



# THE EMERGENCE AND ACTIVITY OF TUNISIA'S MOST FEARFUL TERRORIST GROUP

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*Ansar al-Sharia is the most prominent Salafist jihadist organization in Tunisia which was established in April 2011. In the beginning, the movement, which sympathizes with the ideology of al-Qaeda, focused its attention on humanitarian and missionary works. Later it did not balk using violence to enforce the religious norms. The conflict between the Ennahda Government and the organization culminated between May and July, 2013. In the end, the Government designated Ansar al-Sharia as terrorist-organization at the end of August 2013. According to the official reports, the organization is responsible for planning several unsuccessful attempts during the intervening months. Therewith Okba bin Nafaa, the military wing of Ansar al-Sharia, has been fighting an open war with Tunisian Army near the Algerian border region since December 2012.*

**Keywords:** *terrorism, Salafi, jihad, Tunisia, Ansar al-Sharia, Okba ibn Nafaa Brigade.*

## Introduction

The Salafist jihadist movements have strengthened significantly in Tunisia after the 2011 Arab Spring. The Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia

(AST), the most prominent local organization, came into existence three months after the collapse of Ben Ali's regime. The movement, which unreservedly sympathized with the ideology of the international al-Qaeda terror-organization, laid emphasis on works of mercy and the dawa, which meant missionary activity in the beginning. After months, it has been took full advantage of the critical economic conditions of the country and the social tensions that originated from the previous situation. It did not flinch away from using the hisba, the enforcement of Islamic doctrines with violence, to achieve its purpose. The conflict between the Ennahda majority government and the organization culminated in May-July, 2013. Finally, the cabinet declared the Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist organization at the end of August. According to governmental sources, the organization tried to make attempts on several occasions during the elapsed time. The Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade, the military wing of the organization, nowadays is fighting an open war with the Tunisian Armed Forces alongside the Algerian border region.

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### 1. The establishment of Ansar al-Sharia

The Salafist Ansar al-Sharia (Partisans of Islamic Law) was set up by Abu Iyad al-Tunisi (or Seifallah Ben Hassine) in Soukra, one of the suburbs of Tunis, at the end of April, 2011. From the beginning its openly declared aim was to provide services that according to his point of view, the government was incapable to provide. The precise structure of the organization has been unknown until now. We only know that it was built up by a network. The latter consisted of smaller local groups and its structure was like a pyramid.<sup>1</sup>

There was not any reliable information about the exact size of the organization, because membership was regularly undervalued by the governmental authorities and overestimated by the supporters. The first adherents came mainly from the working-class in Bab al-Khadra as well as al-Kambes and Malik bin Anas Mosques. The popularity of the AST grew dynamically in a short time due to its intensive campaign and religious activities in the local mosques. In a little while, the base of the AST attracted mainly desperate youths who were disappointed in the revolution and the regime.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning the organization emphasized the importance of propaganda to pass its message to a wide mass of people. It established the al-Qayrawan Media Foundation (QMF) on April 27, 2011 to popularize its ideology and work. It ran its own blog and created Facebook pages as well as it regularly published different presses.<sup>3</sup>

Officially it covered its expenses from donations that mainly Tunisian locals offered in the mosques during the Friday preaching. The works of mercy were also sponsored by prominent foreign – mainly Saudi and Kuwaiti – foundations.

Besides the activity on behalf of the community, it made an intensive campaign to demand the release of well-known Islamist prisoners. In addition, it held peaceful sit-ins on several occasions outside the Iraqi embassy in Tunis and in front of the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on behalf of Tunisian activist of al-Qaeda, who were imprisoned in Iraq during 2005–2007.<sup>4</sup>

The name of the organization also shows that the main objective of the Ansar al-Sharia is to appear the sharia strongly in everyday life. The ideas of AST about the new Tunisia were manifested at a nation-wide conference in Kairouan on May 20, 2012.<sup>5</sup>

Ansar al-Sharia supported unreservedly the ideology of international al-Qaeda network about global jihad. Despite the ideological identification, in the beginning, the group concentrated vitally on recruiting local volunteers and providing missionary activities (dawa). AST considered its main duty to return to the right way and to strongly enforce Islamic values in everyday life. The long-term aim of the organization was the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate.

The Ansar al-Sharia emphasized several times that its aim is not to acquire power. It did not want to accede in internal politics so it did not set up an own legal party. It condemned the state and

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<sup>1</sup> Fabio Merone, “Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia” in *Jadaliyya*, April 11, 2013, available online at: [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11166/salafism-in-tunisia\\_an-interview-with-a-member-of-](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11166/salafism-in-tunisia_an-interview-with-a-member-of-), accessed on August 01, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Salafi Challenge to Tunisia’s Nascent Democracy” in *The Washington Institute, Improving the Quality of U.S. Middle East Policy*, December 8, 2011, available online at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-salafi-challenge-to-tunisias-nascent-democracy>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Rise of Salafists in Tunisia After the Fall of Ben Ali” in *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point*, August 01, 2011, available online at: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-rise-of-salafists-in-tunisia-after-the-fall-of-ben-ali>, accessed on July 31, 2014.

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<sup>4</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Salafi Challenge to Tunisia’s Nascent Democracy” in *The Washington Institute, Improving the Quality of U.S. Middle East Policy*, December 8, 2011, available online at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-salafi-challenge-to-tunisias-nascent-democracy>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> This occasion Abu Iyad urged the reform of the media, tourism and commercial sectors in accordance with Islamic principles. He also felt necessary to create an Islamic trade union to counteract the powerful and secularist Tunisian General Labour Union. (Lin Noueihed, “Radical Islamists urge bigger role for Islam in Tunisia” in *Reuters*, May 21, 2012, available online at: <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/05/21/tunisia-salafis-idINDEE84K03420120521>, accessed on July 29, 2014.



democracy and in the distributed pamphlets it pronounced the participation in political life as a polytheist act. In addition, AST regularly posted fatwas and videos from popular Salafi jihadist sheiks arguing against democracy in order to deter potential voters from the poll.<sup>6</sup>

Another important aspect was the rejection of violent jihad in Tunisia besides the radical interpretation of Islam. This statement was not the result of the weakness of Salafi jihadist tendency that could not previously strengthen in Tunisia. At the same time we also have to add to the non-violent-statement that in this case Ansar al-Sharia only rejected the open fight with external enemies of the Islam religion in Tunisia. We have to emphasize this, because the main aims of the organization were the missionary activities and the so-called hisba, which meant an avoidance of forthcoming wrong.<sup>7</sup>

The homemade dawa did not prevent Abu Iyad from supporting violent jihad in foreign countries. This is why he created a dual strategy in the interest of keeping on non-violence and alleviating tensions in Tunisia. He offered an opportunity of choice for his fellows to decide who wanted to do peaceful missionary works at home. The others, who wanted to fight, were sent to Syria, Libya or Mali.<sup>8</sup> In his country he endeavored consistently to make real Islamic

moral mainly with verbal persuasion and exemplary behavior in the population.

Influential theorists of the movement are Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the Palestinian writer with Jordanian citizenship, Sheikh al-Khatib al-Idrissi, who is one of the most prominent Salafi clerics in Tunisia, the imprisoned Abu Qatada al-Filistini, the Syrian Abu Basir al-Tartusi, Anwar al-Awlaki, who were killed in the end of September, 2011, or Hani Sabahi.<sup>9</sup>

In practice, the organization's aim was to offer concrete choices for daily challenges and tribulations in accordance with Islam. For example, AST often organized presentations for gaining minds and hearts. On these performances notable Tunisian scholars popularized the thought of returning to Islamic values. In addition, it regularly distributed the works of the Salafist literature among the people on the weekly market, the activist cleaned the streets in public works, they nursed elder locals in their homes, they carried out many humanitarian actions in the refugee camps as well as in the region afflicted by natural disaster, and the organization helped those in need with donations of food, medicine and clothes in the backward countryside areas, which were previously neglected by the government. AST took maximally the advantages of the opportunities of modern age to form a wide supporting base. This is why AST continuously reported its activity on the internet which was illustrated by photos.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Warning signs

There were many warning signs from 2011 referring to the will of the Salafists to enforce their Islamist minds and rebuild the state to their own face as soon as possible despite several occasions

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<sup>6</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Salafi Challenge to Tunisia's Nascent Democracy" in *The Washington Institute, Improving the Quality of U.S. Middle East Policy*, December 8, 2011, available online at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-salafi-challenge-to-tunisia-nascent-democracy>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> In practice this means making observations of religious norms in the Muslim community. According to their interpretation this entitled them to attack and assault persons and institutions in necessity that violated regulations. (Daveed Gartenstein-Ross – Bridget Moreng – Kathleen Soucy, "Raising the Stakes: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's Shift to Jihad" ICCT Research Paper, February 2014. p. 4; Sarah Leah Whitson, "Letter to Tunisian Minister of Interior and Minister of Justice" in *Human Rights Watch*, 14 October 14, 2012, available online at: <http://www.hrw.org/es/node/110818>, accessed on August 05, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Meeting Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia" in *The Middle East Channel*, March 08, 2013, available online at: [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/08/meeting\\_tunisia\\_ansar\\_al\\_sharia](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/08/meeting_tunisia_ansar_al_sharia), accessed on July 23, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Fabio Merone, "Salafism in Tunisia: An Interview with a Member of Ansar al-Sharia" in *Jadaliyya*, April 11, 2013, available online at: [http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11166/salafism-in-tunisia\\_an-interview-with-a-member-of-](http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/11166/salafism-in-tunisia_an-interview-with-a-member-of-), accessed on August 01, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Meeting Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia" in *The Middle East Channel*, March 08, 2013, available online at: [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/08/meeting\\_tunisia\\_ansar\\_al\\_sharia](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/08/meeting_tunisia_ansar_al_sharia), accessed on July 23, 2014.



of non-violent declarations. The first serious conflict between the government and Ansar al-Sharia occurred on June 26, 2011. Several dozens of AST activists demonstrated on Habib Bourguiba Avenue against the Tunisian film “No God, No Master” that outspokenly criticized political Islam. The demonstrators broke into a movie hall where they crushed the equipment. The police arrested seven people, but about 100 Salafist activists had been demanding the release of their detained fellows two days later in front of the Justice Ministry. The protesters attacked five lawyers and one of the latter ones was taken to hospital. After the incident, the interim government determined to crush the Islamists and arrested 26 people, among them several Ansar al-Sharia’s members.<sup>11</sup>

Three months later the tempers got out of control again due to another film, *Persepolis*, the Oscar-nominated film. Abu Iyad encouraged his fellows against Nessma private television channel after it had broadcasted the film on October 7, 2011. The next day the Islamists tried to set fire to the TV station and the channel owner’s home was raided.<sup>12</sup>

By this time, the demonstrations in the capital happened ordinarily on behalf of women in universities wearing niqab, which covers their whole body. The protesters attacked the riot policemen who tried to dissolve them with tear-gas with sticks, stones and knives. Shortly, the street disturbances also spread to the universities. The Salafist activists attacked secular minded students and a little group of undergraduates led by Mohamed Bakti practically kept Habib

Kazdaghli, the dean of University Manouba as hostage in his office for weeks in order to force him to give permission to wear niqab in classrooms and on exams.<sup>13</sup> The influence of religious extremism was clearly and alarmingly manifested on March 16, 2012. Thousands of Islamist protesters demonstrated in front of the building of Constituent National Assembly in Tunis under al-Qaeda’s typical black banner where they demanded the acknowledgement of sharia as the fundamental source of law in the future constitution.<sup>14</sup> Nine days later, the flag appeared again in the downtown of Tunis where an originally peaceful demonstration started organized by Ansar al-Sharia for glorifying Koran. The demonstrators took one with them to the top of the clock tower near one of the busiest crossroad of the capital where they demanded the establishment of a new caliphate. Unfortunately the violence did not fail on this occasion either. This time the participants interrupted a performance in front of a theater of the capital when they attacked and maltreated the members of the company.<sup>15</sup>

In La Marsa, one of Tunis’s suburbs, other disturbances broke out on account of an art exhibition on June 12, 2012. The temper got out of control after the assault of the gallery. Thousands

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Hammond; Tarek Amara, “Tunisia Islamists Arrested After Clashes in Capital” in *Reuters*, June 28, 2011, available online at: <http://af.reuters.com/article/algeriaNews/idAFLDE75R14C20110628?pageNumber=1&virtualBrandChannel=0>, accessed on July 31, 2014; Adrew Hammond, “„No God” film angers Tunisian Islamist” in *Reuters*, July 06, 2011, available online at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/06/us-tunisia-islamists-tension-idUSTRE7652VZ20110706>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Ben Child, “Islamist protesters attack Tunisian TV station over animated film *Persepolis*” in *The Guardian*, October 10, 2011, available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/10/islamist-protesters-attack-tunisian-persepolis>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Rob Prince, “Tunisia culture wars: the case of Habib Kazdaghli, Dean of the University of Tunis-Manouba” in *Open Democracy, Free thinking for the World*, July 26, 2012, available online at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/rob-prince/tunisia-culture-wars-case-of-habib-kazdaghli-dean-of-university-of-tunis-manouba>, accessed on July 28, 2014; Jacopo Salvadori, “Tunisia – Niqab and woman’s activism: the Tunisian March 8” in *DAO Online, News and Informations from Kuwait and the World*, March 08, 2012, available online at: [http://www.daoonline.info/news\\_dett\\_eng.asp?ID=1127](http://www.daoonline.info/news_dett_eng.asp?ID=1127), accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> John Rosenthal, “Tunisian Salafists Demonstrate for Sharia under Al Qaeda Banner” in *National Review Online*, March 21, 2012, available online at: <http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/294103/tunisian-salafists-demonstrate-sharia-under-al-qaeda-banner-john-rosenthal>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Ahmed Ellali, “Several Thousand Salafists Demonstrate for Islamic Law, Attack Dramatists in Tunis” in *Tunisia alive, living Tunisia*, March 25, 2012, available online at: <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/03/25/several-thousand-salafists-demonstrate-for-islamic-law-attack-dramatists-in-tunis/>, accessed on July 29, 2014.





of protesters set fire to the offices of the country's main labour union in Jendouba, burned a local court in west Tunis and threw rocks and Molotov cocktails at several police stations. At the end of the riots, 65 members of the security forces were wounded and 162 people were detained.<sup>16</sup>

The turning-point with long-term consequences occurred on September 14. The demonstrations began after Friday prayers on account of a film which portrayed the Prophet Mohammad engaged in vulgar and offensive behavior. The disturbances quickly spread in the capital when Ansar al-Sharia endorsed the rallying call on Facebook by Islamist activists. The protesters marched in front of the U.S. embassy in Tunis with sticks, stones and petrol bombs where they forced their way into the building and started to plunder it systematically. Certain persons hauled down the U.S. flag from the embassy, burned it, and replaced it with the black flag of Islam while others carried off the values. Luckily, no one from the American embassy's staff was hurt due to the quick arrival of the riot police though the aggressors resolutely stood on the defensive in the beginning. Their resistance ended when the police used live cartridge. During this time, their fellows broke into a nearby American School. They set aflame the building after they took away laptops and computers. On this occasion the clashes required serious casualties: minimum 29 persons got injured and two others lost their lives.<sup>17</sup>

The assassination of the well-known left-wing secular minded Chokri Belaid on February 6, 2013 was another example of declining public security throughout the country. Disturbances broke out after the opposition leader's death

which someone used to plunder. However the police arrested the majority of these persons in a short time, Ansar al-Sharia found that the time had come to set in its private army, called Neighborhood Committees. The activists, as self-appointed vigilantes, patrolled on streets in 10–50 member groups waving al-Qaeda black flag to provide justice arbitrarily against anyone whose behavior they regarded substandard. Although the crisis-situation passed with few scuffles and the arrestment of a thief, the patrols' presence made a big impression on locals who were disappointed with the cabinet's policy. This and the social activity for public welfare together showed explicitly that AST would soon form a separate state inside the Tunisian state. Ennahda had to do something, because the co-operation grew larger between the party's hard-line elements and AST due to the concessions made to the secularists in the writing of the constitution.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. The proscription of the Movement

In the beginning, the moderate Islamist Ennahda adopted an extremely tolerant policy towards Ansar al-Sharia after winning the National Assembly elections on October 23, 2011. It took the initiative and suggested a national dialogue with Salafist. With this step it trusted in preventing the radicalization of fundamentalists who meant a dangerous threat with their illegality and commitment to terror-acts in the long run. However, the positive proposal affected inconsiderably the Jihadist movement, because several members approached Ennahda with some skepticism from the beginning. In spite of positive efforts the first conflicts had been already occurred in 2011 when Ennahda made a non-Islamist parties' coalition. The situation became more and more critical in 2012. The number of Salafist demonstrations increased on the streets where the marchers protested against

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<sup>16</sup> "Tunisia shaken by 'Islamist protests'" in *BBC News*, June 12, 2012, available online at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-18416327>, accessed on July 28, 2014; "Tunisia: Conservative Islamists Riot Over Art Exhibit" in *The New York Times*, June 12, 2012, available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/13/world/africa/tunisia-conservative-islamists-riot-over-art-exhibit.html>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Tarek Amara, "Two dead as protesters attack U.S. embassy in Tunisia" in *Reuters*, September 14, 2012, available online at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/09/14/us-protests-tunisia-school-idUSBRE88D18020120914>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

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<sup>18</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Night's Watch: Ansar al-Shari'ah in Tunisia's 'Neighborhood Committees'" in *al-Wasat* – *طسول*, *The Muslim world, radicalization, terrorism, and Islamist ideology*. February 11, 2013, available online at: <http://thewasat.wordpress.com/2013/02/11/the-nights-watch-ansar-al-shariah-in-tunisias-neighborhood-committees/>, accessed on July 29, 2014.



governmental policy with violent acts. At the end of December the cabinet offered a new dialogue for those Salafist groups which rejected violence. At the same time for emphasizing the importance of gesture it stressed that it was not willing to negotiate with those ones who disturb public order and promised serious sanctions against them.<sup>19</sup> The relation between Ennahda and Ansar al-Sharia worsened; because the same ideological aspects of the movement with al-Qaeda and its wide missionary activities soon became suspicious. In governmental circles it caused growing anxiety how AST could recruit adherents in such extremely respectable numbers during a short period.<sup>20</sup> The Abna'um fi Khidmatikum's (Your Sons Are at Your Service) activity mainly impressed those people who became disillusioned by the government's policy. These people more and more saw the care they previously expected from government in AST.

As the charity works of the organization became known throughout the country, in the beginning, the government targeted its propaganda. Their Facebook-profile was banned 12 occasions between September 2012 and March 2013, with no effect. The movement emerged again and again to inform its fellows continuously.<sup>21</sup> After the attack on the US embassy, the cabinet was forced to accept the demand of the political opposition and numerous Jihadist persons, among them several Ansar

al-Sharia members, were detained to restrain extremists. However, many imprisoned Salafists began hunger-strikes as a protest against the considered unjust procedure. Two of them died in prison in November. So the cabinet did not succeed in shattering Islamists, but gave martyrs to their movement unwittingly.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the growing danger, the government still bewared of openly confronting with Ansar al-Sharia whereas several members of the organization evidently participated regularly in demonstrations against blasphemous issues and acts. According to the authorities' suspicions, others did more and they were related with many violent incidents and weapon smuggling in March 2013. However, they could not prove the charges for a long time, so the organization could work further. Then the security forces bore down on members of the organization without any kind of warning on 10-11 May, who distributed their books and pamphlets on the streets. In response, Abu Iyad threatened the government to give up his peaceful standpoint and broke out an open violent jihad against it.<sup>23</sup> In its reaction, the cabinet banned Ansar al-Sharia's imminent annual congress. The membership of the organization was infinitely indignant at decision and its motive. The disaffected persons already clashed openly with security forces in Tunis and Kairouan on May 19. The protesters threw stones and Molotov cocktails to the policemen, set fire to an armored vehicle, attacked one of the posts of National Guard, closed roads, burned a national flag and plundered. The government gave up its tolerant rhetoric once and for all after the clashes that caused at least one protester's death and 15 policemen' injury. Prime Minister Ali Larayedh openly declared Ansar al-Sharia an

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<sup>19</sup> "Two years on since revolution, Tunisia struggles with new political realities" in *Al Ahram Online*, January 14, 2013, available online at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/62468/World/Region/Two-years-on-since-revolution,-Tunisia-struggles-w.aspx>, accessed on July 31, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> It was a clear indication of the organization's considerably increasing popularity that only a few hundred people attended the 2011 conference whereas the participants' number reached 10 000 people one year later. (Mohammad Abu RUMMAN – Hassan Abu Haniya, "Ansar al-Sharia: Al-Qaeda's Response to Arab Spring" in *Al-Monitor*, January 07, 2013, available online at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/01/history-ansar-al-sharia-arab-spring.html#>, accessed on July 31, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Meeting Tunisia's Ansar al-Sharia" in *The Middle East Channel*, March 08, 2013, available online at: [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/08/meeting\\_tunisia\\_ansar\\_al\\_sharia](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/03/08/meeting_tunisia_ansar_al_sharia), accessed on July 23, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> Nouredine Hlaoui, "Salafist Hunger Strikers Die in Tunisian Prison" in *Al-Monitor*, November 26, 2012, available online at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2012/11/salafist-hunger-strikers-die-in-tunisian-prison.html>, accessed on August 04, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, "Standoff Between the Tunisian Government and Ansar al-Sharia" in *The Washington Institute, Improving the Quality of U.S. Middle East Policy*, May 14, 2013, available online at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-salafi-challenge-to-tunisia-nascent-democracy>, accessed on August 04, 2014.



illegal organization and for first time he spoke about AST's alleged terrorist ties and activities when he commented on the events.<sup>24</sup>

The oppositionist Mohamed Brahmi's death on July 25, 2013 and the following mass-demonstrations this time meant turning-point. On 27 August, Prime Minister Ali Larayedh announced at a press conference that Ansar al-Sharia was provably the mastermind behind killing Brahmi and Chokri Belaid and held them responsible for the internal crisis.<sup>25</sup> To the murder of the two politicians he added that the murderers were senior leaders of AST who committed their act with Abu Iyad's knowledge and approval. So he justified the terrorist designation of the organization as part of the international al-Qaeda network which trained its volunteers in Libya and Syria as well as got its financial support from Arabic countries, like Yemen, Libya or Mali.<sup>26</sup> He charged them with supporting the armed jihadist cell which was active in the Algerian-Tunisian border region and was the target of the army for a month around Mount Chaambi. Next day, the Director of Public Security supplied the information that the secret military wing of the organization provably planned assassinations

<sup>24</sup> Roula Khalaf, "Tunisia has finally turned up the heat on the Salafis" in *Politics & Society*, May 20, 2013, available online at: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6b4e8ab2-c14f-11e2-9767-00144feab7de.html#axzz3935abQ3H>, accessed on July 31, 2014; Antoine Lambroschini, "Tunisia PM vows firm action after unrest" in *The Daily Star Lebanon*, May 20, 2013, available online at: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2013/May-20/217720-tunisia-salafist-leader-says-group-cannot-be-defeated.ashx#axzz2UDE2JhBI>, accessed on August 04, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> According to police sources, both assassinations were provably carried out with the same gun that they seized during a raid. ("Ansar al-Sharia blamed for Tunisia killings" in *Al-Jazeera*, August 27, 2013, available online at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/08/2013827131811488516.html>, accessed on August 01, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Later Ansar al-Sharia linked to that group which exploded on the vehicles of National Guard in La Goulette in July. The police managed to arrest two of the perpetrators in Marnaguia in September. During the raid the authorities seized many home-made bombs and TNT explosives in considerable quantity. ("Tunisia: Two Terrorists Arrested, Weapons Seized in Mornaguia – Interior" in *Tunis Afrique Presse*, September 28, 2013, available online at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201309300977.html>, accessed on August 01, 2014).

against 19 public figures.<sup>27</sup>

In its response, announced on September 3, the organization denied the charges and stressed its independence and innocence. It found the terrorist designation as "honor" and threatened the "tyrants", who ruled Tunisia, to start a war.<sup>28</sup> Abu Iyad was accused of instigating the besieging mass over the U.S. embassy and a warrant of arrest was issued against him; therefore he fled to illegality after the embassy's attack. Nowadays, he is supposedly staying in Libya where he enjoys the protection of Abdelhakim Belhadj, a former Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) commander.<sup>29</sup>

The United States of America also accepted the standpoint of the Tunisian cabinet in relation to Ansar al-Sharia in the beginning of 2014. According to their judgment, the organization became the most dangerous threat against American interests in Tunisia. This is why they designated the group and its leader as terrorist on January 10.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> YASM, "Tunisia: Al-Qaeda Funds Ansar Al-Sharia, Tunisia Reveals" in *Magharebia*, August 29, 2013, available online at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201308300788.html>, accessed on August 01, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Ansar al Sharia responds to Tunisian government" in *The Long War Journal*, September 03, 2013, available online at: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/ansar\\_al\\_sharia\\_tuni\\_6.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/09/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_6.php), accessed on August 01, 2014; MTI, "Ezentül terroristának számítanak Tunéziában az Anszar as-Saría tagjai" in *HVG*, August 27, 2013, available online at: [http://hvg.hu/vilag/20130827\\_tunizia\\_terrorista\\_szervezet](http://hvg.hu/vilag/20130827_tunizia_terrorista_szervezet), accessed on July 23, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross; Bridget Moreng, "Tunisia's War with Ansar al-Sharia: New Revelations about Al-Qaeda's North African Network" in *War on the Rocks*, October 21, 2013, available online at: <http://warontherocks.com/2013/10/tunisi-as-war-with-ansar-al-sharia-new-revelations-about-al-qaedas-north-african-network/>, accessed on August 01, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> "Terrorist Designations of Three Ansar al-Shari'a Organizations and Leaders" in *U.S. Department of State Diplomacy in Action*, January 10, 2014, available online at: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/01/219519.htm>, accessed on July 24, 2014; Robert JOYCE, "US declares Ansar al-Saria a Terrorist Organisation" in *Tunisia alive, living Tunisia*, January 10, 2014, available online at: <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2014/01/10/us-declares-ansar-al-sharia-a-terrorist-organization/>, accessed on July 24, 2014.



### 4. The end of non-violent policy

The jihadist cell, hiding in the Mount Chaambi region, identified by the Tunisian authorities as Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade and AST were accused of co-operation. The exact structure and the size of the terror-group are unknown as well as its leadership. Nowadays, it seems that it is composed at least of two *serrya* (company) that are built up rather flexibly. The crackdown on the group is very probable, because injured militants were taken away immediately by their companions during clashes. If the latter was impossible, they decapitated the bodies to avoid identification. They also hid booby-traps under the abandoned bodies to cause further damages to security forces.<sup>31</sup>

The cell, which numbered about 20 jihadist fighters in May 2013, was composed mainly of foreign volunteers from the neighboring countries – primarily Algerians and Libyans – in the beginning. The situation worsened when Ennahda increasingly turned against Salafist groups and reached out to secular opposition parties as a compensation of extremists. In its response, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb issued a statement on March 17, 2013 urging Tunisian volunteers in foreign countries to return home and turn back unfavorable processions against religion. Many Tunisian veterans, who fought earlier in Iraq and/or Syria, traveled back to their country where they joined Okba Ibn Nafaa as well as set up another group, estimated of 12–15 persons, in the area of el-Kef 160 kilometers to the north.<sup>32</sup>

According to the signs, from the beginning the group was closely linked to terrorist-organization al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. According to Interior Minister Ali Larayedh's announcement in December 2012, the cell was under the leadership of three Algerians, who were in close

relationship with Abdelmalek Droukdel, leader of al-Qaeda's North-African wing. He said that in the beginning their main goal was to set up camps in the Kasserine region, where recruits could get initial training before sending them to one of al-Qaeda's base in Algeria or Libya.<sup>33</sup> Later, his notification was justified by the terrorists, who were equipped with Kalashnikovs, heavy weapons and sniper rifles. They used – and are using nowadays too – the same tactic in their raids around Mount Chaambi that al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb practiced in the Kabylie mountains against the Algerian army: raiding by surprise against mountainous hardly approachable military posts, then torturing the bodies of the soldiers and finally looting their weapons and military dress.<sup>34</sup>

The terrorist-group, which was named after the Umayyad general, first appeared in the horizon of the authorities at the end of 2012. In December, four armed men killed adjutant Anis Jelassi in shoot-out in Kasserine Governorate. The Tunisian authorities began a wide-scope investigation and arrested seven people. On the basis of their confession, Interior Minister Ali Rayadh delineated for first time the exact name of the cell, its contact with al-Qaeda as well as its smuggling and secret military training activity on December 21.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> He also stated that the members of the group were inhabitants of Kasserine region and Ansar al-Sharia volunteers. His statement, which meant an open charge against a legally working organization, was lacked any kind of proof. That is why many people questioned the authenticity and precision of the notification (Andrew Lebovich, "Confronting Tunisia's jihadists" in *The Middle East Channel*, May 16, 2013, available online at: [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/16/confronting\\_tunisas\\_jihadists](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/16/confronting_tunisas_jihadists), accessed on August 01, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> "Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade" in *TRAC, Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium*. (<http://www.trackingterrorism.org/group/okba-ibn-nafaa-brigade>) accessed on August 01, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> Andrew Lebovich, "Confronting Tunisia's jihadists" in *The Middle East Channel*, May 16, 2013, available online at: [http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/16/confronting\\_tunisas\\_jihadists](http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/16/confronting_tunisas_jihadists), accessed on August 01, 2014; Amira Masrour, "Circumstances of Death Arise After Algerian Border Attack" in *Tunisia Live, living in Tunisia*, December 11, 2012, available online at: <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2012/12/11/circumstances-of-death->

<sup>31</sup> Mohamed Kasdallah, "Terrorists in Tunisia Adopt 'Asymmetric' Warfare Tactics" in *Al-Monitor*, November 11, 2013, available online at: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2013/11/tunisia-terrorists-asymmetric-warfare.html#>, accessed on August 05, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Schemm, "Jihadis threaten Tunisia's Arab Spring transition" in *AP*, July 31, 2013, available online at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/jihadis-threaten-tunisas-arab-spring-transition>, accessed on July 31, 2014.





Following the case when a road-sided bomb shattered one patrolling soldier's leg in the National Park, the Tunisian Army launched a military offensive to eliminate them. Practically, there was no direct armed contact with the group in the first half of the two-month action. The terrorists always escaped after they undermined the place. The Army's only solution against this was using mortar fire against dangerous areas. During the operation, which was executed by several hundred soldiers, three persons died and 27 were injured due to the 10 explosions against them.<sup>36</sup>

Certainly the armed forces caused serious damages to the terrorists, but they did not succeed to eliminate them completely. The cell struck again in Mount Chaambi in July 2013. They killed eight soldiers and cut the throats of five of them. The armed forces launched a new wide-range offensive against them as revenge, but the offenders managed to escape also on this occasion.<sup>37</sup>

### 5. Open jihad against security forces

After the proscription of the organization, the Tunisian authorities started an intensive hunt for Ansar al-Sharia and Islamist militants. During 2013 alone, 1,347 persons were brought to justice in connection with terrorist-related charges, and more than 8,000 young men and women were prevented from going to Syria to fight.<sup>38</sup> During

a police raid in the Raoued area outside Tunis, Kamel Gadhgadhi, the main suspect of Chokri Belaid's assassination, was killed along with six other terrorists. It was thought-provoking that the security forces found a large quantity of weapons during the rummage of the building. It indicated that the terrorists probably planned to carry out an attack.<sup>39</sup> Another six members of the banned organization were detained by the anti-terrorist unit in the centre of Sidi Bouzid on July 10. Two weeks later, they arrested Mohamed Anis, "the Princes of Ansar al-Sharia", who possessed considerable cash and documents containing terrorist plans.<sup>40</sup> According to the reports, the security forces killed several other members of the organization in October. Due to their intervention, the suicide attempt against French and American embassies also failed at the end of the month, which was ordered by Abdelmalek Droukdel to sleeping cells of Ansar al-Sharia as a revenge for French military action in Mali and the liquidation of al-Qaeda leaders. They also managed to disarm the suicide bomber who wanted to blow up the mausoleum of Habib Bourguiba in Monastir with considerable quantity of explosives in his rucksack on October 30. Unfortunately, they could not prevent his companion from committing action. His bomb, which was hidden in a suitcase, was activated by a mobile phone on the beach outside the Riad Palm Hotel in Sousse on the same day.<sup>41</sup> Luckily, the

feature-01, accessed on July 29, 2014.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> The actual influence of the banned organization was well pictured that the companions of the July arrested activists started a spontaneous demonstration at the police headquarters and demanded their release on the same day. The police used tear gas and fired warning shots to disperse the mob. Also on the same day, Salafist extremists clashed with policemen in El Kef. They threw stones at police vehicles and attacked the police station with Molotov cocktails. ("Ansar al-Sharia clash with Sidi Bouzid police" in *Magharebia*, July 11, 2014, available online at: [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/newsbriefs/general/2014/07/11/newsbrief-03](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/newsbriefs/general/2014/07/11/newsbrief-03), accessed on July 29, 2014; Yosr Kzadri, "The Arrest of the Prince of Ansar al-Sharia Mohammed Anis in Mahdia" in *Tunisia Times*, July 24, 2014, available online at: <http://tunisiatimes.tn/en/news/the-arrest-of-the-prince-of-ansar-al-sharia-mohammed-anis-in-mahdia>, accessed on July 29, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Joscelyn, "Suicide bomber strikes in Tunisia" in *The Long War Journal*, October 30, 2013, available online at: [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/10/nine\\_members\\_of\\_ansa.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/10/nine_members_of_ansa.php), accessed on August 04, 2014.

arise-after-algerian-border-attack/, accessed on August 05, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> At the same time it was thoughtful that none of the detained dozens of suspects almost certainly belonged to the hiding jihadists. (Paul Schemm, "Jihadis threaten Tunisia's Arab Spring transition" in *AP*, July 31, 2013, available online at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/jihadis-threaten-tunisia-arab-spring-transition>, accessed on July 31, 2014; "Tunisia links two wanted jihadist groups to al-Qaeda" in *AFP*, May 7, 2013, available online at: <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/africa/2013/05/07/Tunisia-links-two-wanted-jihadist-groups-to-al-Qaeda-.html>) accessed on July 29, 2014.)

<sup>37</sup> "Tunisia declares Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist group" in *BBC News*, August 27, 2013, available online at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23853241>, accessed on July 25, 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Yasmin Najjar, "Tunisia takes out top terrorists" in *Magharebia*, February 05, 2014, available online at: [http://magharebia.com/en\\_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/02/05/](http://magharebia.com/en_GB/articles/awi/features/2014/02/05/)



suicide assailant did not hurt anybody else.

Soon after these events, the Tunisian authorities began a wide-range investigation. Shortly, they arrested five persons and confiscated a considerable quantity of explosives in Monastir. The suspects told during their interrogation that they planned an attempt according Abu Iyad's order against the center of the security services, police stations as well as four supermarkets, where alcohol could be bought.<sup>42</sup> The security services managed to discover another attempt when they arrested a terrorist cell. Supposedly, the six terrorists wanted to target hotels or bars on the popular tourist site Djerba Island during New Year's Eve celebrations.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, despite the unquestionable significant results, the struggle against terrorism proved to be a remarkable challenge for the Tunisian armed forces. The low experience meant a serious problem as well as the lack of sufficient equipment. Their position worsened when they had to divide their small strength and regroup forces to the Libyan border region that became dangerous after the turn in the country. What is more, the militants slew at least 15 soldiers or policemen until October 2013 and killed two policemen in Beja about 160 km north of the Chaambi region on October 15, 2013. The security forces lost their confidence in the cabinet due to growing casualties. Their unions organized several demonstrations where they demanded to make the needed resources available to combat jihadist elements as well as laws to protect policemen.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross; Bridget Moreng, Kathleen Soucy, "Raising the Stakes: Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia's Shift to Jihad" ICCT Research Paper, February 2014. p.16.

<sup>43</sup> Monia Ghanmi, "Tunisia Thwarts New Suicide Bombing" in *All Africa*, December 10, 2013, available online at: <http://allafrica.com/stories/201312110409.html?viewall=1>, accessed on August 05, 2014.

<sup>44</sup> The growing disaffection of policemen was exceedingly exemplified on October 18, 2013, when they did not allow President Moncef Marzouki, Prime Minister Ali Larayedh and parliamentary speaker Mustapha Ben Jaafar to attend the funeral ceremony for the two comrades, who were killed three days earlier by extremists. ("Tunisia leaders evicted from police memorial" in *Al-Jazeera*, October 18, 2013, available online at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2013/10/tunisia-leaders-evicted-from-police-memorial-20131018135840923875.html>, accessed on July

The danger of terrorism increased on January 14, 2014 when Okba Ibn Nafaa merged with Ansar al-Sharia whereby it was non-officially transformed to al-Qaeda's Tunisian wing. Abdelmalek Droukdel, the Algerian chief of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, appointed Khaled Chaieb (aka Lokman Abou Sakhr) as the leader of the new organization that was very soon referred to in the press as al-Qaeda in Tunisia. From the experience of the past half a year, it seems that Chaieb managed to recruit and train new volunteers meanwhile he managed all the time to avoid capture. The militants, equipped with rocket-propelled grenades and rifles, raided again and made an assault on two military checkpoints near Mount Chaambi on July 17, 2014. The casualties – 15 soldiers lost their lives and at least 20 other wounded in the attack – were the heaviest death toll registered by the armed forces since independence in 1956.<sup>45</sup> After the events, the government set up a crisis group and closed the unlicensed Al-Ensan television and Nour Radio stations, as well as certain mosques, which they claimed that they had promoted violence and jihad.<sup>46</sup> Above all, the Tunisian cabinet intensified its cooperation with neighboring Algeria and they launched a joint operation to catch Islamists. Despite the preventive measures, another raid occurred on July 26, when some 40 Islamists ambushed two vehicles of the armed forces near Djebel Urga, in Kef Governorate. In response to the attack, which caused two soldiers' death and four others injured, two days later, the armed forces reacted quickly and arrested more than 10 persons of perpetrators.<sup>47</sup>

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29, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> "Tunisian soldiers killed in attack near Algerian border" in *BBC News*, July 17, 2014, available online at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28341318>, accessed on July 24, 2014.

<sup>46</sup> Safa Ben Said, "Ask the Experts: Are Media Closures a Threat to Freedoms?" in *Tunisia alive, living Tunisia*, July 22, 2014, available online at: <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2014/07/22/ask-the-experts-are-media-mosque-closures-a-threat-to-freedoms/>, accessed on July 28, 2014.

<sup>47</sup> M.G., "Le Kef: Plusieurs arrestations en rapport avec l'embuscade de Jebel Ouergha" in *Business News*, July 28, 2014, available online at: <http://www.businessnews.com.tn/le-kef-plusieurs-arrestations-en-rapport-avec-lembuscade-de-jebel-ouergha,520,48310,3>, accessed on July 29, 2014.



### Conclusion

We can see in the study how the relations between Ansar al-Sharia and the Tunisian government worsened step-by-step. The main reasons were many successive incidents as well as mutual responses and reactions. We can consider Anis Jelassi's killing in December 2012 as the beginning of the war against the state. The raids against soldiers together with the set-back of public order caused a considerable pressure to the cabinet until the politician Mohamed Brahmi's death in July 2013 as well as the killing of eight members of security forces some days later. The Tunisian cabinet got into a tight corner and without any kind of a choice it had to designate Ansar al-Sharia as terrorist-organization and declared an open struggle against it.

Today, there are many factors that spelt difficulties in the fight against terrorists. The jihadists look like normal inhabitants with their appearance and clothes and enjoy the local's maximum support. They build up close cooperation with local smugglers in hardly controlled mountainous regions so there is no special problem for them in gaining reserves. The police lost its prestige after the fall of Ben Ali's regime so now the armed forces' main task is to eliminate them. At the same time, we can not wonder that this proved to be an enormous challenge for them with securing public institutions and keeping public order as well as controlling several hundred kilometers borderline and fighting against terrorists. The problem is heightened by the lack of such technological resources (e.g. enough airplanes and helicopters or suitable bugs for reconnaissance) that could compensate for the disadvantages in their number. It looks like that without effective measures, all of the risk that jihadist activists can set up their own basis in the region, where they can train their common ideological volunteers in untroubled conditions who will be deployed later against the institutions and represents of Tunisian state seems to transform into a real threat.

The failed attempts in the second half of 2013 also resulted in misgivings. Namely, the selection of targets implies that the terrorist-organization accepted Jamal al-Islamiyya's previous tactic

when it wanted to force its conception upon state by attacking tourism. Using this strategy practically means the loss of the main public revenue needed as soon as possible for the state to stabilize the critical economic conditions.

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