

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

Name: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

Type of Organization:

- Insurgent
- non-state actor
- religious
- social services provider
- terrorist
- transnational
- violent

Ideologies and Affiliations:

- ISIS-affiliated group
- Islamist
- jihadist
- Qutbist
- Salafist
- Sunni
- takfiri

Place of Origin:

Tunisia

Year of Origin:

2011

Founder(s):

Seifallah Ben Hassine

Places of Operation:

Tunisia

Overview

Also Known As:

- Al-Qayrawan Media Foundation¹
- Ansar al-Sharia²
- Ansar al-Shari'ah³
- Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia (AAS-T)⁴
- Ansar al-Shari'ah in Tunisia⁵
- Partisans of Islamic Law in Tunisia⁶
- Partisans of Sharia in Tunisia⁷
- Shabab al-Tawhid (ST)⁸
- Supporters of Islamic Law⁹
- Supporters of Islamic Law in Tunisia¹⁰
- Supporters of Sharia in Tunisia¹¹

Executive Summary:

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST) was a Salafist group that was prominent in Tunisia from 2011 to 2013.¹² AST sought to implement sharia (Islamic law) in the country and used violence in furtherance of that goal under the banner of hisbah (the duty to command moral acts and prohibit immoral ones).¹³ AST also actively engaged in *dawa* (Islamic missionary work), which took on many forms but were largely centered upon the provision of public services.¹⁴ Accordingly, AST found a receptive audience among Tunisians frustrated with the political instability and dire economic conditions that followed the

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2011 Tunisian Revolution.¹⁵ The group received logistical support from al-Qaeda central, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Ansar al-Sharia in Libya (ASL), and later, from ISIS.¹⁶ AST was designated as a terrorist group by the United States, the United Nations, and Tunisia, among others.¹⁷

AST was originally conceived in a Tunisian prison by 20 Islamist inmates in 2006, according to Aaron Zelin at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Following the Tunisian Revolution in 2011, many of those Islamist inmates were pardoned and released from prison, including Seifallah Ben Hassine (a.k.a. Abu Iyad al-Tunisi).¹⁸ Ben Hassine formally established AST in April 2011 and, according to a spokesman for Tunisia's Interior Ministry, many of AST's original members "were among those released from prison" under the general pardon.¹⁹

Following the revolution, new-found civil liberties enabled AST to openly proselytize and the group claimed to amass as many as 70,000 followers.²⁰ AST initiated several violent protests, including the September 2012 attack on the U.S. embassy in Tunis.²¹ AST militants were also held responsible for the assassination of secular Tunisian politicians Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmî in February and July 2013, respectively.²²

In August 2013, the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization and launched a large-scale crackdown on the group.²³ With the high number of arrests among its leadership and fighters and the rise of ISIS across the region, AST began to fragment.²⁴ In July 2014, AST spokesman Seifeddine Rais declared loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.²⁵ By mid-2015, analysts had reported that AST no longer existed in any meaningful way and that many of its surviving militants had left to fight alongside other jihadist groups in Libya and Syria.²⁶

Doctrine:

AST embraced Salafism: the belief that "pure Islam" was practiced by the generation of pious Muslims (the *salaf*) that lived around the time of the Prophet Muhammad.²⁷ To restore "pure Islam" in modern times, AST supported the creation of an Islamic state governed by sharia.²⁸ An unnamed AST member stated in an interview that "[t]he state that we imagine is based on God's laws. This is the [*sic*] not up for discussion. We are Muslims and we want to act according [to] the *Quran* and *sunna* [body of legal practice]."²⁹ AST claimed democracy and sharia cannot exist simultaneously—according to jihadist group scholar Aaron Y. Zelin, AST "believe[d] democracy is a separate religion from Islam."³⁰

AST members in Europe reportedly "flocked" to listen to al-Qaeda's "most influential" cleric, [Abu Qatada](#) [1], who was also known as Osama bin Laden's "European ambassador" for a time.³¹ AST shared al-Qaeda's vision of global jihad and promoted jihad abroad.³² "With our religion we can dominate the world, just like we used to in the past," an anonymous AST member declared in 2013.³³ In Tunisia, AST mainly focused on *dawa*, which it viewed as a precursor to future violent jihad.³⁴ "This is a long-term vision to prepare society," AST spokesman Hassen Brik said. "We are for jihad, armed revolution, but we cannot do this if the people are not with us. It will only be possible when everyone is behind the vision."³⁵

Organizational Structure:

According to an alleged AST leader, the group was a "lightweight and decentralized movement, with an extended autonomy for the local groups, which are the real core of the movement."³⁶ The leader went on to emphasize the importance of the organization's lowest level, local groups made up of around 20 people who coordinated the organization's activities neighborhood by neighborhood. The organization was reportedly divided into northern, central, and southern branches.³⁷

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Counterterrorism scholar Daveed Gartenstein-Ross noted that although AST was divided into small, autonomous sub-groups, the group's senior leadership was not "irrelevant or lacking any means of control." In fact, senior leadership reportedly had direct control over various compartments, including offices for *dawa*, humanitarian activities, media, and tactical coordination.³⁸ Gartenstein-Ross explained that "sources loyal to AST have an incentive to portray it as decentralized... by emphasizing this decentralization, AST can engage in violence without triggering a state crackdown."³⁹

Financing:

AST's principal fundraisers were "[Tunisian] charities that raise financial and in-kind donations," according to Tunisian journalist Nebil Zaghdoud.⁴⁰ Tunisian researcher Sami Brahem said AST profited from smuggled goods and from "more than 120 legal organisations that distribute subsidies," many of which operate overseas.⁴¹

The Tunisian and U.S. governments claim AST received funding from al-Qaeda, particularly its affiliate al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In August 2013, Tunisia's Director General of National Security, Mustapha Ben Amor, said that AST "is a member of the parent terrorist al-Qaeda" and that its financing came from "certain Arab countries, such as Yemen, Libya and Mali."⁴² David Cohen, then-U.S. Undersecretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, stated that "AQIM...has provided funding for other terrorist groups including Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia."⁴³

Recruitment and Training:

AST claimed to have recruited as many as 70,000 members since it was established in April 2011, according to a 2014 *Economist* article.⁴⁴ AST appeared to attract recruits by capitalizing on popular frustration with the Tunisian government.⁴⁵ As one student supporter of AST said: "They welcome people, they perform charitable works that the state doesn't do: caravans bringing food aid, assistance, clothes, in every corner of the country in the poor neighborhoods."⁴⁶

Like other Salafist groups, AST seemingly expanded its membership by recruiting through "preaching tents" on school campuses.⁴⁷ AST also recruited through social media. The group's media wing, al-Qayrawan Media Foundation, used a Facebook page and Twitter account until both were removed. Al-Qayrawan later reemerged on those sites under other names.⁴⁸

Thousands of AST members received military training at camps in Libya and many went on to Syria to fight, alongside ISIS and other jihadist groups, against Bashar al-Assad's forces.⁴⁹

¹ "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to Its Sanctions List," United Nations, September 23, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm> [2].

² "Counter Terrorism Designations," U.S. Department of the Treasury, January 10, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20140110.aspx> [3].

³ "Counter Terrorism Designations," U.S. Department of the Treasury, January 10, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20140110.aspx> [3].

⁴ "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to Its Sanctions List," United Nations, September 23, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm> [2].

⁵ "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to Its Sanctions List," United Nations, September 23, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm> [2].

⁶ "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to Its Sanctions List," United Nations, September 23, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm> [2].

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⁸ Aaron Y. Zelin, "Shabab Al-Tawhid: The Rebranding of Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia?" Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 9, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/shabab-al-tawhid-the-rebranding-of-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia> [4].

⁹ "Counter Terrorism Designations," U.S. Department of the Treasury, January 10, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/OFAC-Enforcement/Pages/20140110.aspx> [3].

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Key Leaders



Seifallah Ben Hassine
Leader



Seifeddine Rais
Spokesman



Wael Amami
Deputy leader



Kamel Zarrouk
Former deputy leader (deceased)



Sami Ben Khemais Essid
Former head of operations for al-Qaeda in Italy



Mehdi Kammoun
Senior leader



Hassan Ben Brik
Head of dawa committee



Ahmed al-Akrami
Medical and humanitarian coordinator



Youssef Mazouz
Leader of AST's youth wing

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History:

- July 24, 2015:** Tunisia's National Guard arrests 13 militants during a raid in the Bizerte province 35 miles north of Tunis.
One man, later identified by local reports as a member of AST, is killed after opening fire on the Tunisian unit. Source: Associated Press, "Tunisian police announce death of militant, arrest 13 others, preventing attack," Fox News, July 24, 2015, <https://www.foxnews.com/world/tunisian-police-announce-death-of-militant-arrest-of-13-others-preventing-attack> [34].
- June 26, 2015:** A gunman massacres 38 European and Russian tourists, 30 of whom are British, at Port El Kantaoui, near the Tunisian beach resort town of Sousse.
The perpetrator, Seifeddine Rezgui Yacoubi, is believed to have been recruited by terror group Ajnad al-Khilafah, an organization that emerged from AST. Sources: Camilla Turner, "Tunisia attack: gunman's links to Britain," *Telegraph* (London), June 30, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11707325/Tunisia-beach-massacre-gunmans-links-to-Britain.html> [35]; Tom Porter, "Tunisia attack: UK links to Seifeddine Rezgui terror group Ansar al-Sharia emerge," *International Business Times*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/tunisia-attack-uk-links-seifeddine-rezgui-terror-group-ansar-al-sharia-emerge-1508812> [36].
- June 2015:** Seifallah Ben Hassine is killed during a U.S. airstrike in Libya.
According to a number of reports, Ben Hassine had been operating training camps out of Libya since 2013. Source: Carlotta Gall and Eric Schmitt, "Jihadist From Tunisia Died in Strike in Libya, U.S. Official Says," *New York Times*, July 2, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/03/world/africa/jihadist-from-tunisia-died-in-strike-in-libya-us-official-says.html> [37].
- March 17, 2015:** The Tunisian government confirms that former AST leader-turned-ISIS-militant Ahmed al-Rouissi (a.k.a. Abu Zakariya al-Tunisi) was killed in clashes between ISIS and a group in Libya. Al-Rouissi was wanted in connection with the 2013 assassinations of Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi.
Source: Bouazza Ben Bouazza, "Islamic State Group Reports Tunisian Leader Killed in Libya," Associated Press, March 17, 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/0e69e8da0d1f49c4b8410c9b66ed4822/islamic-state-group-reports-tunisian-leader-killed-libya> [38].
- December 17, 2014:** In an ISIS video, AST-linked French-Tunisian jihadist Abubakr al-Hakim claims to have orchestrated the 2013 assassinations of secular Tunisian politicians Mohammed Brahmi and Chokri Belaid.
After the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization in August 2013, analysts reported that many Islamists associated with the organization, including al-Hakim, joined ISIS in Syria. Sources: "Video claims Islamic State responsibility for 2013 Tunisia assassinations," *Japan Times*, December 19, 2014, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/12/19/world/video-claims-islamic-state-responsibility-for-2013-tunisia-assassinations/> [39]; Thomas Joscelyn, "US confirms death of high-profile Tunisian Islamic State assassin," *Long War Journal*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/us-confirms-death-of-tunisian-islamic-state-leader-involved-in-high-profile-assassinations.php> [40]; George Packer, "Exporting Jihad: The Arab Spring has given Tunisians the freedom to act on their unhappiness," *New Yorker*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/28/tunisia-and-the-fall-after-the-arab-spring> [41].
- November 5, 2014:** Islamist militants kill four Tunisian soldiers and wound 11 in an attack on a bus near the Algerian border. AST is suspected.
Source: "Four Tunisian Soldiers Killed in Suspected Islamist Attack," Reuters, November 5, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/05/us-tunisia-security-idUSKCN0JF1R020141201> [42].
- October 24, 2014:** Following a 24-hour standoff between police and AST militants in the outskirts of Tunis, Tunisian security forces kill six militants, five of them who are women.
One police officer is wounded in the firefight. Source: Heba Saleh, "Tunisia Police Kill Six Militants in Operation Ahead of Election," *Financial Times*, October 24, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5b12f76e-5b7c-11e4-b68a-00144feab7de.html#axzz3NxR68pNB> [43].
- October 14, 2014:** Tunisian security forces uncover a plot to assassinate Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, a vocal leader of the country's secular Republican Party.
Following the discovery, the government arrests a group of AST militants, including two women. The attack was allegedly set to occur just days before the country's parliamentary elections. Source: Tarek Amara, "Tunisia Says It Thwarted Jihadist Attack before Elections," Reuters, October 14, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/14/us-tunisia-islamists-idUSKCN0I324020141014> [44].
- September 23, 2014:** The U.N. adds AST and Seifallah Ben Hassine to a list of individuals and entities subject to sanctions for supporting al-Qaeda.
Source: "Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to Its Sanctions List," United Nations, September 23, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm> [2].
- August 26, 2014:** The U.S. pledges \$60 million in military aid to Tunisia to battle al-Qaeda-affiliated militants, including AST.
Just three weeks earlier, the U.S. said it would sell Tunisia a dozen Black Hawk helicopters, a deal valued at an estimated \$700 million. Source: "US to Give Tunisia \$60m in Military Aid," Al Jazeera, August 26, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/08/us-give-tunisia-60m-military-aid-2014826141910964934.html> [45].
- July 26, 2014:** Gunmen, armed with rocket-propelled grenades and rifles, attack military checkpoints in the Jebel Chaambi region, killing two Tunisian soldiers.
AST claims responsibility for the attack two days later. Source: Yasm Najjar, "Ansar Al-Sharia Claims Jebel Chaambi Attacks," AllAfrica, August 1, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201408041566.html> [46].
- July 20, 2014:** The Tunisian government launches a crackdown on mosques, radio stations, television networks, and websites sympathetic to Ansar al-Sharia and other jihadist groups operating in the country.
The prime minister's office releases the following statement: "The prime minister has decided to close immediately all the mosques that are not under the control of the authorities, and those mosques where there were reported celebrations over the deaths of the soldiers." Source: "Tunisia to Close Down Salafist-Run Mosques," Al Jazeera, July 20, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/07/tunisia-launches-crackdown-mosques-201472002116194675.html> [47].

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- July 16, 2014:** AST militants armed with rifles and rocket-propelled grenades kill 14 Tunisian soldiers in an attack on military checkpoints near the border with Algeria.
The attack sparks a massive crackdown by Tunisian security forces, including airstrikes and a ground “combing” operation. On July 20, AST formally claims responsibility for the attack. Sources: “At Least Five Tunisia Soldiers Dead After Militant Attack,” Reuters, July 16, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/17/us-tunisia-violence-idUSKBN0FL2UC20140717> [48]; Tarek Amara, “Tunisia Orders Crackdown After Militants Kill 14 Soldiers,” Reuters, July 19, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/20/us-tunisia-violence-idUSKBN0FO10420140720> [49]; Yasmine Najjar, “Tunisia: Ansar Al-Sharia Claims Jebel Chaambi Attacks,” AllAfrica, August 1, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201408041566.html> [46]; Kevin Moore, “Statement from Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia Claiming Responsibility for Attack on Tunisian Security Forces,” 19 July 2014, “Edinburgh Arabic Initiative, July 20, 2014, <https://edinburgharabicinitiative.wordpress.com/2014/07/20/statement-from-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia-claiming-responsibility-for-attack-on-tunisian-security-forces/> [50].
- July 4, 2014:** While speaking at a mosque in Kairouan, Tunisia, AST spokesman Seifeddine Rais swears loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS.
Source: Jamel Arfaoui, “Tunisia: Ansar Al-Sharia Spokesman Backs Isis,” AllAfrica, May 14, 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201407090299.html> [10].
- March 21, 2014:** AST militants kidnap Mohamed bin Sheikh, the secretary of the Tunisian ambassador, in Tripoli, Libya. AST releases Sheikh on June 29, 2014.
Source: “Mapping Militant Organizations: *Ansar al-Shariah (Tunisia)*,” Stanford University, August 24, 2016, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/547> [24].
- March 17, 2014:** Tunisian police shoot and kill three AST fighters and arrest six others in the Tunisian city of Jendouba.
The raids come a day after Algerian security forces kill seven fighters crossing into Algeria from Tunisia. Source: “Tunisia Police Kill ‘Fighters’ Near Algeria,” Al Jazeera, March 17, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/03/tunisia-police-kill-fighters-near-algeria-2014317162139733800.html> [51].
- February 17, 2014:** The Tunisian Interior Ministry announces stricter regulations regarding the niqab (a veil covering the hair and face, worn by Muslim women).
The ministry states, “In light of the terrorist threats that the country is witnessing and as some suspects and fugitives deliberately wear niqab for disguise and to escape from security units, the ministry... will tighten procedural controls on every person wearing a niqab within the framework of what is authorized by law.” The statement comes under harsh criticism. The government responds citing the case of Seifallah Ben Hassine, who reportedly evaded capture by wearing a niqab. Source: Robert Joyce and Asma Smadhi, “New ‘Controls’ on Niqab Spur Alarm in Tunisia,” Al Jazeera, April 26, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/03/new-controls-niqab-spur-alarm-tunisia-2014319111436498101.html> [52].
- February 16, 2014:** Four militants disguised as Tunisian security officials kill three policemen and a civilian, wounding another two policemen and a border guard near Tunisia’s border with Algeria.
Although no group claims responsibility, Tunisian authorities implicate AST. The attacks trigger protests in the northwestern Tunisian city of Jendouba. More than a thousand people demonstrate in solidarity with the victims. Sources: “Fighters Kill Policemen in Tunisia,” Al Jazeera, February 16, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/fighters-kill-policemen-tunisia-201421693036139272.html> [53]; “Tunisians Protest against Attack on Police,” Al Jazeera, February 18, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/tunisians-protest-against-attack-police-2014217224610567113.html> [54].
- February 9, 2014:** After a brief gun battle in Tunis, authorities arrest four AST militants, including Hmed el-Melki, a.k.a. “Somali.”
El-Melki is a suspect in the assassination of Tunisian MP Mohamed Brahmi. Source: Agence France-Presse, “Tunisia Arrests Suspect in Murder of MP,” Al Jazeera, February 9, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2014/02/tunisia-arrests-suspect-murder-mp-20142952137498819.html> [55].
- February 5, 2014:** In a raid, Tunisian security forces kill seven AST militants, including the prime suspect in Chokri Belaid’s murder.
An Interior Ministry spokesman says the militants had “probably [been] planning to carry out an attack.” Source: “Tunisia Takes Out Top Terrorists,” All Africa, February 5, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201402061024.html> [56].
- February 2014:** AST deputy leader Kamel Zarrouk surfaces in Syria, waging jihad there alongside ISIS fighters.
Source: Bill Roggio, “Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia Deputy Leader Reportedly in Syria,” *Long War Journal*, February 27, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_7.php?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=ansar-al-sharia-tunisia-deputy-leader-reportedly-in-syria# [57].
- January 10, 2014:** The U.S. government designates AST as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) and Seifallah Ben Hassine as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT).
Source: “Terrorist Designations of Three Ansar Al-Shari’a Organizations and Leaders,” U.S. Department of State, January 10, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/219519.htm> [58].
- October 30, 2013:** AST members attempt to carry out two separate suicide attacks.
One bomber blows himself up at the Riadh Palms hotel in Sousse, with no reported casualties. Nearby, in the city of Monastir, security forces prevent a second suicide attack targeting the mausoleum of former Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba. Source: Tristan Dreisbach, “Bombing at Hotel in Sousse, Failed Bombing in Monastir,” Tunisia Live, October 30, 2013, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/10/30/attack-on-hotel-in-sousse/> [59].
- October 20, 2013:** The Tunisian military kills nine and captures four alleged AST figures who were suspected to be involved in the October 17, 2013 murder of two policemen.
Source: “Tunisia: 9 Believed Behind Police Ambush Killed,” Associated Press, October 19, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/tunisia-9-believed-behind-police-ambush-killed> [60].
- October 17, 2013:** AST militants kill two Tunisian policemen during clashes in Goubellat, Tunisia.

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Source: "Gunmen Kill Two Tunisian Police in Northern City," Reuters, October 17, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/17/us-tunisia-security-idUSBRE99G0LS20131017> [61].

- **August 29, 2013:** Tunisian security forces seize an assassination list allegedly compiled by AST. The list includes the names of politicians, anti-Islamist media figures, and academics. Source: Mohammad Yassin Al-Jalassi, "Tunisia Minister: Ansar Al-Sharia Linked to Assassinations," Al-Monitor, August 29, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/08/ansar-al-sharia-connected-to-assassinations.html#> [62].
- **August 27, 2013:** The Tunisian government designates AST as a terrorist organization after claiming to have proof that the group was responsible for assassinating politicians Chorki Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi. Source: "Tunisia Declares Ansar Al-Sharia a Terrorist Group," BBC News, August 27, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23853241> [13].
- **July 29, 2013:** In the midst of heightened tension between AST and the Tunisian government, unidentified militants ambush Tunisian soldiers in the Mount Chaambi region, a hotbed of Islamic extremism located near the border with Algeria. The assailants kill at least eight soldiers, allegedly cutting the throats of three. Source: Carlotta Gall, "Tunisia Faces More Anger After an Ambush Kills Soldiers," *New York Times*, July 29, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/africa/tunisia-faces-more-anger-after-soldiers-die-in-attack.html> [63].
- **July 25, 2013:** AST assassinates secular politician Mohamed Brahmi. The Interior Ministry later determines that AST militants used the same gun to kill both Brahmi and Tunisian politician Chokri Belaid. Source: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "An Escalation in Tunisia: How the State Went to War with Ansar Al-Sharia," *War on the Rocks*, February 24, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/02/an-escalation-in-tunisia-how-the-state-went-to-war-with-ansar-al-sharia/> [20].
- **May 20, 2013:** In a massive show of force, Tunisian police and military block the third AST conference in Kairouan. A riot of approximately 40,000 supporters ensues during which Islamists chant "the rule of the tyrant should fall." Tunisian security forces use tear gas to disperse the crowd and one person is killed. Source: Mischa Benoit-Lavelle, "Salafists, State Move Closer to Open Conflict in Tunisia," Al-Monitor, May 20, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/tunisia-salafists-suppression.html> [64].
- **March 26, 2013:** Tunisian Prime Minister Ali Larayedh accuses Seifallah Ben Hassine of being "deeply involved in issues of violence and arms trafficking." Ben Hassine responds with a warning to the Tunisian government: "To your wise men we say: Keep your sick [or diseased] ones from us, or we will direct our war against them until their downfall and their meeting with the dustbin of history...." Source: Thomas Joscelyn, "War of Words Escalates in Tunisia," *Long War Journal*, March 27, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/03/war_of_words_escalat.php# [65].
- **December 21, 2012:** The Tunisian government announces the arrest of 16 members of a Tunisia-based AQIM-affiliated terrorist cell known as the Militia of Uqba Ibn Nafaa. Authorities say the cell members "were known for their active participation in events organized by [AST]." Source: Thomas Joscelyn, "Tunisian Government Arrests Al Qaeda Cell Tied to Ansar Al Sharia," *Long War Journal*, December 22, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/12/tunisian_government.php# [66].
- **September 14, 2012:** AST organizes protests in front of the U.S. Embassy in Tunis. AST leader Abu Iyad al-Tunisi participates in the protest and allegedly initiates violence against the embassy's security guards. Source: Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Tunisia's War with Ansar Al-Sharia: New Revelations About Al-Qaeda's North African Network," *War on the Rocks*, October 21, 2013, <http://warontherocks.com/2013/10/tunisias-war-with-ansar-al-sharia-new-revelations-about-al-qaedas-north-african-network/> [18].
- **June 2012:** AST organizes riots in Tunis in protest of the "Spring of the Arts" exhibit in Tunis's La Marsa suburb. Thousands of Islamists throw rocks and gasoline bombs at police stations, secular political offices, and courthouses. One person is killed, 65 police officers are injured, and 162 rioters are arrested. Source: Tarek Amara and Lin Noueihed, "Tunisian Salafi Islamists riot over 'insulting' art," Reuters, June 12, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/12/us-tunisia-salafis-clash-idUSBRE85B0XW20120612> [67].
- **May 23, 2012:** More than 5,000 Salafists attend AST's annual conference in Kairouan. AST leaders call on attendees to boycott the media, which they accuse of slandering the Salafist movement. Ben Hassine also calls for the creation of an Islamic workers syndicate to challenge the secular Tunisian General Labor Union. Source: Houda Trabelsi, "Tunisia: Salafist Congress in Kairouan Draws Thousands," *Eurasia Review*, May 24, 2012, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/24052012-tunisia-salafist-congress-kairouan-draws-thousands/> [68].
- **October 2011:** After Nessma TV airs the animated film *Persepolis*, which briefly depicts God in human form, AST launches a "Day of Rage" against the broadcaster. Seifallah Ben Hassine calls on his followers to attack and destroy Nessma's owner's home. Some 300 Islamist protesters descend on the station's offices intending to set fire to the buildings. Sources: Aaron Zelin and Vish Sakthivel, "Tunisia Designates Ansar Al-Sharia," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, August 28, 2013, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisia-designates-ansar-al-sharia> [69]; "Protesters Attack TV Station over Film *Persepolis*," BBC News, October 9, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-15233442> [70].
- **May 2011:** AST launches its Facebook page. Source: Aaron Zelin, "Tunisia: Uncovering Ansar Al-Sharia," Think Africa Press, October 25, 2013, <http://thinkafricapress.com/tunisia/uncovering-ansar-al-sharia> [71].
- **April 2011:** Seifallah Ben Hassine founds AST. Source: "Tunisia Declares Ansar Al-Sharia a Terrorist Group," BBC News, August 27, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23853241> [13].
- **January 2011:** Political upheaval in Tunisia culminates in the ousting of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. Source: "Tunisia: President Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali Forced Out," BBC News, January 15, 2011, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-12195025> [72].

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- **March 2003:**Turkish authorities deport Seifallah Ben Hassine to Tunisia, where he is imprisoned and charged with various terrorism-related offenses.
He remains imprisoned until early 2011. Source: Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar Al Sharia Releases Pictures of FBI Agents," *Long War Journal*, December 23, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/12/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_1.php [73].
- **September 9, 2001:**Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud is assassinated.
TCG is later implicated in the assassination. Source: "Al Qaeda Ally Orchestrated Assault on US Embassy in Tunisia," *Long War Journal*, October 2, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/al_qaeda_ally_orches.php [74].
- **January 2001:**Italian authorities thwart an attack on the U.S. Embassy in Rome.
According to the U.S. Department of State and Italian authorities, the plot was directed by Sami Ben Kemais Essid, then-head of al-Qaeda operations in Italy. Source: Thomas Joscelyn, "From Al Qaeda in Italy to Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia," *Long War Journal*, November 21, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/11/from_al_qaeda_in_ita.php# [75].
- **2000:**Seifallah Ben Hassine founds the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG) "in coordination with Al-Qaeda."
Source: "QE.T.90.02. TUNISIAN COMBATANT GROUP," United Nations, April 7, 2011, <http://www.un.org/sc/committees/1267/NSQDe090E.shtml> [76].

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Violent history:

- **June 2012:** AST organizes riots in Tunis in protest of the “Spring of the Arts” exhibit in Tunis’s La Marsa suburb. Thousands of Islamists throw rocks and gasoline bombs at police stations, secular political offices, and courthouses. One person is killed, 65 police officers are injured, and 162 rioters are arrested.⁵⁰
- **September 14, 2012:** AST organizes protests in front of the U.S. Embassy in Tunis. AST leader Seifallah Ben Hassine participates in the protest and allegedly initiates violence against the embassy’s security guards.⁵¹
- **December 21, 2012:** The Tunisian government announces the arrest of 16 members of a Tunisia-based AQIM-affiliated terrorist cell known as the Militia of Uqba Ibn Nafaa. Authorities say the cell members “were known for their active participation in events organized by [AST].”⁵²
- **February 6, 2013:** AST gunmen assassinate secular Tunisian politician Chokri Belaid on the doorstep of his home.⁵³ Al Jazeera describes his funeral as “one of the largest outpourings of grief in Tunisian history, with an estimated one million people taking to the street.”⁵⁴ The assassination causes the country’s biggest upheaval since the 2011 revolution that ousted former president Ben Ali.⁵⁵
- **May 20, 2013:** In a massive show of force, Tunisian police and military block the third AST conference in Kairouan. A riot of approximately 40,000 supporters ensues during which Islamists chant “the rule of the tyrant should fall.” Tunisian security forces use tear gas to disperse the crowd and one person is killed.⁵⁶
- **July 25, 2013:** AST assassinates secular politician Mohamed Brahmi. The Interior Ministry later determines that AST militants used the same gun to kill both Brahmi and Tunisian politician Chokri Belaid.⁵⁷
- **July 29, 2013:** In the midst of heightened tension between AST and the Tunisian government, unidentified militants ambush Tunisian soldiers in the Mount Chaambi region, a hotbed of Islamic extremism located near the border with Algeria. The assailants kill at least eight soldiers, allegedly cutting the throats of three.⁵⁸
- **October 17, 2013:** AST militants kill two Tunisian policemen during clashes in Goubellat, Tunisia.⁵⁹
- **October 30, 2013:** AST members attempt to carry out two separate suicide attacks. One bomber blows himself up at the Riadh Palms hotel in Sousse, with no reported casualties. Nearby, in the city of Monastir, security forces prevent a second suicide attack targeting the mausoleum of former Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba.⁶⁰
- **February 2014:** AST deputy leader Kamel Zarrouk surfaces in Syria, waging jihad there alongside ISIS fighters.⁶¹
- **February 16, 2014:** Four militants disguised as Tunisian security officials kill three policemen and a civilian, wounding another two policemen and a border guard near Tunisia’s border with Algeria. Although no group claims responsibility, Tunisian authorities implicate AST.⁶² The attacks trigger protests in the northwestern Tunisian city of Jendouba. More than a thousand people demonstrate in solidarity with the victims.⁶³
- **March 21, 2014:** AST militants kidnap Mohamed bin Sheikh, the secretary of the Tunisian ambassador, in Tripoli, Libya. AST releases Sheikh on June 29, 2014.⁶⁴
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- **July 26, 2014:** Gunmen, armed with rocket-propelled grenades and rifles, attack military checkpoints in the Jebel Chaambi region, killing two Tunisian soldiers. AST claims responsibility for the attack two days later.⁶⁸
- **October 14, 2014:** Tunisian security forces uncover a plot to assassinate Ahmed Nejib Chebbi, a vocal leader of the country’s secular Republican Party. Following the discovery, the government arrests a group of AST militants, including two women. The attack was allegedly set to occur just days before the country’s parliamentary elections.⁶⁹
- **October 24, 2014:** Following a 24-hour standoff between police and AST militants in the outskirts of Tunis, Tunisian

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security forces kill six militants, five of who are women. One police officer is wounded in the firefight.⁷⁰

- **November 5, 2014:** Islamist militants kill four Tunisian soldiers and wound 11 in an attack on a bus near the Algerian border. AST is suspected.⁷¹
- **December 17, 2014:** In an ISIS video, AST-linked French-Tunisian jihadist Abubakr al-Hakim claims to have orchestrated the 2013 assassinations of secular Tunisian politicians Mohammed Brahmi and Chokri Belaid. After the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization in August 2013, analysts reported that many Islamists associated with the organization, including al-Hakim, joined ISIS in Syria.⁷²
- **June 26, 2015:** In modern Tunisia's worst terrorist attack, a gunman massacres 38 European and Russian tourists, 30 of whom are British, at Port El Kantaoui, near the Tunisian beach resort town of Sousse. The perpetrator, Seifeddine Rezgui Yacoubi, is believed to have been recruited by terror group Afnan al-Khilafah, an organization that emerged from AST.⁷³

⁵⁰ Tarek Amara and Lin Noueihed, "Tunisian Salafi Islamists riot over 'insulting' art," Reuters, June 12, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/12/us-tunisia-salafis-clash-idUSBRE85B0XW20120612> [67].

⁵¹ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Tunisia's War with Ansar Al-Sharia: New Revelations About Al-Qaeda's North African Network," War on the Rocks, October 21, 2013, <http://warontherocks.com/2013/10/tunisias-war-with-ansar-al-sharia-new-revelations-about-al-qaedas-north-african-network/> [18].

⁵² Thomas Joscelyn, "Tunisian Government Arrests Al Qaeda Cell Tied to Ansar Al Sharia," *Long War Journal*, December 22, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/12/tunisian_government.php# [66].

⁵³ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Tunisia's War with Ansar Al-Sharia: New Revelations about Al-Qaeda's North African Network," War on the Rocks, October 21, 2013, <http://warontherocks.com/2013/10/tunisias-war-with-ansar-al-sharia-new-revelations-about-al-qaedas-north-african-network/> [18].

⁵⁴ Yasmine Ryan, "Who Killed Tunisia's Chokri Belaid?" Al Jazeera, September 12, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/201394183325728267.html> [19].

⁵⁵ Yasmine Ryan, "Who Killed Tunisia's Chokri Belaid?" Al Jazeera, September 12, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/201394183325728267.html> [19].

⁵⁶ Mischa Benoit-Lavelle, "Salafists, State Move Closer to Open Conflict in Tunisia," Al-Monitor, May 20, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/tunisia-salafists-suppression.html> [64].

⁵⁷ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "An Escalation in Tunisia: How the State Went to War with Ansar Al-Sharia," War on the Rocks, February 24, 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/02/an-escalation-in-tunisia-how-the-state-went-to-war-with-ansar-al-sharia/> [20].

⁵⁸ Bouazza Ben Bouazza, "8 Tunisian soldiers killed in militant ambush," Associated Press, July 29, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/official-8-tunisian-soldiers-killed-ambush> [77].

⁵⁹ "Gunmen Kill Two Tunisian Police in Northern City," Reuters, October 17, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/17/us-tunisia-security-idUSBRE99G0LS20131017> [61].

⁶⁰ Tristan Dreisbach, "Bombing at Hotel in Sousse, Failed Bombing in Monastir," Tunisia Live, October 30, 2013, <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2013/10/30/attack-on-hotel-in-sousse/> [59].

⁶¹ Bill Roggio, "Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia Deputy Leader Reportedly in Syria," *Long War Journal*, February 27, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_7.php?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=ansar-al-sharia-tunisia-deputy-leader-reportedly-in-syria# [57].

⁶² "Fighters Kill Policemen in Tunisia," Al Jazeera, February 16, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/fighters-kill-policemen-tunisia-201421693036139272.html> [53].

⁶³ "Tunisians Protest against Attack on Police," Al Jazeera, February 18, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/02/tunisians-protest-against-attack-police-2014217224610567113.html> [54].

⁶⁴ *Ansar al-Shariah (Tunisia)*, Mapping Militant Organizations - Stanford University, August 24, 2016, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/547> [24].

⁶⁵ "At Least Five Tunisia Soldiers Dead After Militant Attack," Reuters, July 16, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/17/us-tunisia-violence-idUSKBN0FL2UC20140717> [48]; Tarek Amara, "Tunisia Orders Crackdown After Militants Kill 14 Soldiers," Reuters, July 19, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/07/20/us-tunisia-violence-idUSKBN0FO10420140720> [49].

⁶⁶ Yasm Najjar, "Tunisia: Ansar Al-Sharia Claims Jebel Chaambi Attacks," AllAfrica, August 1, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201408041566.html> [46].

⁶⁷ Kevin Moore, "'Statement from Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia Claiming Responsibility for Attack on Tunisian Security Forces,' 19 July 2014," Edinburgh Arabic Initiative, July 20, 2014, <https://edinburgharabicinitiative.wordpress.com/2014/07/20/statement-from-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia-claiming-responsibility-for-attack-on-tunisian-security-forces/> [50].

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

⁶⁸ Yasm Najjar, "Ansar Al-Sharia Claims Jebel Chaambi Attacks," AllAfrica, August 1, 2014, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201408041566.html> [46].

⁶⁹ Tarek Amara, "Tunisia Says It Thwarted Jihadist Attack before Elections," Reuters, October 14, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/14/us-tunisia-islamists-idUSKCN0I324020141014> [44].

⁷⁰ Heba Saleh, "Tunisia Police Kill Six Militants in Operation Ahead of Election," *Financial Times*, October 24, 2014, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/5b12f76e-5b7c-11e4-b68a-00144feab7de.html#axzz3NxR68pNB> [43].

⁷¹ "Four Tunisian Soldiers Killed in Suspected Islamist Attack," Reuters, November 5, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/01/us-tunisia-security-idUSKCN0JF1R020141201> [42].

⁷² "Video claims Islamic State responsibility for 2013 Tunisia assassinations," *Japan Times*, December 19, 2014, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/12/19/world/video-claims-islamic-state-responsibility-for-2013-tunisia-assassinations/> [39]; Thomas Joscelyn, "US confirms death of high-profile Tunisian Islamic State assassin," *Long War Journal*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/12/us-confirms-death-of-tunisian-islamic-state-leader-involved-in-high-profile-assassinations.php> [40]; George Packer, "Exporting Jihad: The Arab Spring has given Tunisians the freedom to act on their unhappiness," *New Yorker*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/28/tunisia-and-the-fall-after-the-arab-spring> [41].

⁷³ Camilla Turner, "Tunisia attack: gunman's links to Britain," *Telegraph* (London), June 30, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11707325/Tunisia-beach-massacre-gunmans-links-to-Britain.html> [35]; Tom Porter, "Tunisia attack: UK links to Seifeddine Rezgui terror group Ansar al-Sharia emerge," *International Business Times*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/tunisia-attack-uk-links-seifeddine-rezgui-terror-group-ansar-al-sharia-emerge-1508812> [36].

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

Designations:

Designations by the U.S. Government:



January 10, 2014: The Department of State designates Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (under section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act).⁷⁴

January 10, 2014: The Department of State designates Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity (under Executive Order 13224).⁷⁵

January 10, 2014: The Department of State designates Seifallah Ben Hassine AKA Abu Iyad al-Tunisi AKA Abou Iyadh, then-leader of AST, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (under Executive Order 13224).⁷⁶

April 19, 2002: The Department of State designates Mohamed ben Belgacem ben Abdallah al-Aouadi AKA Mohamed ben Belgacem, head of AST security wing, as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (under Executive Order 13224).⁷⁷

Designations by Foreign Governments and Organizations:



Tunisia listed Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia as a terrorist organization on August 27, 2013.⁷⁸



The United Kingdom listed Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia as a terrorist organization in April 2014.⁷⁹



The United Nations listed Ansar al-Shari'a in Tunisia (AAS-T) AKA Ansar al Sharia Tunisia AKA AST as a Terrorist Organization associated with al-Qaeda pursuant to resolution 2161 (2014) on September 23, 2014.⁸⁰

The United Nations listed Seifallah Ben Hassine AKA Abu Iyad al-Tunisi AKA Abou Iyadh, then-leader of AST, as an Individual Associated with al-Qaeda pursuant to resolution 2161 (2014) on September 23, 2014.⁸¹

⁷⁴ "Individuals and Entities Designated by the State Department Under E.O. 13224," U.S. Department of State, accessed March 25, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/143210.htm> [12].

⁷⁵ "Terrorist Designations of Three Ansar Al-Shari'a Organizations and Leaders," U.S. Department of State, January 10, 2014, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266560.htm> [78].

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

⁷⁶ “Terrorist Designations of Three Ansar Al-Shari’a Organizations and Leaders,” U.S. Department of State, January 10, 2014, <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/266560.htm> [78].

⁷⁷ “Executive Order 13224,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, accessed March 25, 2015, <http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/terror.pdf> [79].

⁷⁸ “Tunisia Declares Ansar Al-Sharia a Terrorist Group,” BBC News, September 14, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23853241> [13].

⁷⁹ “Proscribed Terrorist Organizations,” United Kingdom Home Office, November 28, 2014, p. 7, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/380939/ProscribedOrganisations.pdf [14].

⁸⁰ “Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to Its Sanctions List,” United Nations Security Council, September 15, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm> [2].

⁸¹ “Security Council Al-Qaida Sanctions Committee Adds Fourteen Individuals and Two Entities to Its Sanctions List,” United Nations Security Council, September 15, 2014, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11575.doc.htm> [2].

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

Associations:

Ties to Extremist Entities:

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)



[Al-Qaeda](#) [80]

There is a long history of documented cooperation between AST and al-Qaeda. Former AST leader Seifallah Ben Hassine reportedly met with al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri before the 9/11 attacks. The Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG), founded by Ben Hassine in 2000, was accused of helping al-Qaeda assassinate Northern Alliance commander Ahmed Shah Massoud on September 9, 2001. In April 2001, a “dual TCG-al Qaeda operative” was arrested in Italy for planning an attack against the U.S. Embassy in Rome.

The plot forced U.S. embassies and consulates across the country to close for the first time since the first Gulf War.⁸² *Long War Journal’s* Thomas Joscelyn drew direct connections between AST and al-Qaeda in an October 2012 report in the *Weekly Standard*, writing that AST founder Ben Hassine was a “notorious al Qaeda terrorist.” Ben Hassine reportedly formed the Tunisian Combatant Group (TCG) “in coordination with’ al-Qaeda,” according to the United Nations.⁸³ As a close associate of al-Qaeda, Ben Hassine reportedly fought with the group alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan even after the country fell to coalition forces in 2001. A Joint Task Force-Guantanamo report found that Ben Hassine and other future Guantanamo detainees had formed a unit called the “Jalalabad Group” that “volunteered to defend [bin Laden] and the embattled al Qaeda fighters at Tora Bora.”⁸⁴

As for AST’s ideological influences, a young AST leader interviewed by Fabio Merone in 2013 said that AST shares its “theoretical references with the international jihadi movement.”

Some of the group’s biggest ideological influences, including Abu Qatada al-Filastini, Abu Mohamed al-Maqdisi, Hani al-Sibai, and Anwar al-Awlaki, have established al-Qaeda connections. Abu Qatada, who was known as Osama bin Laden’s “European ambassador,” is allegedly the “most influential” of all, as AST members who lived in Europe “flocked to listen to his lessons.”⁸⁵

In its statements and media releases, AST has been outspoken about its strong relationship with al-Qaeda. In September 2013,

AST posted a message on its Facebook page that read, “We remind again that our blessed method is declared and there is no hiding in it, and regarding our loyalty to Qaeda 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.”⁸⁶

After bin Laden was killed in May 2011, Ben Hassine reportedly said: “Let the entire world celebrate the death of one of our Ummah’s leaders since the death and martyrdom of our leaders for the sake of this straight path... is an indication of the truthfulness of our way... This is the allegiance, and that is the promise to Allah—do not regress after the death of your sheikh

[i.e., bin Laden], or the deaths of your leaders. Remain steadfast—and die for [the same cause] for which the best among you died.”⁸⁷

In January 2013, AST honored two more deceased al-Qaeda members of on its Facebook page: Said al Shihri, co-founder and deputy emir of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and Khalid bin Abdul Rahman al Husainan, a top leader of al-Qaeda central.⁸⁸



[Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb \(AQIM\)](#) [81]

In October of 2013, Tunisian Prime Minister Ali Larayedh told Reuters, “There is a relation between leaders of Ansar al Sharia [Tunisia], al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Ansar al Sharia in Libya. We are coordinating with our neighbors over that.”⁸⁹

The U.S. government has commented that this relationship is financial, with David Cohen, then-Undersecretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, saying that “AQIM... has provided funding for other terrorist groups including Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia.”⁹⁰ The U.S. Department of State has described AST as “ ideologically aligned with al Qaeda and tied to its affiliates, including AQIM.”⁹¹

In December 2012, the Tunisian government identified a cell affiliated with AQIM known as the Militia of Uqba Ibn Nafaa in Tunisia.⁹² The government claimed that the cell members “were known for their active participation in events organized by Ansar al Sharia” but could not prove that the cell had an “organizational relationship” with AST.⁹³

In August 2013, the Tunisian government offered a direct link between AST and al-Qaeda when it designated AST as a terrorist organization. The government produced a handwritten “Allegiance Act” signed between Ben Hassine and AQIM leader Abdelmalik Droukdel.⁹⁴

On social media, AST has been openly supportive of AQIM, retweeting and helping to disseminate official AQIM communications and releases. AQIM has also praised AST operations and attacks.⁹⁵

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)



ISIS [82]

AST expressed support for ISIS in social media posts and other official communications. On April 9, 2013, AST posted a photo of ISIS militants on its website with a banner that read: "O lions of god in all the earth Call out Allah Akbar, for victory and conquest is ours. Rejoice, for the glorious caliphate is near. Our [sharia] will reign over every corner [or inch of land]."⁹⁶

In May 2013, now-deceased AST deputy leader Kamel Zarrouk stated: "I would like to declare loud and clear, that the al-Nusra Front, Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the mujahideen in Somalia, Mali, and Algeria, we all stand united against our enemies."⁹⁷ However, when al-Qaeda formally severed ties with ISIS in February 2014, AST members were already divided in their support for the two groups.⁹⁸ Over the course of 2014, a number of AST leaders, including AST spokesman Seifeddine Rais, pledged allegiance to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.⁹⁹

After evading government capture in Tunis, Zarrouk reportedly traveled to Syria to fight alongside ISIS. *Magharebia* reported that "Zarrouk is known in his [Tunisian] neighborhood as someone who encouraged young people to go for jihad in Syria, which he considers to be the springboard for establishing an Islamic state from the Gulf to the ocean."¹⁰⁰ Contrarily, AST leader Seifallah Ben Hassine discouraged Tunisians from migrating to "active jihad fronts" abroad, lamenting that the wars in Syria and Mali had "emptied Tunisia of its young."¹⁰¹ After the Tunisian government designated AST as a terrorist organization in August 27, 2013, a large number of AST members traveled to Syria to fight alongside ISIS.¹⁰² In February 2014, it was estimated that more than 5,000 Tunisians had traveled to Syria to fight against Bashar al-Assad's government.¹⁰³ That same month, Tunisian Interior Minister Lofti Ben Jeddou reported that Tunisian security forces had prevented 8,000 Tunisians from traveling to Syria to fight.¹⁰⁴ Tunisians have featured heavily in ISIS propaganda, and ISIS has regularly eulogized Tunisian fighters and suicide bombers.¹⁰⁵



Ansar al-Sharia Libya (ASL)

AST and ASL shared logistical, financial, and operational ties.¹⁰⁶

The United Nations found that ASL's Derna branch had provided significant support to AST in recruitment and the acquisition of weapons.¹⁰⁷ ASL also reportedly provided AST members with combat training at military camps in Libya.¹⁰⁸ AST members have openly commented on the group's relations with ASL, with one anonymous founding member of AST stating in a 2013 interview that the groups, along with Ansar al-Sharia Egypt, are connected like a "spider web." Members of the three organizations reportedly met and traveled together in the Gaza Strip and in northern Sinai in 2012 to discuss administration, organization, and management with Palestinian Salafists.¹⁰⁹

⁸² Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda Responsible for 4 Attacks on U.S. Embassies in September," *Weekly Standard*, October 3, 2012, http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/al-qaeda-responsible-4-attacks-us-embassies-september_653460.html?page=1 [83].

⁸³ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda Responsible for 4 Attacks on U.S. Embassies in September," *Weekly Standard*, October 3, 2012, http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/al-qaeda-responsible-4-attacks-us-embassies-september_653460.html?page=1 [83].

⁸⁴ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda Ally Orchestrated Assault on US Embassy in Tunisia," *Long War Journal*, October 2, 2012, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/10/al_qaeda_ally_orches.php [74].

⁸⁵ Fabio Merone, "Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar Al-Sharia," *Jadaliyya*, April 11, 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11166/salafism-in-tunisia_an-interview-with-a-member-of [26].

⁸⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar Al Sharia Responds to Tunisian Government," *Long War Journal*, September 3, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_6.php# [84].

⁸⁷ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar Al-Sharia Tunisia Honors Senior Al Qaeda 'Martyrs,'" *Long War Journal*, January 30, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/01/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_3.php# [85].

⁸⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar Al-Sharia Tunisia Honors Senior Al Qaeda 'Martyrs,'" *Long War Journal*, January 30, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/01/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_3.php# [85].

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- ⁸⁹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda and the Threat in North Africa," *Long War Journal*, November 21, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/11/al_qaeda_and_the_thr_1.php [9].
- ⁹⁰ "Remarks of Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen before the Center for a New American Security on 'Confronting New Threats in Terrorist Financing'," U.S. Department of the Treasury, March 4, 2014, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2308.aspx> [29].
- ⁹¹ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda-Affiliated Group Assaulted U.S. Embassy in Tunis," *Weekly Standard*, January 10, 2014, http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/al-qaeda-affiliated-group-assaulted-us-embassy-tunis_774103.html [86].
- ⁹² Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Tunisian Jihadism after the Sousse Massacre," *Combatting Terrorism Center Sentinel* 8, no. 10 (2015): 13, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2015/10/CTCSentinel-Vol8Iss1036.pdf> [5].
- ⁹³ Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda-Affiliated Group Assaulted U.S. Embassy in Tunis," *Weekly Standard*, January 10, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2012/12/tunisian_government.php# [66].
- ⁹⁴ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Tunisia's War with Ansar Al-Sharia: New Revelations about Al-Qaeda's North African Network," *War on the Rocks*, October 21, 2013, <http://warontherocks.com/2013/10/tunisias-war-with-ansar-al-sharia-new-revelations-about-al-qaedas-north-african-network/> [18].
- ⁹⁵ Thomas Joscelyn, "AQIM Rejects Islamic State's Caliphate, Reaffirms Allegiance to Zawahiri," *Long War Journal*, July 14, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/07/aqim_rejects_islamic.php [87].
- ⁹⁶ Thomas Joscelyn, "Social Media Jihad: Cheerleading Al Qaeda's New 'Islamic State'," *Long War Journal*, April 9, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2013/04/social_media_jihad_cheerleadin.php [88].
- ⁹⁷ Mischa Benoit-Lavelle, "Tunisia Considers Crackdown on Radical Preachers," *Al-Monitor*, May 10, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/fr/contents/articles/opinion/2013/05/tunisia-terrorist-crackdown.html> [89].
- ⁹⁸ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Bridget Moreng, "Tunisian Jihadism after the Sousse Massacre," *Combatting Terrorism Center Sentinel* 8, no. 10 (2015): 15, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2015/10/CTCSentinel-Vol8Iss1036.pdf> [5].
- ⁹⁹ Abdallah Suleiman Ali, "Global Jihadists Recognize Islamic State," *Al-Monitor*, July 3, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/07/syria-iraq-isis-islamic-caliphate-global-recognition.html#> [90]; Jemal Arfaoui, "Tunisia: Ansar Al-Sharia Spokesman Backs Isis," *AllAfrica*, May 14, 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201407090299.html> [10].
- ¹⁰⁰ Haim Malka and Margo Balboni, "Getting There: Journeys to Foreign Battle Zones," *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, June 2016, <http://foreignfighters.csis.org/tunisia/getting-there.html> [91]; Bill Roggio, "Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia Deputy Leader Reportedly in Syria," *Long War Journal*, February 27, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_7.php [92].
- ¹⁰¹ Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Ansar Al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: *Dawa*, *Hisba*, and *Jihad*," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism-The Hague*, May 2013, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/Gartenstein-Ross-Ansar-al-Sharia-Tunisia%27s-Long-Game-May-2013.pdf> [6]; Bill Roggio, "Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia Deputy Leader Reportedly in Syria," *Long War Journal*, February 27, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_7.php [92].
- ¹⁰² Aaron Zelin, "Tunisian jihadism five years after Ansar al-Sharia," *Middle East Institute*, September 16, 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/tunisian-jihadism-five-years-after-ansar-al-sharia> [21].
- ¹⁰³ Bill Roggio, "Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia Deputy Leader Reportedly in Syria," *Long War Journal*, February 27, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_7.php [92].
- ¹⁰⁴ Bill Roggio, "Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia Deputy Leader Reportedly in Syria," *Long War Journal*, February 27, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_7.php [92].
- ¹⁰⁵ Bill Roggio, "Ansar Al Sharia Tunisia Deputy Leader Reportedly in Syria," *Long War Journal*, February 27, 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_7.php [92].
- ¹⁰⁶ Faisal Irshaid, "Profile: Libya's Ansar Al-Sharia," *BBC News*, June 13, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-27732589> [93].
- ¹⁰⁷ "Narrative Summaries of Reasons for Listing," *United Nations Security Council*, February 3, 2016, https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/1267/qa_sanctions_list/summaries/entity/ansar-al-charia-derna [94].
- ¹⁰⁸ Aaron Zelin, "Tunisia: Uncovering Ansar Al-Sharia," *Think Africa Press*, October 25, 2013, <http://thinkafricapress.com/tunisia/uncovering-ansar-al-sharia> [71].
- ¹⁰⁹ Aaron Zelin, "Tunisia: Uncovering Ansar Al-Sharia," *Think Africa Press*, October 25, 2013, <http://thinkafricapress.com/tunisia/uncovering-ansar-al-sharia> [71].

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

Media Coverage:

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

Rhetoric:



[95]

[AST Statement on the Jebel Chaambi attacks, July 2014 \[95\]](#)

“God enabled the Knights of al-Qairawan, the mujahideen of Uqba [Ibn] Nafi, to increase another great masterpiece of epics, championships, and another lesson on the foolish idols who interpret the mujahideen’s silence and patience against their crimes as weakness and an inability to respond...They (the mujahideen) surprised them Wednesday evening, the 18th day of Ramadan, with a raid on two outposts stationed in the Chaambi mountains, leading to 15 dead and 20 wounded.”¹¹⁰



[96]

[AST Facebook Page, September 2013 \[96\]](#)

“We remind again that our blessed method is declared and there is no hiding in it, and 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.”¹¹¹



[97]

[Seifallah Ben Hassine, May 2013 \[97\]](#)

“A message to our heroes who wrote and are writing with their blood and sweat the epics of Islam in the lands of jihad, may Allah give steadfast to your mujahidin and accept your martyrs and release your prisoners from the hands of your enemies and give your families patience and perish your and His enemy.”¹¹²



[98]

[Kamel Zarrouk, May 2013 \[98\]](#)

“I would like to declare loud and clear, that the al-Nusra Front, Ansar al-Sharia, al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and the mujahideen in Somalia, Mali, and Algeria, we all stand united against our enemies.”¹¹³



[99]

[AST Facebook Page, April 2013 \[99\]](#)

“O lions of god in all the earth Call out Allah Akbar, for victory and conquest is ours. Rejoice, for the glorious caliphate is near. Our sharia [law] will reign over every corner [or inch of land].”¹¹⁴



[100]

[Seifallah Ben Hassine, March 2013 \[100\]](#)

“To your wise men we say: Keep your sick [or diseased] ones from us, or we will direct our war against them until their downfall and their meeting with the dustbin of history... Know that we will not delay in saying that the answer is what you see, not what you hear... If you do not rectify your situation.”¹¹⁵



[101]

[“Young Leader of AST,” Early 2013 \[101\]](#)

“From the perspective of the development of our group’s theoretical framework/worldview, some of the most influential Salafi activists include: Abu Quttada al-Falestini, Abu Mohammed al-Maqdassi, Abu Basir Tartusi, Hani Sabahi, and al-Aulaki. Abu Kottada al-Falestini is probably the most influential among them--our brothers that were in Europe over the past years all flocked to listen to his lessons. It is not strange then that Abu Yadh himself or Abdallah a-Tunsi went to him as well. Sheikh Hani Sabahi

Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia (AST)

is also respected in our movement. We have a steady contact with him and he is very sympathetic to our experience.”¹¹⁶



[102]

[Hassen Brik, AST spokesman, September 2012](#) [102]

“This is a long-term vision to prepare society. We are for jihad, armed revolution, but we cannot do this if the people are not with us. It will only be possible when everyone is behind the vision. Look at Libya, the insurrection was only successful once armed and sharing a common vision.”¹¹⁷



[103]

[Seifallah Ben Hassine, May 2011](#) [103]

“Let the entire world celebrate the death of one of our Ummah’s leaders since the death and martyrdom of our leaders for the sake of this straight path... is an indication of the truthfulness of our way... This is the allegiance, and that is the promise to Allah—do not regress after the death of your sheikh [i.e., bin Laden], or the deaths of your leaders.

Remain steadfast—and die for [the same cause] for which the best among you died.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁰ Kevin Moore, “Statement from Ansar Al-Sharia in Tunisia Claiming Responsibility for Attack on Tunisian Security Forces,” July 19 2014,” Edinburgh Arabic Initiative, July 20, 2014, <https://edinburgharabicinitiative.wordpress.com/2014/07/20/statement-from-ansar-al-sharia-in-tunisia-claiming-responsibility-for-attack-on-tunisian-security-forces/> [50].

¹¹¹ Thomas Joscelyn, “Ansar Al Sharia Responds to Tunisian Government,” *Long War Journal*, September 3, 2013, http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2013/04/social_media_jihad_cheerleadin.php [88].

¹¹² Louisa Loveluck, “Planting the Seeds of Tunisia’s Ansar Al Sharia,” *Foreign Policy*, September 27, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/09/27/planting-the-seeds-of-tunisia-ansar-al-sharia/> [7].

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