recently provided some restraint on when Tunisian foreign fighters should go to Syria or other battlefields.

As previously discussed, a large number of Tunisians – somewhere between 230 and 800 – have gone to fight in Syria, and a number have fought in Mali, while still others have taken part in violence in Libya and Algeria. However, in February 2013 Abu Iyad “advised Tunisians not to migrate to Syria or other active *jihad* fronts but to stay in the country and carry out peaceful *jihad* there”.⁹² In other words, Abu Iyad suggested that salafi jihadists were needed more on the home front, advancing the movement’s agenda inside Tunisia. His advice in this regard was consistent with the statement AQIM released on 17 March 2013, where it said Tunisians should combat secularism at home rather than fighting in Mali. But there was one caveat: Abu Iyad said that those who possessed “special skills” could in fact advance the *jihad* in Syria or Mali.

Yet despite these words discouraging Tunisians from fighting abroad, AST’s media wing continued to eulogise Tunisians killed while fighting as part of the Al-Nusra Front in Syria.⁹³ It is possible that the disjuncture between Abu Iyad discouraging Tunisians from fighting abroad and AST’s media outlets celebrating their “martyrdom” indicates duplicity on the group’s part. It is also possible that AST genuinely does want to slow the number of Tunisians going to fight overseas for strategic reasons.

Regardless of which of these two interpretations is correct, it is clear that Abu Iyad’s statement discouraging Tunisians from going to Syria and elsewhere is speaking to multiple audiences at once, not just would-be foreign fighters. Another audience is Tunisia’s government, which is concerned about citizens returning from *jihad* who will subsequently be difficult to reintegrate into society. Abu Iyad’s statement may in part be designed to persuade the government not to launch a crackdown on foreign fighter activity. A third audience is families who have either seen their children go to fight *jihad* abroad or are worried about this occurring. A video that quickly gained notoriety in Tunisia in March 2013 is representative of families’ fears. Al-Arabiya reports:

Both women embraced the bearded man amid tears and screams. They hugged him amid everyone’s surprise as Turkish security officers approached to inquire what was going on. Mobile phones captured a live scene of a Tunisian mother hugging her son along with his wife in Istanbul’s airport to prevent him from travelling to Antakya and from there to Syria to join the fighting. The mother and wife succeeded in their goal and the video of the event circulated among media outlets.

It is a story that kept the Tunisian and some of the Arab public opinion busy after indications of an increasing jihadist flow between Tunisia and Syria. Many young men were either killed or lost on that front. But this time, the wife and the mother of the assumed jihadist dragged him away from the chance of death. After he called her from Libya before heading to Turkey, the wife managed to convince him that she wants to meet him in Turkey and join him in *jihad*. He therefore told her where he will be in Turkey. The wife and his mother then met him in Istanbul’s airport and prevented him from travelling. It was a live scene that we have seen nothing like before.⁹⁴

⁹² “Web: Jihadists see Tunisia Assassination as Conspiracy Against Islamists”, *BBC Monitoring in English* (14Feb. 2013).

⁹³ See “Al-Bayariq Media Establishment Video Eulogizes Tunisian Member of Al-Nusra Front”, *Ansar al-Mujahedin Network* (14 Mar. 2013), trans. Open Source Center.

⁹⁴ Diana Moukalled, “The Story Behind a Wife and Mother of a Tunisian Jihadist”, *Al-Arabiya* (18 Mar. 2013), <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/views/2013/03/18/The-story-behind-a-wife-and-mother-of-a-Tunisian-jihadist.html>.

Families of jihadists who have gone to Syria do not possess a robotic pride in the fighters. Regardless of their view of the justness of the overall cause, many families are suspicious of, or frightened by, the jihadist factions that their sons have joined. These families worry about the health and safety of those who departed to Syria. The widely-discussed video of family members stopping a would-be jihadist at the Istanbul airport is representative of a backlash, on a very personal level, against Tunisians' involvement in the Syrian conflict. Part of Abu Iyad's intention in discouraging Tunisians from going to Syria and Mali was likely to speak to families who have such deep concerns. After all, these families are part of the audience that AST wants to appeal to in its *dawa* efforts.

In addition to *jihad* abroad, there is the issue of AST and *jihad* violence at home. As previously discussed, AST has been involved in one incident to date that can clearly be classified in this manner. That incident occurred on 14 September 2012, when hundreds of protesters turned up at the US embassy in Tunis following the controversy surrounding a crude, privately-made film satirising the Prophet Muhammad called "The Innocence of Muslims". The protesters were able to overrun security and ransack not only the embassy, but also a nearby American school. Four people were killed and 46 injured in skirmishes. AST clearly played a major role in organising the demonstrations, as it used its Facebook page to encourage Tunisians to protest in front of the US embassy on 14 September. Thereafter, AST members (including Abu Iyad) were seen at the demonstration. Though many other Tunisians turned up as well, including non-salafists, local eyewitnesses believe that AST initiated the clashes.⁹⁵

If and when AST moves to a more active embrace of *jihad* within Tunisia, it is likely to undertake attacks that are disruptive in nature – and the embassy attack serves as a good example. In addition to the damage that the attack caused directly, it had the second-order consequence of severely damaging US diplomatic efforts. US officials ordered a departure from Tunisia, and many people who had been working at the embassy had to leave without even packing up their houses. This disrupted diplomatic continuity, and new security procedures have made it even more difficult for American diplomats to do their jobs effectively. Another significant aspect of the embassy attack is that AST was able to portray itself as the protector rather than the oppressor of fellow Muslims: the attack targeted non-Muslims, and responded to a perceived provocation against Islam (the fact that the US did not stop the film critical of Muhammad from being produced in the first place).

There is also the matter of AST's preparations for future confrontation with the state. Arms have frequently been smuggled into Tunisia through the country's porous borders, sometimes resulting in clashes between security forces and smugglers. Several political figures have linked this flow of arms to jihadist groups. For example, Tunisia's then-prime minister Hamadi Jebali claimed in December 2012 that "due to the Libyan revolution and disturbances in Mali, some terrorist organisations took the opportunity to smuggle arms into Tunisia".⁹⁶ It is likely that some of this flow of arms is connected to AST's desire to prepare itself for a turn to *jihad* and confrontation with the state.

So when will that confrontation come? Some observers believe it may be imminent, as both sides are increasingly entering uncharted territory in opposing the other. Not only did Prime Minister Ali Larayedh publicly link AST to terrorism for the first time in May 2013, but he also referred to it as an "illegal organisation". Abu Iyad has also increasingly issued threats that depart from his description of Tunisia as a land of *dawa* rather than a land of *jihad*. On 27 March 2013, he threatened to overthrow Tunisia's government, casting it into the "dustbin of history" if it interfered with AST.⁹⁷ He again threatened the state in May 2013, stating that actions taken against AST could force the youth to defend Islam, as they had done in places like Afghanistan, Chechnya, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria. Given the steep descent into violence in the locales he named, this threat was less than subtle.

⁹⁵ Sayah, "Qui a attaqué l'ambassade des Etats-Unis" (2012).

⁹⁶ Amira Masrouf, "Prime Minister Jebali Addresses Arms Trafficking in Tunisia", *Tunisia Live* (13 Dec. 2012), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/12/13/prime-minister-addresses-arms-trafficking-in-tunisia/>.

⁹⁷ Thomas Joscelyn, "War of Words Escalates in Tunisia", *Long War Journal* (27 Mar. 2013), http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/03/war_of_words_escalat.php.

Though increasing violence is a real risk, it is worth noting that both AST and the government have a great deal to lose from a major short-term escalation. AST feels that confrontation could go poorly for it because its strategy has been working rather well. It has provided social services to areas neglected by the government, thus bolstering its popularity, and has positioned itself as a leading voice opposed to a system widely seen as failing. AST has been numerically small but growing, enjoying influence beyond its numbers. Going to the war with the Tunisian state would mean sacrificing its ability to engage in *dawa* openly. This dynamic is likely one reason that Mauritanian AQIM member Abou Yahia Chenguitti urged AST to be wary of the Tunisian government's "provocations", and to demonstrate "patience and wisdom".⁹⁸ As for the government, it seems to believe it can defang AST surgically, without the conflict spiralling out of control. A major short-term escalation could disrupt this strategy, turning a policing operation into a military showdown.

At some point, fighting between the two sides will worsen. But given their perceptions of what deviations from the status quo could cost them, it could take some time for that point to arrive.

5. Conclusion

It is possible that there will be a short-term escalation in violence between the Tunisian state and AST. While a number of risks are associated with this course, if AST were to become a major security problem for Europe or the US, it would happen over the longer term. As such, Western actors attempting to assist Tunisia can gear their policies toward the long term – thinking strategically – rather than crafting them solely to address the country's short-term crises. Many of the policies that these outside states adopt may not neatly fit within traditional counter-terrorism categories, yet may nonetheless help to bolster security in the face of challenges like AST. Understanding AST's own strategy is an important part of crafting the right policies.

AST clearly benefits from the perception that Tunisia's new government is failing – that the entire system is not working, and cannot work. The jihadist group has positioned itself as one of the most prominent actors offering a broad anti-system critique. If outside states can help Tunisia craft the right institutions and capabilities, that can marginalise AST's brand of extremism. Ultimately, though, both Europe and the US are beset by grave economic problems of their own, and at some point will likely be forced to turn inward: vague prescriptions to help the Tunisian economy in ways that are unsustainable absent large outside commitments may be less desirable than helping Tunisia build the right kind of institutions that are not dependent on outside help. This report's suggestions can be divided into three major categories: transparency and rule of law, national consultation, local police capacity, and intelligence cooperation.

5.1 Transparency and rule of law

Transparency and rule of law are critical for both Tunisian counter-terrorism efforts and also the state's policies more generally. Under Ben Ali, counter-terrorism laws were frequently misused to stifle freedom of speech and assembly, rather than being laudable policies that were perceived as protecting society. Counter-terrorism laws were broadly drafted, and implemented in arbitrary ways.

Under the new regime, counter-terrorism should not be seen as a repressive tool of the state, or something demanded by outside powers, but rather as a set of policies that keep Tunisians themselves safe from violent actors. Western states should take a long view of Tunisian counter-terrorism policies: rather than simply pushing for specific arrests or a reduction of the flow of fighters to Syria (policies that may be valuable in themselves), Western states should also encourage counter-terrorism policies that develop transparently and within the bounds of the law, in order to maintain long-term public confidence.

⁹⁸ "Mauritanian al Qaeda Leader Sends Message to Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia", *Nouakchott Sahara Media* (2013).

The government of Tunisia should focus on the security sector, and its need for restructuring and reform.⁹⁹ This includes the role of the police, intelligence services, and the military. Reforms should be undertaken within the framework of international standards applicable to the security sector, and with the assistance of individual governments or international organisations like NATO.

Transparency and rule of law are also vital principles beyond the framework of counter-terrorism and the security sector. One promising initiative is the creation of a rule of law centre based in Tunis, the International Institute of Justice and the Rule of Law. While the planning for this centre is still in its early stages, the concept of having an international centre dedicated to strengthening state institutions that can promote the rule of law and justice is positive.

The role of international and multilateral organisations such as the EU should continue to focus on training and capacity-building in the framework of rule of law, and governance of legal institutions and personnel. This should be done in close cooperation with the Tunisian government and the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF).

5.2 National consultation

Though many grievances pushed the Tunisian people to overthrow Ben Ali's regime, the desire for democratic rule was clearly one of their cherished aspirations. Despite the many problems the new regime in Tunisia has experienced, it still represents the ideal of self-rule, in contrast to the vision offered by AST – which is, at its core, both anti-democratic and authoritarian. National consultation can build upon some of the advantages of the new system, helping it to better reach its potential and also marginalise violent extremist forces.

Organisations – for example the UN – could consider bringing different societal actors together to discuss the present state of affairs, in the aftermath of the revolutionary changes. This national consultation should either involve or focus on the country's youth, and should produce practical recommendations to deal with societal unrest, lack of employment opportunities, disenchantment, frustrations, hate speech, the role of new media, and other related issues. This could be done under the banner of UN Security Council Resolution 1624.

Such efforts could be supplemented by a country-specific analysis of potential drivers and triggers for radicalisation in the post-revolution phase in Tunisia, with a special focus on AST and its public support base. This study should lead to more specific recommendations for civil society, government, and the international community.

Civil society organisations should consider advocating a non-violent political approach to societal tensions and differences, promoting diversity and mutual respect, as well as an open and frank exchange of positions and opinions. Civil society organisations should seek a strategic alliance with local government, religious leaders, and other actors to advocate and promote these approaches; and should also do so through social media.

5.3 Local police capacity

Building local police capacity is extremely important. Capable local police can respond more effectively to the engagement of AST and other salafi jihadists in *hisba*-related violence. Currently, the police are frequently hesitant to make arrests, and in some cases admit that they feel intimidated by salafi jihadists. This status quo allows salafi jihadist vigilante violence to occur without state response, which serves dual purposes for AST. On the one hand, this violence raises AST's profile and intimidates its opponents. On the other hand, it degrades confidence in the state.

Further, the US and European actors who provide aid to Tunisia should demand accountability by inquiring whether individuals who have committed religiously-motivated vigilante crimes – such as those

⁹⁹ Querine Hanlon, *Security Sector Reform in Tunisia: A Year after the Jasmine Revolution* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2012).

identified in HRW's report on the subject – have been arrested, or if they are still operating openly even though their identity and crimes are known.

5.4 Intelligence cooperation

Tunisia will not be able to stop all of the smuggling at its borders, but improved intelligence capacities can help the state understand the location of arms caches within Tunisia, as well as chart the growth of AST and other violent non-state actors. Building intelligence capacities can enable the Tunisian state, without enacting overly repressive policies that will erode public confidence in the government, to counter the prospect of a heavily armed salafi jihadist movement.

5.5 Tunisia's future

Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's future in the country is highly uncertain. The current series of escalations by both the jihadist group and also the government has placed both sides in uncharted territory – but, at least for the moment, both sides have an incentive to muddle through without descending into all-out war.

The most potent threat that AST might pose is almost certainly in the longer term. The group still has the opportunity to draw more Tunisians to its cause through *dawa*, and to better prepare itself for a transition to *jihad*. But since this group can pose the greatest challenge in the longer term, both Tunisia and outside governments can also adopt a more visionary strategic perspective. Hopefully, this Paper can enhance the public discussion about how to accomplish that.

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