

Raising the Stakes: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's Shift to Jihad

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Since the fall of Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, the country has been challenged by the growth of a domestic salafi jihadist movement. The most significant salafi jihadist organisation is Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), which by 2013 established a strategy based around *dawa* and *hisba* violence. Since May 2013, violence between AST and the Tunisian state significantly increased, prompting Tunisia's government to designate AST a terrorist organisation in late August.

The Research Paper analyses the likely future of the conflict between AST and the Tunisian state, making three arguments. First, it explains how strategic thinking and political considerations drove the Tunisian government to escalate its fight against AST despite ambiguities in the evidence concerning who bore ultimate responsibility for the violence that prompted this escalation. Second, it argues that new revelations about AST make it seem less like the local organisation many observers perceived a year or two ago, and more connected to international jihadism. Third, the Paper describes the strategic thinking behind the recent targeting choices of Tunisian jihadists, who are attempting to undermine the country's economy.

About the Authors

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In addition to his academic work, Gartenstein-Ross consults for clients who need to understand violent non-state actors and twenty-first century conflict. His client work has included live hostage negotiations in the Middle East, border security work in Europe, risk assessment of possible terrorist attacks, examination of alternative futures for terrorist and smuggling networks, expert witness work for asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa, and story and series development for media companies. He also regularly designs and leads training for the U.S. Department of Defense's Leader Development and Education for Sustained Peace (LDESP) program. 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. from the New York University School of Law and a B.A. from Wake Forest University. He can conduct research in five languages, including Arabic and French.

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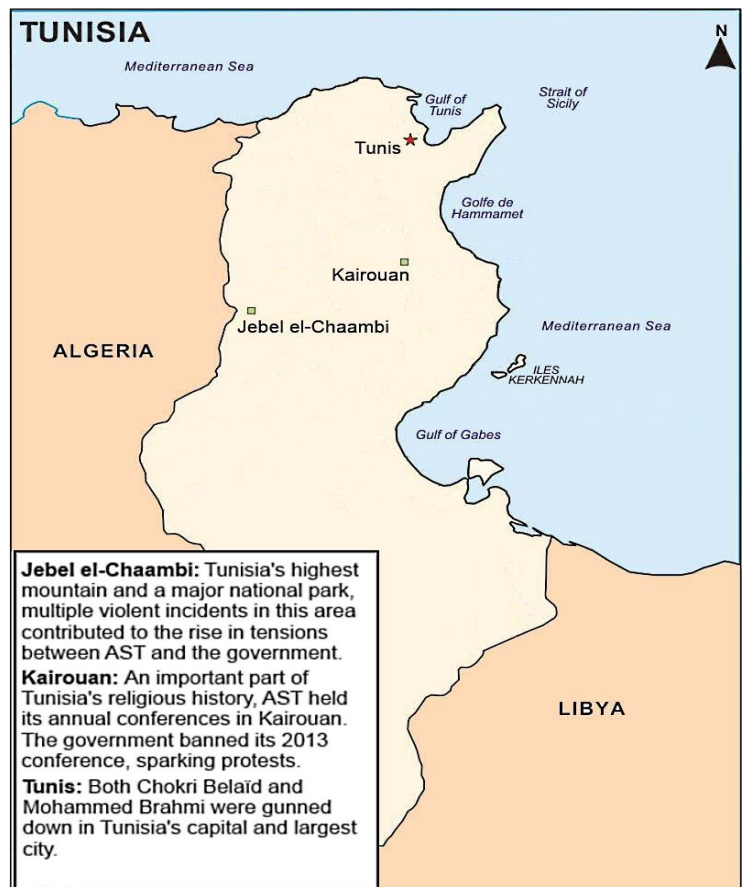
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1. Introduction*

Since the fall of Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, the country has been challenged by the aggressive growth of a domestic salafi jihadist movement. The most significant organisation within this movement is Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST), which has now been designated a terrorist group by the governments of Tunisia and the United States (US).¹ In May 2013, before either country had designated AST, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague (ICCT) published a study examining the jihadist organisation. The study concluded that the main prong of AST's strategy at that time was *dawa* (missionary work), with *hisba* violence (violence designed to enforce religious norms, usually vigilante attacks) also playing an important role.² The study argued that AST intended to eventually put jihad (warfare) at the forefront of its approach to confronting the state, but that time “has not yet arrived”.³

Much has changed since May, largely in ways anticipated by ICCT's previous study. Levels of violence between AST and the Tunisian state significantly increased from May to July 2013, and Tunisia's government ultimately felt compelled to designate AST a terrorist organisation in late August, ban it, and mount a crackdown. AST now seems to be largely prioritising jihad, although two qualifications should be noted. First, ambiguity remains about what an “AST attack” means because – as this study demonstrates – the group's organisational structure is opaque. Thus, some of the post-ban violent acts and plans attributed to AST may in fact involve individuals linked to the group who are not acting pursuant to a specific organisational plan. Second, AST has not abandoned *dawa*, either – a fact that will have an impact on how it chooses to employ violence.

This Paper follows up on the prior ICCT Research Paper by explaining how this course of events came to be. It is worth noting that AST enjoyed a number of advantages as of May. Its *dawa* activities were legal and overt, a dramatic change from life under Ben Ali, when such activities by jihadist groups were suppressed. Although it could evangelise openly, AST also engaged in violent acts – usually *hisba* violence – that targeted and intimidated its opponents, without these acts triggering a state crackdown. AST could engage in this low-scale violence without bringing the full power of the state down on it in large part because the group's opaque organisational structure allowed the leadership to deny that it had a role in violent acts carried out by members.



* The authors would like to thank three of FDD's excellent Spring 2014 interns, who helped navigate late-breaking news about Tunisia, and fill out a few areas where we needed additional source material: Henry Appel, Winchester Eubank, and Phil Heaver. FDD's Patrick Megahan generously designed the map that appears in this study. We would also like to thank Andrew Lebovich and Aaron Zelin for providing informed feedback on an earlier draft of this study.

¹ “Tunisia Declares Ansar al-Sharia a Terrorist Group”, BBC News (27 Aug. 2013); US Department of State, “Terrorist Designations of Three Ansar al-Sharia Organizations and Leaders” (10 Jan. 2014).

² Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, *Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba, and Jihad* (The Hague: ICCT, 2013).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6. The term *jihad* has variegated connotations, but for AST and other salafi jihadist groups, the military meaning is critical to their usage. This Paper's definitional section explains the breadth of the term in more detail, as well as contestations about its meaning from within the Islamic faith. However, since this Paper focuses AST, it generally employs the term *jihad* in a manner consistent with AST's understanding of the concept.

Such an organisational scheme allowed the group to carry out violence while simultaneously denying that it was doing so.

However, multiple escalations by both AST and also militant groups loosely tied to it contributed to the current state of open conflict between AST and the Tunisian state. Though it is hard to pinpoint a definitive beginning in this sequence, the most persuasive inflection point is December 2012, when militants shot and killed Anis Jelassi, an adjutant in the Tunisian National Guard, in the Kasserine governorate.⁴ This incident prompted Tunisian authorities to identify, for the first time, a militant group known as Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi, which is tied to both AST and also al Qaeda (AQ)'s regional affiliate, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This group was active in Jebel el-Chaambi, which is both Tunisia's highest mountain and also a major national park, and is located in the governorate of Kasserine. The governorate's northern border abuts the Kef province, and its western border is shared by Algeria.

The February 2013 assassination of secularist politician Chokri Belaïd was another escalation, though it is not clear that Belaïd's killing was ordered by AST's top leadership. Belaïd's assassination prompted a great deal of national attention and political pressure on the government, but no crackdown against AST.

Thereafter, there were several more progressions in the escalating conflict between AST and the government. Tunisia stepped up its security operations in Jebel el-Chaambi, and soldiers patrolling there suffered from frequent landmine attacks. In May, the government interrupted public lectures and other AST *dawa* activities, then cancelled the group's annual conference in Kairouan. While that conference's cancellation put the conflict between AST and the government in increasingly uncharted territory, tensions between the two reached their climax in late July. In a one-week period at the end of that month, another prominent secularist politician, Mohammed Brahmi, was gunned down by assassins, while a jihadist ambush in Jebel el-Chaambi left "eight soldiers dead – five with slit throats".⁵ This was finally a point of no return, even though, given the vagaries in AST's decision-making structure and the departure from the group's established strategy that these two attacks represented, it is unclear that AST's leadership intended the two incidents to occur so close together, nor is it clear that the leadership ordered the attacks at all. The decision to ambush and kill the soldiers in Jebel el-Chaambi may have been made by the Katibat's field commanders rather than AST's leadership; and AST's leadership may not have ordered Brahmi's killing. AST has never publicly claimed responsibility for either incident.

Nonetheless, after they occurred Tunisia launched a vigorous crackdown against AST. Tunisian jihadists have also escalated in several ways since then, underscoring AST's transition from a primarily *dawa*-based strategy to one where jihad plays a more prominent role. Most significant, jihadists whom the state has connected to AST attempted three bombings before the end of 2013, targeting two tourist destinations and a major monument. Because Tunisia's economy relies heavily on tourism, this tactic targets one of the state's key points of vulnerability – although it is a tactic that could dramatically backfire against the perpetrators, if such an attack succeeded.

This study, which traces the escalating conflict between AST and the Tunisian state, makes three overarching arguments. First, it explains how strategic thinking and political considerations drove the Tunisian government to escalate its fight against AST despite ambiguities in the evidence concerning who bore ultimate responsibility for the violence that prompted this escalation. Consonant with this point, the Paper also argues that the evidence suggests AST's leadership did not intend to trigger the crackdown. It either massively overplayed its hand or else, more likely, did not actually order the two assassinations attributed to it.

The second argument is that new revelations about AST make it seem less like the local organisation that many observers perceived a year or two ago, and more connected to international jihadism. Indeed, based on the available evidence, AST appears likely to be an unannounced AQ affiliate. While many analysts will disagree with this conclusion, this Paper presents available evidence from regional sources, and makes note of uncertainties or ambiguities related to the evidence. Our conclusion about the likely relationship between AST and AQ is significant for formulating a better understanding of the possible shape of the jihadist movement in Tunisia and North Africa, and also has broader ramifications. One of the critical current debates in the field of terrorism

⁴ "Tunisie: Décès de l'adjudant Anis Jelassi dans des affrontements à Feriana", *Global Net* (11 Dec. 2012).

⁵ Paul Schemm, "Jihadis Threaten Tunisia's Arab Spring Transition", Associated Press (31 July 2013), <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/jihadis-threaten-tunisia-arab-spring-transition>.

studies is whether AQ should be understood as small and largely decentralised, or whether it may in fact be more expansive.⁶ AST is an extremely relevant case study in this broader debate.

Third, the Paper describes the strategic thinking behind the recent targeting choices of Tunisian jihadists, who are attempting to undermine the country's economy. It argues that attacks against economic targets, and particularly the tourist sector, are likely to continue – but that such attacks carry great risks not only for the Tunisian state, but for AST as well. Militant Islamic groups in other countries have brought themselves to ruin by executing unpopular terrorist attacks, and there is a chance that AST could experience a similar backlash following a successful attack.

2. Background and Key Definitions

AST openly acknowledges that it is a salafi jihadist group, subscribing to the same ideology as AQ, though it claims to be organisationally independent. After the Tunisian government designated AST a terrorist group, and publicly trumpeted its connections to the AQ network, AST released a rather weak denial which claimed that it was “not tied to any outside group”. However, the statement also acknowledged that “regarding our loyalty to Qaedat al-Jihad and the jihadi formations, we have declared it from the first day and we are not ashamed to renew today our declaration with a louder voice”.⁷

Salafism, the broader religio-political movement of which AST is a part, is not a monolithic phenomenon. Salafists can be defined broadly as belonging to a movement that embraces a 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. In pursuing this goal, salafism tends to be very textually focused, on the Qur'an and *hadith*, and literalist in its interpretations. Monica Marks, a scholar who has contributed some of the most detailed studies of salafism in Tunisia, writes that there are three major divisions of salafism in the country: *salafiyya 'alimiyya* (usually translated as scientific salafism, but which Marks believes is better understood as scripturalist salafism), political salafism, and salafi jihadism.⁸

Marks 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, rather than participating in politics, focus on “apolitical lives of quietist piety”.⁹ Adherents to Marks's 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. They think political participation “could serve as a vehicle to attain a more caliphate-like, sharia-based polity”.¹⁰ The third division, salafi jihadism, rejects both participation in democracy and also “the non-engagement of scripturalist Salafis”.¹¹ 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”.¹² AST is part of this latter division within salafism.

Since AST is a salafi jihadist group, it is worth explaining the term *jihad*. The Arabic word *jihad*, which literally means “struggle”, is an Islamic religious concept with multiple connotations, but to jihadist groups warfare is the most important meaning. AST, according to its own admissions, has a conception of *jihad* closely aligned with that of AQ. Although the jihadist movement has often focused on attacking the US and other Western countries in the post-9/11 era, such violence in large part serves an instrumental purpose. As Thomas Joscelyn notes, AQ has always tried “to acquire power in ‘local’ settings”, and attacking Western countries was a means for the group to attempt to acquire local power and implement its hardline version of sharia law.¹³ In the

⁶ See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Obama's Kobe Bryant-Al Qaeda Flap”, *Daily Beast* (22 Jan. 2014), <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/22/obama-s-kobe-bryant-al-qaeda-flap.html>.

⁷ Thomas Joscelyn, “Ansar al-Sharia Responds to Tunisian Government”, *Long War Journal* (3 Sept. 2013), http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_6.php.

⁸ Monica Marks, “Youth Politics and Tunisian Salafism: Understanding the Jihadi Current”, *Mediterranean Politics* 18:1 (2013).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Quintan Wiktorowicz, “Anatomy of the Salafi Movement”, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29 (2006), p. 208.

¹³ Thomas Joscelyn, “Know Your Enemy”, *Weekly Standard* (30 Jan. 2014).

post-Arab Spring environment, where the weakness of local regimes is apparent, a greater proportion of jihadist violence will likely be locally focused rather than aimed at the West.

It should be noted that the understanding of *jihad* held by AST and AQ is heavily contested within the Islamic faith itself. One ambitious effort to undermine the theological arguments for the jihadist conception of religious warfare is a project known as the “Amman Message”, launched by Jordan’s King Abdullah II in November 2004. This project has produced a statement, which has been widely endorsed by a diverse array of Islamic scholars, condemning extremist groups’ use of *takfir* (excommunication); and also a draft document about *jihad* and the Islamic law of war, holding that the religious identity of a people cannot justify the Muslim community making war on them, and singling out former AQ emir Osama bin Laden’s ideas about *jihad* for particularly lengthy condemnation.¹⁴ AQ’s understanding of *jihad* has even met resistance from within the jihadist movement itself, as can be seen in Dr. Sayyid Imam bin Abdal Aziz al-Sharif’s lengthy denunciations of the group’s failure to adhere to *sharia* when making war.¹⁵

Though AST is a jihadist group, *jihad* violence has not always been at the forefront of its strategy. At the beginning of 2013, and even as late as August, AST sought to advance its agenda primarily through *dawa* and *hisba*. *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”.¹⁶ AST’s *dawa* efforts, like those of many other salafi jihadists, focus not on convincing non-Muslims to convert to Islam, but on trying to win other Muslims over to their extreme interpretation of the faith.

Hisba is related to the obligation of “commanding right and forbidding wrong”, an important Islamic concept that is discussed in the Qur’an.¹⁷ Though the concept itself had existed for centuries and can be traced to some of the earliest Muslim communities, the Princeton University historian Michael Cook explains in a comprehensive study that the well-known Sunni scholar Ghazzali (d. 1111) coined the term *hisba* “as a general term for ‘forbidding wrong’”.¹⁸ While groups like AST believe that *hisba* necessitates violence, this type of violence can be distinguished from jihad. Jihad is carried out against external enemies of the faith, while “forbidding wrong” suggests that the objects of these efforts are already part of the Muslim community. In other words, *hisba* is the enforcement of religious norms, and for AST it has often entailed vigilante attacks on people or institutions perceived to violate these norms.

Though AST’s strategy focused primarily on *dawa* and *hisba* at the beginning of 2013, it made increasing use of jihadist violence throughout the year. As this Paper details, the group has now seemingly entered a new phase in its struggle with the state where jihad is given higher priority.

2.1 AST’s organisational structure

Any group with revolutionary political goals would be hard-pressed to achieve them without an organisational structure. AST is a structured organisation, although much of its structure is clandestine. Hassan Ben Brik, who heads AST’s *dawa* committee, told an Italian interviewer in 2012 that the group employed a clandestine structure because “all the members of Ansar al-Sharia are being targeted by the government, and by the international community”.¹⁹ The group’s clandestine nature creates many ambiguities – most significantly, whether violent acts taken by members are directed by group leadership, or whether they are more spontaneous and autonomous. Those ambiguities extend even to the specific attacks that ultimately led the government to ban, and crack down on, AST.

¹⁴ For the Amman Message’s statement on *takfir*, see *True Islam and the Islamic Consensus on the Amman Message* (Amman: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2006). For the draft document on jihad, see *Jihad and the Islamic Law of War* (Jordan: The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2007). For an analysis of both efforts, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “The Role of Consensus in the Contemporary Struggle for Islam”, *Review of Faith & International Affairs* 6:4 (2008), pp. 13-22.

¹⁵ For analysis of this critique of al Qaeda, see, for example, Paul Kamolnick, “Al Qaeda’s *Sharia* Crisis: Sayyid Imam and the Jurisprudence of Lawful Military *Jihad*”, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 36 (2013), pp. 394-418.

¹⁶ Munawar Haque, review of Sohirin M. Solihin, *Islamic Dawah: Theory and Practice* (Kuala Lumpur: IIUM Press, 2008), published in *Intellectual Discourse* 17:1 (2009), p. 119.

¹⁷ See Qur’an 3:104, 3:110, 9:71.

¹⁸ Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁹ Sergio Galasso, “Intervista ad Hassan Ben Brik: ‘Non crediamo nella democrazia, ma senza appoggio del popolo niente jihad’”, *Limes* (11 Oct. 2012).

Despite organisational ambiguities, certain details about the group are widely known. Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (born Saifallah Ben Hassine) is well established as AST's emir. A veteran jihadist, Abu Iyad was a protégé of the prominent extremist preacher Abu Qatada al-Filistini in the "Londonistan" scene of the early 1990s. Thereafter, he relocated to Taliban-controlled 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 just before AQ executed the 9/11 attacks. Turkish authorities arrested Abu Iyad in 2003, after which they extradited him to Tunisia. Ben Ali's regime sentenced him to 43 years of imprisonment, but Abu Iyad was released in the March 2011 general amnesty that followed the revolution.²⁰

It is clear from AST's social media postings, and through interviews that researchers have conducted with the group's members, that it has at least four divisions below its senior leadership:

- The *dawa* office, which Ben Brik heads.²¹
- Humanitarian activities, including AST's medical convoys and provision of basic goods.
- Media activities, including the Al-Bayariq Media Productions Foundation, AST's website, and the group's social media presence.
- A division that coordinates with local AST groups. This coordination has been divided geographically, into northern, central, and southern regions.²²

ICCT's May 2013 Research Paper also asserted that AST appeared to have a clandestine military wing in addition to these four more widely recognised divisions.²³ At the time, some evidence for this assessment came from the fact that AST had a clearly expressed commitment to jihad since the group's founding, and AST's leadership believed that the group would eventually enter a stage of outright confrontation with the state. Moreover, AST's members and associates possessed impressive militant credentials. For example, Tarek Maaroufi was implicated in a number of terrorist plots in Europe, 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.²⁴ Further, Sami bin Khamis Essid and Mehdi Kammoun – who did not have publicly announced roles in AST, but seemed to have unannounced positions – were an important part of AQ's network in Italy.²⁵

Since publication of the May report, new evidence further suggests that AST has a covert military wing. As this Paper details later, AST's connections to Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi have become clearer, and the Tunisian government has now outright alleged the existence of such a covert wing. American researcher Aaron Y. Zelin has also been able to independently confirm the existence of AST's military wing.²⁶

3. AST's Activities Prior to the Escalation

AST's strategy before its ban in August 2013 prioritised both *dawa* and *hisba*, as this Paper has already explained. Its *dawa* efforts employed some traditional methods, such as holding *dawa* events at markets or universities, holding public protests, and dominating physical spaces, such as cafés, near places of worship. But AST also had innovative approaches to *dawa*. These included provision of social services – though militant Islamic groups like Hizballah and Hamas have also employed this technique, AST was an early adopter among salafi jihadist groups – and its use of social media.

²⁰ See the biographical sketch of Abu Iyad in Aaron Y. Zelin, "Missionary at Home, Jihadist Abroad: A Profile of Tunisia's Abu Ayyad the Amir of Ansar al-Sharia", *Militant Leadership Monitor* 3:4 (Apr. 2012).

²¹ Stefano M. Torelli, Fabio Merone, and Francesco Cavatorta, "Salafism in Tunisia: Challenges and Opportunities for Democratization", *Middle East Policy* 19:4 (2012), p. 149.

²² 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->.

²³ Gartenstein-Ross, *Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game* (2013), p. 7.

²⁴ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Who's Who in Tunisia's Salafi-Jihadi Community: A Look at Key Leaders of Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia", *Militant Leadership Monitor* 6:4 (Apr. 2013), p. 10.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Tunisia: Uncovering Ansar al-Sharia", *Think Africa Press* (25 Oct. 2013), <http://thinkafricapress.com/tunisia/uncovering-ansar-al-sharia>.

AST's social services activity has included distribution of food, clothing, and basic supplies, as well as sponsorship of convoys that provide medical care and medicine. These efforts concentrated on areas of Tunisia that are typically neglected by the government, such as those that are rural or impoverished. AST's social services are accompanied by distribution of literature designed to propagate its ideology. Even at the height of its *dawa* activities, AST's distribution of social services did not reach the same areas consistently: it is not clear whether any communities saw AST as a services provider week after week. This is where AST's savvy use of social media was particularly relevant. Almost immediately after it undertook humanitarian efforts, AST would post information about its latest venture, including photographs, to its Facebook page and other websites. Social media thus served as a force multiplier: while AST seemingly did not provide consistent services to a single area, its social media activity illustrated a rapid pace of humanitarian assistance, and thus helped the group achieve its goal of visibility. AST continues to undertake *dawa* even after the Tunisian government banned it, but AST youth leader Youssef Mazouz said the group now carries out "less than half the work it used to before August when it could plan events openly and post details on Facebook".²⁷

Most, though not all, of AST's violent acts before the escalation of its conflict with the state could be categorised as *hisba*. It should be noted, though, that while there was a large amount of salafi *hisba* violence in Tunisia, AST's clandestine structure largely masked which of these acts were specifically attributable to that group. Much of the *hisba*-type violence carried out by Tunisian salafists was certainly performed by those who were neither AST members nor connected to the organisation. However, several violent *hisba* incidents were connected to AST – either carried out by its members, incited by AST's leadership, or even planned in advance by its leaders.

One target of the general *hisba* violence that became a powerful phenomenon in Tunisia was women.²⁸ Soon after the revolution, outraged mobs began attacking the country's *maisons closes* (brothels), and set these establishments aflame in Kairouan, Médenine, Sfax, and Sousse. Prostitutes were beaten in some of these attacks. Other women were attacked for being improperly attired. 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.²⁹ 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". Similar attacks occurred in the north-western city of Jendouba.³⁰

Violence targeting women was the first post-revolution sign of the surge in *hisba* violence, but salafi vigilante attacks rapidly spread to other sectors. One battlefield was free expression, as attacks targeted an anti-Islamist film director, an art-house cinema, and a TV station that broadcast the controversial animated film *Persepolis*.³¹ Education is another sphere where *hisba* violence was used as a tool of coercion, with physical attacks against university and secondary school administrators who refused to allow female students to wear the *niqab* (face covering) in their institutions.³² Vigilante attacks and salafi intimidation also regularly targeted sufi shrines, which salafis perceive as emblematic of heretical religious practice, and non-Muslims.³³

²⁷ "The Salafist Struggle", *The Economist* (1 Jan. 2014).

²⁸ For a comprehensive description of the rise in salafi *hisba* violence in Tunisia, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Springtime for Salafists", *Foreign Policy* (26 Mar. 2013).

²⁹ 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>.

³⁰ Sana Ajmi, "Clashes Between Salafists and Police in Northwestern City of Tunisia", *Tunisia Live* (22 Feb. 2012), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/02/22/clashes-between-salafists-and-police-in-northwestern-city-of-tunisia/>.

³¹ See Andrew Gilligan, "Tunisia: Birthplace of the Arab Spring Fears Islamist Resurgence", *Telegraph* (28 May 2011); 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>; "Protesters Attack TV Station Over Film *Persepolis*", BBC News (9 Oct. 2011), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15233442>.

³² See Nura Suleiman, "The Disintegrating Fabric of Tunisian Politics: The Niqab Ban and Tunisian Flag Desecration at Manouba University", *Jadaliyya* (13 Apr. 2012); "Tunisie: Lycée de Menzel Bouzelfa – Un directeur agressé par des salafistes", *All Africa* (11 Apr. 2013).

³³ See "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>; "Muslims Bid to Turn Christian Site into Mosque", AFP (16 Sept. 2012).

Though hisba was AST's dominant connection to violence before the escalation, it also had a clear connection to jihad. Soon after AST's founding, it was considered a group that engaged in *dawa* at home and jihad abroad, as Abu Iyad made no secret that he encouraged AST members to join AQIM or the Syria jihad.³⁴ One incident of jihad violence that AST was involved in at home before the escalation was the 14 September 2012 attack on the US embassy in Tunis. This attack occurred while many in the region were furious about a crude, privately-made film satirising the Prophet Muhammad called "The Innocence of Muslims". The Tunis protesters overran embassy security and ransacked both the embassy and a nearby American school. Four people were killed and 46 injured in the skirmishes. AST played a major role in organising the demonstrations, as it used its Facebook page to encourage Tunisians to turn out for them. Local eyewitnesses also believe that AST initiated the clashes with security.³⁵ The fighting between Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi and Tunisian forces in Jebel el-Chaambi is also properly characterised as jihad violence, and Jebel el-Chaambi incidents would increase in parallel with the escalating conflict between AST and the Tunisian state.

4. Violence in Jebel el-Chaambi

Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi was described as a "shadowy group" by one of the analysts who first took notice of it.³⁶ This was by design: both of the major organisations associated with Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi, AQIM and AST, have largely clandestine structures and operate in a clandestine manner. This section discusses Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi's size, structure, and leadership; then examines the role the group played in escalating the conflict between AST and the Tunisian government.

4.1 Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi's size, structure and leadership

Several aspects of Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi's size and structure have been reported in open sources. One regional analyst explains that the "basic unit" of an organisation like Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi is the *serrya*, an Arabic military term referring to a company. The analyst continues that each *serrya* is comprised of about 15 men, and several such groups "form a *katiba* (battalion) which includes 50 to 80 men".³⁷ Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi, according to Tunisian officials, is comprised of at least two *serryas*. Authorities are not certain of the number of members each *serrya* has, but their estimates are around 30 men total, which is consistent with what is known about the militants' conception of a *serrya*.³⁸ The *serryas* have been able to maintain a consistent level of activity even though authorities have killed or captured many members, thus suggesting that the Katibat's structure is designed to make it resilient in the face of losses.³⁹ Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi has Algerian and Tunisian members, further underscoring the manner in which it operates in both countries, and connects AST to AQIM.⁴⁰ Within Tunisia, its *serryas* were active in both Jebel el-Chaambi and El Kef.

The leadership question – that is, who controls Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi – is, by design, murkier than the question of how its fighters (the most overt part of the group) are organised. Reflecting this murkiness, Andrew Lebovich, who authored the most incisive early work on Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi, wrote:

Then there is the question of how, exactly, the fighters in El Kef and Jebel el-Chaambi may (or may not) be linked to AST [...]. [S]ome analysts are quick to draw a connection between AST and al Qaeda, in this case AQIM. The reality, however, may be a bit more complicated. Despite Abu Iyad's professions and past

³⁴ Zelin, "Missionary at Home, Jihadist Abroad" (2012), p. 9.

³⁵ Habib M. Sayah, "Qui a attaqué l'ambassade des Etats-Unis: retour sur Ansar al-Chari'a, Abou Iyadh et ses relations avec Ennahdha", *Institut Kheireddine* (14 Sept. 2012).

³⁶ Andrew Lebovich, "Confronting Tunisia's Jihadists", *Foreign Policy* (16 May 2013), http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/16/confronting_tunisia_jihadists.

³⁷ Col. Mohamed Kasdallah, "Terrorists in Tunisia Adopt 'Asymmetric' Warfare Tactics", *Al-Monitor* (11 Nov. 2013).

³⁸ "Tunisie : deux militaires tués dans une explosion au Jebel Chaambi", *Jeune Afrique* (6 June 2013); "Des groupes liés à Al-Qaida recherchés en Tunisie", *Le Monde* (7 May 2013).

³⁹ For discussion of how the structure of clandestine militant organisations can enable their resiliency, 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).

⁴⁰ "Tunisia Hunts al-Qaeda-Linked Militants Near Algeria", *Reuters* (7 May 2013), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/07/us-tunisia-qaeda-idUSBRE9460E920130507>.

connections, there is little public information about the organisational structure of AST and the level of command and control exercised over its members. Indeed, given the spread of salafi jihadi ideas in Tunisia and the spread of protests and vigilante violence that may or may not be linked to AST, it is possible that some of Uqbah Ibn Nafi's fighters could be tied in to AST while also participating in other groups based on their own inclinations and connections. This kind of loose organisational structure based on overlapping connections would likely suit AST, allowing for fighters inclined toward violence and military activity to pursue those avenues.⁴¹

One difficulty researchers experience in interpreting developments related to AST, which this study discusses in more detail later, is how much credence to give to the Tunisian government's claims. Some of its allegations about the jihadist group appear unreliable or self-serving. Bearing in mind this uncertainty, subsequent revelations make the cooperation between AST and AQIM on Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi appear more deliberate, and less coincidental than Lebovich felt it might have been. (This Paper will discuss Tunisia's revelations later.)

However, Lebovich's emphasis on uncertainties about AST's organisational structure remains quite relevant. Because of these uncertainties, it is still difficult to say with confidence whether the various acts of violence attributed to AST over the course of 2013 actually represented organisational decisions. And there are further uncertainties about Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi's structure. The evidence suggests it is a collaborative effort between AST and AQIM, but are there members of the Katibat who belong to neither group? Is Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi subordinate to either, or both, AQIM and AST, or does it essentially operate as an independent centre of power? If the Katibat is subordinate, who makes operational decisions: Abu Iyad or AQIM emir Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud (a.k.a. Abdelmalek Droukdel)? Or are almost all operational decisions made by field commanders?

Though multiple uncertainties exist, particularly about the decision-making behind specific attacks that Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi carried out, it can be said that AST's policies toward the Katibat were both supportive and also permissive. Even as violence caused by the Katibat became an increasingly important issue for the Tunisian government and public, there was no discernible diminution in the flow of AST members to the group. This fact would influence the Tunisian state's later decisions about how to deal with AST.

4.2 Violence at the Tunisia-Algeria border

The first set of incidents that caused Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi to become an important factor in the relationship between the Tunisian government and AST occurred in December 2012. Tunisian authorities decided to step up interdiction efforts at the border with Algeria after a police raid in Jendouba on 8 December turned up a significant amount of guns and explosives, along with the arrest of two men who were "suspected of membership in a salafist group".⁴² Two days later, Tunisian National Guardsmen patrolling at the border were alerted to a group of about four militants who had entered Tunisian territory, and were in the forest near the village of Derneya.⁴³ A small detachment of guardsmen entered the forest, and ended up in a firefight with the militants. The militants shot and killed Anis Jelassi, an adjutant.

Jelassi's killing prompted intensified police operations. Tunisian authorities arrested seven salafists suspected of playing a role in the killing. At a press conference announcing the arrests, officials publicly named Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi for the first time when interior minister Ali Laarayedh said that the seven arrestees belonged to a group bearing that name.⁴⁴ He also said that Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi was part of AQIM emir Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud's militant network. Tunisian authorities alleged that the Katibat was engaged in smuggling activity between Tunisia and Algeria, and that it used Jebel el-Chaambi to conduct militant training.⁴⁵ The terrain is appropriate for such training activity, as the densely-wooded national park is filled with valleys and caves.

⁴¹ Lebovich, "Confronting Tunisia's Jihadists" (2013).

⁴² Amira Masrour, "Circumstances of Death Arise after Algerian Border Attack", *Tunisia Live* (11 Dec. 2012), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/12/11/circumstances-of-death-arise-after-algerian-border-attack/>.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ "Groupes armés, Larayedh sonne l'alerte", *TAP* (21 Dec. 2012).

⁴⁵ "Possibles connexions entre réseaux terroristes et de contrebande", *TAP* (6 May 2013); "Al Qaïda, menace-t-elle vraiment la Tunisie?", *Business News* (21 Dec. 2012), <http://www.businessnews.com.tn/Al-Qa%C3%AFda,-menace-t-elle-vraiment-la-Tunisie--519,35278,1>.

Police operations at the Algerian border continued after these arrests. Sweeps by the Tunisian army and National Guard discovered caches of weapons and ammunition.⁴⁶ During this period of intensified operations and sweeps, Tunisian authorities occasionally got into firefights with militants running arms and other items across the border. Then in early May of 2013, sixteen members of the security forces were wounded in four separate landmine attacks, and five of them had limbs amputated as a result.⁴⁷

On May 7, following these incidents, Tunisian authorities held a major press conference. Interior ministry spokesman Ali Aroui alleged that the Katibat's two *serryas* in Jebel el-Chaambi and El Kef were part of the AQ network – a claim that, rather than being revelatory, was consistent with the government's previous allegations about its connections to AQIM.⁴⁸ The government also said that AST was connected to the Jebel el-Chaambi violence, though one of AST's leaders denied this in an interview with a regional Arabic-language publication, describing the government's claims as lies designed to squash the salafist movement.⁴⁹

Violence in Jebel el-Chaambi continued thereafter, and militant attacks were met with intensified policing operations. As violence surged, the government decided to forbid AST's annual conference that it planned to hold in the city of Kairouan, a move that further multiplied tensions.

5. Cancellation of the Kairouan Conference and Its Aftermath

For the first couple of years of AST's existence, one of the most visible spectacles to draw its members, supporters, and fellow travellers was an annual event the group hosted in Kairouan. The second annual Kairouan conference in May 2012 drew between 3,000 and 10,000 attendees. It also attracted a star-studded line-up of jihadist speakers, and several prominent international figures who could not attend issued supportive statements. Egyptian jihadist scholars Marjan Salim and Hani al-Siba'i, and Jordanian cleric Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi addressed the gathering by video, and Ahmad Ashush issued a written statement expressing his "endorsement and support" of AST.

AST's 2013 conference was scheduled to begin on 19 May, and some media outlets estimated the number of expected attendees at 40,000.⁵⁰ But only days before the conference was set to begin, on 15 May, the government banned the meeting, explaining that the move was prompted by AST's failure to submit the paperwork necessary to hold the conference.⁵¹

The following day, AST spokesman Saif Eddine Eras said at a press conference in Tunis that the group "doesn't need the government's authorisation to preach the word of God".⁵² Asserting that the conference would be held despite the government's cancellation, Eras warned against any police efforts to stop it. He said that "the government will be responsible for every drop of blood that will be poured". Brushing aside these warnings, the government affirmed its decision to ban the conference. Tunisia's interior ministry even accused the salafist movement of showing contempt for the institutions of the state, and inciting violence against them.⁵³ During this war of words, Ali Laarayedh – who had by then been elevated from interior minister to prime minister – described AST as an "illegal organisation that defies and provokes the state's authority".⁵⁴ Though observers were confused

⁴⁶ "Poursuite d'un groupe armé dans une zone forestière à la frontière entre la Tunisie et l'Algérie", *Kapitalis* (12 Mar. 2013), <http://www.kapitalis.com/politique/14974-poursuite-d-un-groupe-arme-dans-une-zone-forestiere-a-la-frontiere-entre-la-tunisie-et-l-algerie.html>.

⁴⁷ Lebovich, "Confronting Tunisia's Jihadists" (2013).

⁴⁸ "Des groupes liés à Al-Qaida", *Le Monde* (2013).

⁴⁹ "Les événements de Jebel Chaambi: Une mise en scène, selon Ansar Al Charia", *DirectInfo* (10 May 2013), <http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2013/05/10/les-evenements-de-jebel-chaambi-une-mise-en-sceneselon-ansar-al-charia/>.

⁵⁰ "Tunisia Confirms Ban on Salafist Meeting in Kairouan", *Xinhua* (18 May 2013), http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/africa/2013-05/18/c_132390376.htm.

⁵¹ "Tunisie: fermeté du gouvernement vis-à-vis d'Ansar al-Charia", *RFI* (17 May 2013), <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130517-strategie-tension-salafistes-tunisie>.

⁵² "Tunisie: les salafistes maintiennent leur meeting annuel malgré l'interdit", *PressAfrik* (17 May 2013), http://www.pressafrik.com/Tunisie-les-salafistes-maintiennent-leur-meeting-annuel-malgre-l-interdit_a103544.html.

⁵³ "Tunisie: les salafistes défient le pouvoir islamiste, un mort dans la rue", *My TFI News* (19 May 2013), <http://ici.tf1.fr/monde/afrique/tunisie-privés-de-congres-les-salafistes-defient-le-pouvoir-7969780.html>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

about what Laarayedh's description of AST as an "illegal organisation" meant – would their *dawa* activities now be banned? – the government did not prevent AST from operating openly until several months had passed, and more blood was shed.

On 19 May, the day the Kairouan conference was scheduled to begin, AST advised its international supporters, through a Facebook post, to cancel their trips to Tunisia due to the gravity of the security situation. A second Facebook post that went up the same day called on AST's domestic supporters to gather in the city of Ettadhamen, near the capital of Tunis.⁵⁵ This was an attempt to circumvent the ban: AST wanted to flout the state's authority by holding the conference, but moving it out of Kairouan – a city that would be surrounded by a ring of security determined not to allow AST to proceed.

That evening, AST released an audio message from Abu Iyad on its Facebook page, which the group described as the speech he would have given at the conference. In the recording, Abu Iyad assured supporters that they could not be defeated despite the "persecution" the government was inflicting upon them.⁵⁶ He congratulated his supporters on "proving to the entire world that their preaching is invincible before these hordes of enemies, that the ambitions of Ansar al-Sharia will not be hampered".⁵⁷

The same evening that AST posted Abu Iyad's statement, clashes erupted between police and salafists in Ettadhamen. Demonstrators threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at officers, burned an armoured vehicle, attacked a National Guard post, and blocked the road between M'nihla and Al-Intilaka with burning tyres.⁵⁸ There were also reports of looting, and even the burning of a Tunisian flag. According to official statistics, one person was killed and 18 wounded, including fifteen police officers, in the first night of clashes.⁵⁹ (Official statistics may well underestimate non-police injuries.) Confrontations also occurred in Kairouan. Though the clashes were intense, the police soon gained the upper hand in Kairouan and Ettadhamen, in part by carrying out 200 arrests – many of whom were quickly released.⁶⁰

Tensions between the government and AST continued to simmer. Violent incidents were sparse, and many of the confrontations in May were precipitated by the government itself, through house raids, arrests, and sweeps at Jebel el-Chaambi. For example, on 23 May authorities arrested seven men described as religious extremists, who were suspected of being involved in the grisly killing of a police officer earlier in the month, where the murder weapon had been a sword.⁶¹

Escalating these raids, on 6 June Tunisian police raided Abu Iyad's home, but he was not found.⁶² The same day, two security officers driving in Jebel el-Chaambi died in a landmine explosion.⁶³ After the landmine claimed the two officers' lives, about fifty Chaambi residents held a public protest, calling for the government to take a stronger stance. They said that authorities should even set the mountain on fire if necessary.⁶⁴ This

⁵⁵ "Tunisie: heurts entre salafistes et policiers à Tunis et Kairouan", *RFI* (19 May 2013), <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20130519-tunisie-le-mouvement-salafiste-ansar-al-charia-renonce-son-meeting>.

⁵⁶ "Tunisie: 200 salafistes arrêtés après des heurts meurtriers avec la police", *Le Monde* (20 May 2013), http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2013/05/19/la-tunisie-se-prepare-a-un-face-a-face-entre-policiers-et-salafistes_3342445_1466522.html.

⁵⁷ "Tunisie: Allocution d'Abou Iyadh au congrès d'Ansar al-Charia interdit", *Global Net* (19 May 2013), <http://www.gnet.tn/actualites-nationales/tunisie-allocution-dabou-iyadh-au-congres-dansar-al-charia-interdit/id-menu-958.html>.

⁵⁸ "Tunisie: La tension s'apaise à la Cité Ettadhamen", *All Africa* (20 May 2013), <http://fr.allafrica.com/stories/201305200596.html>.

⁵⁹ "Tunisie: Le groupe salafiste Ansar Charia annule son appel à manifester", *Reporters.dz* (24 May 2013), http://www.reporters.dz/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=336:tunisie--le-groupe-salafiste-ansar-charia-annule-son-appel-a-manifester&catid=6:monde-&Itemid=7.

⁶⁰ "Tunisie: 200 salafistes arrêtés", *Le Monde* (2013).

⁶¹ Tristan Dreisbach, "Seven Suspects Arrested for Murder of Police Officer", *Tunisia Live* (24 May 2013), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/05/24/seven-suspects-arrested-for-murder-of-police-officer/>.

⁶² Amira Masrour, "Police Raid Home of Fugitive Ansar al-Sharia Founder", *Tunisia Live* (6 June 2013), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/06/06/police-raid-home-of-fugitive-ansar-al-sharia-founder/>.

⁶³ Amira Masrour, "Two Soldiers Killed by Landmine Explosion Along Algerian Border", *Tunisia Live*, (6 June 6 2013), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/06/06/two-soldiers-killed-by-landmine-in-operation-against-militants/>.

⁶⁴ Amira Masrour, "Locals Demand Government Burn Chaambi Mountain to Drive Out Militants", *Tunisia Live* (6 June 6 2013), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/06/06/locals-demand-government-burn-mountain-to-drive-out-militants/>.

illustrates how the simultaneous escalation in violence in both Jebel el-Chaambi and the country's interior generated pressure for the government to show resolve in the face of the jihadist threat.

The military continued to sweep the Chaambi region, raiding the homes of suspected militants and arresting those who were thought to have a connection to the *serryas* operating in the area. Algerian security forces cooperated with the Tunisians, setting up twenty new military checkpoints at their shared border in order to inhibit militants' passage between the countries.⁶⁵ Reports also suggested that Algerian special forces were operating inside Tunisian territory, looking for Uqbah members. Tunisian authorities broadened their sweeps in July in a further effort to flush out militants.⁶⁶

At the end of July, two major incidents occurred within five days of each other that would substantially reshape the relationship between AST and the government. On 25 July, the assassination of secularist politician Mohammed Brahmi was blamed on AST. Brahmi's killing already placed the relationship between AST and the state on the brink, and on 29 July a jihadist ambush in Jebel el-Chaambi killed eight soldiers, five of whom had their throats slit. Though eight soldiers dying in a single day might seem routine for countries accustomed to their troops dying in wars, this was the bloodiest day that Tunisian security forces had ever experienced. The brutality of the killings further magnified their prominence. The slitting of throats is an unmistakable hallmark of recent jihadist killing, and in this context recalled the Algerian civil war.

The incident at Jebel el-Chaambi pushed the conflict between AST and the state irreparably over the edge. This study now turns to the two assassinations blamed on AST in 2013.

6. Political Assassinations Attributed to AST

The Tunisian government blamed AST for two political assassinations that occurred in 2013, both of secularist politicians. Chokri Belaïd was assassinated in February 2013, while Mohammed Brahmi was gunned down at the end of July. As previously noted, there are questions about whether AST's leadership was actually culpable in these killings, and the evidence of its role will be assessed at the end of this section.

6.1 Chokri Belaïd's assassination

On 6 February 2013, gunmen shot and killed secularist politician Chokri Belaïd outside his home in Tunis. For more than a year prior to his killing, Belaïd was subjected to an intensive campaign of surveillance and intimidation. He had countless enemies, which made the precise faction surveilling and stalking him unclear. Indeed, the politician received countless threatening phone calls and text messages, and his Facebook and email were hacked in December 2012. As the stalking intensified, Belaïd began removing his phone battery before travelling.

Immediately after Belaïd's murder, a million outraged Tunisians took to the streets, protesting in what has been called "one of the largest outpourings of grief in Tunisian history".⁶⁷ The Ennahda Party, Tunisia's ruling Islamist faction, was a particular object of popular rage, as protesters torched its building in Mezzouna and ransacked its office in Gafsa.⁶⁸ They believed the party was too lax in its efforts to violent religious extremism. Some protesters called for a "second revolution" against the new Tunisian government, and members of the Popular Front political coalition, of which Belaïd was a part, organised weekly demonstrations in front of the Ennahda's offices throughout the country. These visible and angry signs that Tunisians felt Ennahda was not doing enough – and even insinuations that it might actually be responsible for Belaïd's murder – would magnify pressure for action against AST.

⁶⁵ Asma Smadhi, "Tunisia Continues Anti-Militant Operations Near Algerian Border", *Tunisia Live* (10 June 2013), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/06/10/tunisia-continues-anti-militant-operations-near-algerian-border/>.

⁶⁶ "Tunisie: Opération contre Aqmi ce mardi", *20 Minutes* (5 July 2013), <http://www.20minutes.fr/ledirect/1151733/20130507-tunisie-operation-contre-aqmi-mardi>.

⁶⁷ Yasmin Ryan, "Who Killed Tunisia's Chokri Belaïd?", *Al Jazeera* (12 Sept. 2013), <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/201394183325728267.html>.

⁶⁸ "Tunisia: Chokri Belaïd Assassination Prompts Protests", BBC News (6 Feb. 2013), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-21349719>.

On 27 February, the interior ministry announced that four religious extremists had been arrested in connection with the murder, but warned that the killer himself was still at large.⁶⁹

A major suspect in Belaïd's murder was a Tunisian named Kamel Gadhgadhi. Though Gadhgadhi's background is not well documented, he has been portrayed as intelligent and well educated. He apparently knew five languages, and studied in the US.⁷⁰ A 3 February 2014 raid on two AST safehouses in the Tunis suburb of Raoued resulted in a 24-hour standoff. Clashes between AST members and the police ended in the death of Gadhgadi and six other militants, as well as one police officer.⁷¹

The AST members whom the raid targeted were heavily armed. Interior minister Lotfi Ben Jeddou said in a 4 February press conference that authorities "wanted to avoid their death, and asked them to surrender, but each of them had weapons, grenades and explosive belts".⁷² In fact, the militants allegedly had 600 kilogrammes of TNT with them.⁷³ Ben Jeddou also said that the individuals killed in the raid were connected not only to Belaïd's murder, but also to the ambush of soldiers on Jebel el-Chaambi.⁷⁴ Though Ben Jeddou portrayed the incident as bringing closure to Belaïd's death, describing the killing of the militants as "the best present that we could give Tunisians", Belaïd's family was unconvinced. Belaïd's brother told the media, "We want to know the whole truth. Gadhgadhi was not alone. There are other parties implicated and we hope they will be captured so that the truth is revealed".⁷⁵

6.2 Mohammed Brahmi's assassination

Six months after Belaïd's murder, on 25 July, another secularist politician named Mohammed Brahmi was gunned down in Tunis, while in a car outside his own home. The gunmen reportedly fired eleven shots at Brahmi, then fled on a motorbike. The assassination spun Tunisia into new chaos. Protests again erupted across the country, as angry crowds called for the government's resignation. Police fired tear gas at crowds that stormed government offices and attacked Ennahda's headquarters.

The day after Brahmi's death, interior minister Ben Jeddou held a press conference in which he claimed that forensic ballistics determined that Belaïd and Brahmi were killed by the same gun – which was subsequently confiscated in a raid in Tunis's Wardieh neighbourhood.⁷⁶ Ben Jeddou also said that the government had "uncovered substantial proof that cannot be refuted" during the course of the investigation, but did not provide further details.⁷⁷ Prime Minister Laarayedh described the gun as providing "proof that the Ansar group is responsible" for the two assassinations.⁷⁸

Ennahda ultimately designated AST a terrorist organisation and banned it on 27 August, stating that AST was responsible for both political assassinations as well as the Jebel el-Chaambi attacks.

This leaves the question of whether AST actually bore responsibility for both assassinations. The answer is not entirely clear, but on balance, the evidence suggests that AST's leadership did not order the killings (which

⁶⁹ Roua Khelifi, "Who Killed Chokri Belaïd? Timeline of the Investigation", *Tunisia Live* (12 Sept. 2013), <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/03/16/who-killed-chokri-belaïd-timeline-of-the-investigation/>.

⁷⁰ David Ottoway, *Violence Unsettles Tunisia's Democratic Transition* (Washington, DC: The Wilson Center, 2013), p. 2; "Qui est Kamel Gadhgadi?", *DirectInfo* (5 Feb. 2013).

⁷¹ "Tunisia: Police Raid in Raoued – Interior Ministry Discloses Identity of Terrorists Killed", *All Africa* (5 Feb. 2014), <http://allafrica.com/stories/201402051196.html>.

⁷² "En Tunisie, l'assassin présumé de l'opposant Chokri Belaïd tué", *Le Monde* (4 Feb. 2014), http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2014/02/04/en-tunisie-l-assassin-presume-de-l-opposant-chokri-belaïd-tue_4360200_1466522.html.

⁷³ "Anti-Terrorist Operation in Raoued: Ben Jeddou Announces Gadhgadhi's Death", *Tunis Afrique Presse* (4 Feb. 2014), <http://www.tap.info.tn/en/index.php/politics2/15337-anti-terrorist-operation-in-raoued-ben-jeddou-announces-kamel-gadhgadhi-s-death>.

⁷⁴ "Tunisia: Police Kill Gadhgadhi, Suspect in Belaïd Assassination", *All Africa* (4 Feb. 2014), <http://allafrica.com/stories/201402050134.html>.

⁷⁵ "Belaïd Family to Tunisia Interior Ministry: You Killed Gadhgadhi, But Where is Truth?", *Middle East Online* (5 Feb. 2014), <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=64067>.

⁷⁶ Mohammad Yassin al-Jalassi, "Tunisia Minister: Ansar al-Sharia Linked to Assassinations", *Al-Monitor* (29 Aug. 2013), <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/08/ansar-al-sharia-connected-to-assassinations.html#>.

⁷⁷ "Conférence de presse Lotfi Ben Jeddou" (26 July 2013), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJ6ycn5zVug>.

⁷⁸ "Ansar al-Sharia Blamed for Tunisia Killings", *Al Jazeera* (27 Aug. 2013), <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/08/2013827131811488516.html>.

does not, as will be discussed momentarily, mean that they bear no responsibility in the deaths). Indeed, many Tunisians have been suspicious of the government's answers. Some believe that the government rushed to finger a perpetrator in order to deflect blame from itself: after all, Ennahda was the target of a vigorous backlash following Belaïd's murder, and these sentiments spiked again after Brahmi was killed.⁷⁹

Turning to specific suspicions about the government blaming AST, the ballistics test that linked the same gun to both Belaïd and Brahmi's murders seemed suspiciously fast to some observers.⁸⁰ The government also has yet to release evidence regarding culpability for the killings beyond its claim that the same gun killed both men, despite its claim to have "substantial proof that cannot be refuted". These killings also run contrary to the strategy AST had established by early 2013 of maintaining its ability to operate legally and openly while at the same time engaging in violence that falls below the levels that might trigger a crackdown. Skepticism of claims that AST's leadership ordered the assassinations appears justified.

This is not to say that AST members did not carry out the assassinations – they appear to have done so. And this raises the further issue that AST may still be considered culpable in the assassinations even if its leadership did not order the killings. The group has propagated a violent ideology that considers secularism heretical, and has worked to create a parallel state, including facilitating militant training for its members. As with the violence at Jebel el-Chaambi, the assassinations did not prompt AST to carry out an internal purge, which at least points to its leadership's permissiveness: if the leadership opposed the killing of Belaïd or Brahmi, it was because the timing was strategically inopportune, not because it had an objection rooted in principle.

Thus, regardless of questions about the role of AST's leadership in these incidents, the Tunisian government chose to designate AST a terrorist organisation and ban it after the Brahmi assassination and the slaughter of eight soldiers at Jebel el-Chaambi. As alluded to earlier, the decision to crack down on AST was driven by both strategic thinking and also political considerations. Tunisia understood that AST was not going away as a problem that the state would have to deal with, and that over time its numbers were growing even while its members engaged in an increasing amount of violence. The state also understood that the ambiguities it faced in trying to determine whether the assassinations or the violence at Jebel el-Chaambi were ordered by AST's top leadership existed by design: they reflected the manner in which the jihadist group wanted to be able to engage in violence while simultaneously denying any involvement. At the same time, the government faced tremendous political pressure to act against AST in the wake of two major political assassinations and the death and injury of several members of the security forces, in a country that was not accustomed to these levels of violence.

Thus, the government decided that whether or not AST's leadership had ordered the recent violence was not the most important question. As a matter of strategy and politics, the state decided on a vigorous response. AST's designation would in turn lead the government to make a number of public revelations about it. If true, these revelations should significantly shift the way analysts understand AST's relationship to regional militancy.

7. Tunisia's Revelations About AST

In announcing AST's ban, the government provided several sets of revelations about the organisation, one of which concerned its relationship with the AQ network. When Tunisian Prime Minister Laarayedh announced AST's designation as a terrorist group, he accused AST of "liaising" with AQIM. Tunisia's claims about AST's connection to AQIM specifically, and the AQ network more broadly, can be divided into four categories: leadership ties, operational links, financial support, and intentions.

Allegations of leadership ties between AST and AQIM are based primarily on documentary evidence, a handwritten "Allegiance Act" between AST emir Abu Iyad al-Tunisi and AQIM leader Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud.⁸¹ Though the document has not been publicly released, regional reporting claims that the Allegiance Act holds that whoever swears allegiance (*bayat*) to Abu Iyad and "then disobeys his orders may be subject to physical extermination". Reporting on the Allegiance Act has been sparse overall, but it may be the source of another claim that has surfaced in the Tunisian press: in the Arabic-language newspaper *Essahafa*, Mohamed Salah Hadri

⁷⁹ "Protests After Tunisia Politician Shot Dead", *Al Jazeera* (27 July 2013), <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/07/201372512523404400.html>.

⁸⁰ Andrew Lebovich and Aaron Zelin, "Alleged Brahmi Killer: Tracing Ties Between Aboubaker el-Hakim, Ansar al-Sharia, and Al Qaeda", *Tunisia Live* (26 July 2013).

⁸¹ "Tunisia Says Ansar al-Sharia was Planning More Assassinations, Bombings", *Tunis Afrique Presse* (29 Aug. 2013).

claimed that Abu Iyad “swore an oath of allegiance to an Algerian emir”. If this claim is correct, Abdel Wadoud is the likeliest figure to whom Abu Iyad may have taken *bayat*.

It is not clear when the Allegiance Act was supposed to have been signed or the oath of *bayat* taken, but these allegations are consistent with claims made by captured members of Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi. Algerian security forces arrested Riadh Toufi, one of the Katibat's founding members, on November 18.⁸² During his interrogation, Riadh Toufi described Abu Iyad as nothing more than a “marionette”, claiming that AQIM's emir for the Sahara area, Yahya Abu al-Humam, held all the power.⁸³ Abu Iyad, according to Toufi, only followed Humam's dictates.

When the government sought to arrest Abu Iyad, he fled to Libya. *Essahafa* hypothesises that, while there, he may have met with Mokhtar Belmokhtar, the emir of the notorious jihadist group Signatories in Blood, which executed the spectacular January 2013 attack at the Tigantourine gas plant near In Amenas, Algeria. Another connection that Abu Iyad seems to have made during his recent time in exile is Libyan political figure Abdelhakim Belhadj, a former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) commander. Tunisian attorney and investigator Taieb Laguili has alleged that Belhadj is now providing Abu Iyad with shelter from authorities.⁸⁴

A second layer of links between AST and AQIM outlined by Tunisia is operational. A large part of the operational ties are focused on Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi, with interior minister Lotfi Ben Jeddou referring to “established links” between AST and AQIM through the militant outfit. Mustapha Ben Amor, Tunisia's director general of national security, described AST as a member of “the parent terrorist al-Qaeda”, and said that AST members receive training in Libya and Syria.⁸⁵

The third categorical layer through which Tunisian authorities alleged a connection between AST and AQIM is financial. Authorities alleged that AST receives financial support from AQ, with Ben Amor saying that government investigations found that AST's financing comes from “external and internal sources”.⁸⁶ Ben Amor specified that the external sources of funding are located in countries like Yemen, Libya, and Mali, all of which are known to have a significant AQ presence.

A fourth layer of alleged connections lies in both AST and AQ's intentions. The Tunisian press has reported that sources in the Tunisian Security Services Union now claim that the country is more important to AQ than previously thought. They say that AQ is looking to establish a permanent foothold in Tunisia, rather than viewing it only as a passageway for arms and personnel. Ben Amor said that AST shares these aspirations, seeking to “create a security vacuum through assassinations, before seizing power and establishing the first Islamic emirate in North Africa”.⁸⁷

Expanding on these claims, the government claimed that AST has a covert military wing, the leadership of which includes a “preparatory operations group” with six members, a “support and implementation group” with eight members, and a “mobilisation and armament group” with two members. The government also pointed to a number of planned attacks by AST that were either discovered or thwarted. Most chillingly, Interior Minister Ben Jeddou claimed that his ministry found “an assassination list” containing the names of a wide array of “politicians and anti-Islamist media figures”, including writers, academics, and a film director.⁸⁸

If Tunisia's information about AST is correct, it is highly likely that the group is an unacknowledged AQ affiliate. We already noted that many analysts will disagree with our view that AST seems to be an unacknowledged AQ affiliate – primarily because many Western observers are quite sceptical of the Tunisian government's claims in this regard. Indeed, Tunisia has done its credibility no favours by exaggerating some

⁸² “L'armée algérienne arrête un libyen en relation avec les terroristes de Chaâmbi”, *Mosaïque FM* (18 Nov. 2013), <http://www.mosaiquefm.net/fr/index/a/ActuDetail/Element/28710-l-armee-algerienne-arrete-un-libyen-en-relation-avec-les-terroristes-de-chaambi>.

⁸³ “Tunisie: Abou Yadh, marionnette de Abou El Hammam!”, *Investir en Tunisie* (21 Nov. 2013), http://www.investir-en-tunisie.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=23201:-tunisie--abou-yadh-marionnette-de-abou-el-hammam-&catid=95:politique-social&Itemid=317.

⁸⁴ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Kathleen Soucy, “Abdelhakim Belhadj and Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia”, *FDD Policy Brief* (8th Oct. 2013), <http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/abdelhakim-belhadj-and-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia/>.

⁸⁵ “Tunisia: Al-Qaeda Funds Ansar al-Sharia, Tunisia Reveals”, *All Africa* (29 Aug. 2013), <http://allafrica.com/stories/201308300788.html>.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Tarek Amara, “Tunisian Islamist Radicals Planned Other Murders, Islamic State: Ministry”, *Reuters* (28 Aug. 2013), <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/28/us-tunisia-crisis-islamists-idUSBRE97R0TP20130828>.

⁸⁸ Jalassi, “Ansar al-Sharia Linked to Assassinations” (2013).

aspects of AST's activities. Given this scepticism, it is worth briefly outlining a framework for determining whether a group might be part of the AQ network. Five major factors are relevant to this evaluation: the group's ideology, its leadership, its international connections, whether it is functionally advancing AQ's agenda, and whether the AQ organisation has specific mechanisms to either influence or control its activities.

Turning to this framework, there is evidence to suggest that AST may be part of the AQ network even if one completely discounts Tunisia's most recent evidence. The group openly proclaims its devotion to AQ's ideology – not only committing itself to salafi jihadism generally, but even specifying its “loyalty to Qaeda al-Jihad and the jihadi formations”.⁸⁹ AST's leadership has longstanding connections to AQ: Abu Iyad was connected to AQ even in pre-9/11 Afghanistan, while men like Tarek Maaroufi, Sami bin Khamis Essid, and Mehdi Kammoun were part of its European networks. A group with multiple leadership connections to AQ is more likely to be or become part of the network: Somalia's al-Shabaab is an example of this dynamic. As to the group's international connections, AST had a significant amount of connections to transnational jihadism, including AQIM, even prior to the most recent revelations.⁹⁰

Was AST functionally advancing AQ's agenda? The answer is yes, even if one completely discounts Tunisia's new evidence about its connections to the jihadist network. Soon after the Arab Uprisings began, salafi jihadist strategists, including major AQ ideologues, outlined their strategic assessment of what the revolutionary events meant, and how to exploit them. The consensus blueprint that these strategists forged for exploiting the new environment was to take advantage of the new *dawa* opportunities that would exist in post-revolution states. AQ emir Ayman al-Zawahiri specifically noted that “an opportunity for advocacy and statement in Egypt and Tunisia has opened”.⁹¹ However, these strategists also emphasised that there would be an eventual need to transition from *dawa* to jihad. As Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam wrote, there was a need to eventually produce “real and open existence for jihad”, without which the efforts of Islamists would have no results “other than gathering and dispersion”, because a number of different “intellectual trends” would be competing for power.⁹² AST followed AQ's template for the Arab Spring environment, with its emphasis on *dawa* and its covert military wing preparing for the eventual shift to jihad. Further, as the group escalated its violent activities, it did so in a manner consistent with AQ's objectives. Examples of this include the attack on the US embassy in Tunis in September 2012, and AST's cooperation with AQIM on the Katibat Uqbah Ibn Nafi.

This leaves the framework's final question, whether AQ has specific mechanisms to influence or control AST's activities. Tunisia's newly released evidence – that which some Western analysts are sceptical of – speaks to these mechanisms of control. Such mechanisms alleged by Tunisia include Abu Iyad's oath of *bayat* to Abu Musab Abdel Wadoud, AST's financial dependence on AQ financiers, and military dependence on AQIM in Jebel el-Chaambi.

Two observations can be made about the new evidence Tunisia has introduced about AST. The first is that the new evidence is consistent with AST's international connections and how it has situated itself toward AQ. While consistency does not necessarily make Tunisia's evidence true, scepticism is always more warranted when new evidence seems to contradict what was previously known about a group. The second observation is that whether Tunisia's allegations are correct is a factual matter that could be resolved quickly with access to more documentary evidence, such as the alleged Allegiance Act. So the existence of scepticism among some analysts does not mean that questions about the AST-AQ relationship are unanswerable.

We assess Tunisia's new evidence about the AST-AQ relationship as likely correct, but acknowledge that publicly available evidence does not provide an incontrovertible answer. If Tunisia's information is correct, then AST has been operating as an unacknowledged AQ affiliate for some time. However, several other questions arise. How long has AST had this relationship with AQIM and AQ? Was the group designed by Abu Iyad to be an unacknowledged rebranding of AQ, or did the relationship develop organically over time? Is there a relationship between AST and AQ's senior leadership?

⁸⁹ Joscelyn, “Ansar al-Sharia Responds to Tunisian Government” (2013).

⁹⁰ For an analysis of AST's connections to transnational jihadism prior to the escalation in the conflict between AST and the state, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, “Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's International Connections”, *ICCT Commentaries* (21 Mar. 2013).

⁹¹ Ayman al-Zawahiri, “And be Neither Weakened nor Saddened”, Al-Sahab Media (15 Aug. 2011).

⁹² Hamzah bin Muhammad al-Bassam, “Heeding the Advantages and Lessons of the Two Uprisings of Egypt and Tunisia”, *Ansar Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiyah* (25 Feb. 2011).

8. AST's Alleged Targeting of Tourists

The government's ban on AST impeded its *dawa* efforts, and Tunisia thereafter undertook extensive policing operations against its network. As the state escalated, so did Tunisian salafists. Tourism is an important part of Tunisia's economy, contributing 7 percent of the country's GDP and 15 percent of its employment.⁹³ Terrorist attacks have started to focus on tourist targets – although, as with the political assassinations, there are serious questions about whether they were ordered by the group's leadership.

8.1 Twin attempted bombings in October

On the morning of 30 October 2013, a man carrying a bulky suitcase tried to enter Sousse's four-star Riadh Palms Hotel, a popular resort for European tourists visiting the beachside city. Security guards questioned him as he tried to make his way in, and quickly decided they did not want to let him enter.

The man with the suitcase rushed out toward the beach, with security on his tail. Suddenly a loud explosion disrupted the morning's tranquillity. Wrecked umbrellas, lounge chairs, and the suicide bomber's remains littered the beach. Explosives experts later discovered that the bomb had been detonated from a distance with cell phone, a technique that terrorist groups sometimes employ when the attacker is a new member.⁹⁴

Fifteen miles south, on the edge of a Gulf of Hammamet peninsula, is the city of Monastir. Almost simultaneous with the Sousse bombing, authorities arrested an eighteen-year-old named Aymen Sâadi Berchid, outside the mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba, the country's secular-minded first president. Though Bourguiba is respected by most Tunisians for his role in bringing Tunisia its independence, his deeply-felt secularism makes him a *bête noire* of religious conservatives. The intentions of the young man whom authorities apprehended outside Bourguiba's mausoleum were clear enough from the fact that his backpack was jammed full of explosives. He tossed a firecracker to try to distract security officers, but the diversion failed, and authorities restrained him.

Berchid, the would-be bomber, had recently attempted to enter Syria to join the conflict raging there, and his mother claimed that he had already been the subject of four search warrants.⁹⁵ Tunisia's interior ministry claimed that both of the attackers belonged to AST.⁹⁶

As with past security incidents, Tunisian police sprang into action immediately following the attempted attacks. The interior ministry announced the arrest of five individuals "with direct links to the assailants" in the cities of Sousse and Monastir.⁹⁷ They also found a large quantity of explosives in one of the houses they searched in Monastir.⁹⁸ The individuals arrested in the sweep allegedly confessed to a plot to bomb the headquarters of the Tunisian National Union of Security Forces Syndicates, police posts, and four supermarkets that sold alcohol.⁹⁹ The arrestees were reportedly in contact with Abu Iyad by Skype two days before the attacks.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Charles Prioux, "Le nouveau terrorisme tunisien: de belles ambitions?", *Intelligence Strategique* (3 Oct. 2012), <http://www.intelligence-strategique.eu/blog/2012/10/03/le-nouveau-tourisme-tunisien-de-belles-ambitions-dans-un-contexte-politique-et-economique-delicat/>.

⁹⁴ "Selon les premiers éléments de l'enquête, la bombe aurait été déclenchée à distance", *DirectInfo*, (1 Nov. 2013), <http://directinfo.webmanagercenter.com/2013/11/01/attentats-sousse-selon-les-premieres-elements-de-lenquete-la-bombe-auroit-ete-declenchee-a-distance/>.

⁹⁵ "Tunisie – Témoignage de la mère du jeune terroriste de Monastir", *Tunisie en numérique* (30 Oct. 2013), <http://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-temoignage-de-la-mere-du-jeune-terroriste-de-monastir/198780>; "Tunisie: deux attentats déjoués dans des zones touristiques", *Le Parisien* (30 Oct. 2013), <http://www.leparisien.fr/international/tunisie-attaque-suicide-a-sousse-tentative-a-monastir-30-10-2013-3271681.php>.

⁹⁶ Nouredine Baltayeb, "Tunisia: Ansar al-Sharia Inaugurates Era of Suicide Bombers", *Al Akhbar* (1 Nov. 2013), <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17485>.

⁹⁷ Hamida Ben Salah, "Tunisia Arrests 5 Suspects After Failed Suicide Attacks", *Agence France Presse* (30 Oct. 2013), <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ityFu3emKr4ytiRssfBXvqk7fy6Q?docId=9d61e9ed-0354-4061-ab0c-24bdf35d588c>.

⁹⁸ "Attentats en Tunisie: cinq suspects arrêtés, les salafistes accusés", *Le Monde* (30 Oct. 2013), http://www.lemonde.fr/tunisie/article/2013/10/30/deux-attentats-suicides-rates-en-tunisie_3505273_1466522.html.

⁹⁹ "Tunisie: Les terroristes arrêtés après l'attentat de Sousse planifiaient des attentats dans 4 supermarchés", *Kapitalis* (1 Nov. 2013), <http://www.kapitalis.com/societe/18953-tunisie-les-terroristes-arretes-apres-l-attentat-de-sousse-planifiaient-des-attentats-dans-4-supermarches.html>.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

8.2 December arrests

On 9 December, Tunisian authorities thwarted another planned attack that similarly seemed to target tourists when they arrested six members of a cell.¹⁰¹ Though their intended target was unclear, according to reports the most serious threat was against the island of Djerba, a popular destination for visitors. Interior ministry spokesman Mohamed Ali Aroui suggested that the attack may have been intended for New Year's Eve celebrations, possibly striking hotels or clubs.

9. Conclusion

This Paper has traced the escalation in the conflict between AST and the Tunisian state throughout 2013. This spiralling conflict culminated in AST's designation as a terrorist group and ban, followed by both intensive policing operations aimed at AST and an escalation in salafi jihadist violence.

Multiple incidents ultimately produced this open state of war between the two, beginning with the killing of Anis Jelassi in Kasserine. Thereafter actions and reactions by AST and the state fed off each other. Policing operations put more security forces in harm's way, and when they struck landmines or ended up in fire fights, the incidents generated more pressure to act. When Chokri Belaïd was killed, many protesters blamed the Ennahda Party, thus putting more pressure on it. Additional harm to security officers in Jebel el-Chaambi caused the state to ban AST's annual conference in Kairouan, further multiplying tensions. When Mohammed Brahmi and eight members of the security forces were killed within five days of each other at the end of July 2013, there could be no turning back. The state had to take decisive action, and it did.

So far things seem to be going well for the Tunisian state. It has conducted a large number of security sweeps. Though there have been attempted attacks against the tourist sector, none have succeeded in causing fatalities (though the Sousse attack arguably achieved one of its major objectives by depressing tourism). Tunisia succeeded in finalising its constitution in January 2014, which is a significant step with the potential to reduce some of the frustrations with the political system that have bolstered AST. There are no signs thus far that Tunisia's war with AST will wreck this progress, though it is possible that a dramatic event changes the situation. What if militants kidnap and kill European tourists? What if they launch a successful suicide bombing at a major resort, or another prominent destination like Tunis's Africa Hotel? These possibilities could have a major impact on the country – and it is possible that they could yield an unexpected result. When Egypt's Gama'a al-Islamiyya slaughtered 58 people in Luxor in 1997, the militant group perhaps expected to devastate the country's tourist industry. Instead, Gama'a overplayed its hand, and turned Egypt's citizenry against it. The result is that Gama'a got eviscerated by the state's crackdown.¹⁰²

The story of the conflict between AST and the Tunisian state is far from its final chapter, and three major questions are relevant to its progression. The first question is how resilient AST will be in the face of Tunisia's crackdown. As Derek Jones has noted, one reason AQ has proven so stubbornly difficult to kill is because of its clandestine cellular structure.¹⁰³ Such groups are clandestine in that they are designed to be out of sight, and cellular in that they are compartmentalised to minimise damage when the enemy neutralises some portion of the network. Compartmentalisation takes two forms. First, at a cell level, a minimum of personal information is known about other cell members. Second, there is strategic compartmentalisation between different elements within the organisation. Counterinsurgents can capture one person in a cell without destroying the cell; and where cell members must interact directly, structural compartmentalisation attempts to ensure that the cell cannot be exploited to target other cells or leaders.

While this organisational structure has helped AQ to survive, it may not prove as successful for AST. One factor that allows AQ's organisational structure to help it survive is that it has a deep bench of jihadists to draw

¹⁰¹ Monica Ghanmi, "Tunisia Thwarts New Suicide Bombing", *All Africa* (10 Dec. 2013), <http://allafrica.com/stories/201312110409.html?viewall=1>.

¹⁰² For an excellent analysis of the defeat of Egypt's militant Islamic groups in the 1990s, see Hassanein Tawfik Ibrahim, "The Rise and Fall of Militant Islamic Groups in Egypt", in Klejda Mulaj ed., *Violent Non-State Actors in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 115-35.

¹⁰³ Jones, *Understanding the Form, Function, and Logic* (2012).

from. On the other hand, AST has a far shallower pool of talent. It is possible that the Tunisian state will simply overwhelm AST's ability to be resilient in the face of attrition.

A second question is whether AQIM will send fighters across the border into Tunisia to enhance AST's capabilities as Tunisia clamps down on it. In addition to AQIM being close to AST, AQIM's rhetoric toward the Tunisian state became sharper as AST's conflict with the state escalated, which clearly raised the possibility of an increase in AQIM-related violence in Tunisia.¹⁰⁴ If AQIM devotes significant resources to the conflict in Tunisia, that could alter the balance of power on the ground.

A third question is whether lack of professionalism in the Tunisian security services will create greater public sympathy for AST. The *New York Times* noted that in Raoued, where Kamel Ghadghadi was killed by security forces, residents had "little sympathy for terrorists, but also little confidence in the police who, despite new training and equipment, are still tarnished by a reputation for cruelty and injustice from the years of dictatorship".¹⁰⁵ Public confidence in the Tunisian security services will have a fundamental impact on the conflict between AST and the state, and bears watching.

Western countries have a stake in the outcome of the conflict between AST and the Tunisian state, and should be willing to assist the government in its struggle with jihadists.

¹⁰⁴ See extensive discussion in Aaron Y. Zelin, Andrew Lebovich and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb's Tunisia Strategy", *CTC Sentinel* (23 July 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Carlotta Gall, "Despite Signs of Progress, Security Issues Rise in Tunisia", *New York Times* (7 Feb. 2014), <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/08/world/africa/despite-signs-of-progress-security-issues-rise-in-tunisia.html>.

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