



Program on Extremism

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

THE ARCHITECTS OF SALVATION: HOW IS
FOREIGN FIGHTER RECRUITMENT
HUBS EMERGED IN TUNISIA

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SEPTEMBER 2019

About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and non-violent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public.

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Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank George Washington University's Program on Extremism, in particular, the Director, Lorenzo Vidino, and Dr. Haroro Ingram. Without their support, this report would not have been possible. The author would also like to thank Oxford University's Nuffield College for additional financial support for fieldwork.

Finally, the author would like to thank his friends in Tunisia who helped make the fieldwork possible. Due to the sensitivity of their ongoing work and the subject matter, they must remain anonymous. I hope they will find some value in the pages that follow.

The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author, and not necessarily those of the George Washington University or Oxford University.

“In the Casbah, it was impossible to find someone to console you without giving him the chance to indoctrinate you...Everywhere, young imams went sniffing out resentment, invading people’s consciousness and forging minds to suit their purpose. They could be seen in the cafés, schools and health clinics, and even on staircases...a mere whimper and the followers heaped their sympathy on you, then, without warning, you found yourself in the hands of the architects of Salvation.”

-Yasmina Khadra, *Wolf Dreams* (106)

Executive Summary and Key Findings

Tunisia's foreign fighter contingent was not only one of the largest in the world, but had more concentrated hubs of recruits than in almost any other country. Why one of these hubs emerged, and how people were recruited in it, is the subject of this paper.

The reason recruitment hubs are important is because human beings are social animals – we observe how the people around us act and adapt our own behavior accordingly. When a hub of militant recruitment forms, it creates new and more diverse pathways for people to join. Instead of only the most committed ideologues, places where recruitment is popular also attract people whose friends or family members joined, or because they want to improve their social standing, or to hide from the police. Even though their reasons for joining are less ideological, these recruits can become just as committed as any other member after they join through a process of socialization and indoctrination.

The most important reason why so many hubs emerged in Tunisia was that Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), the country's main Jihadi Salafi movement, recruited virtually unopposed for two years after Tunisia's 2011 revolution. This allowed AST to organize activities in all areas of Tunisia, unlike in most places where recruitment was more constrained. When the Tunisian government eventually declared AST a terrorist organization in August 2013, it criminalized a nationwide social movement and drove thousands to flee the country for Syria – mostly to join the Islamic State (IS).

This paper describes how one of the main centers of recruitment of IS foreign fighters formed in Tunisia in order to help us better understand how large numbers of people joined IS and under what conditions they might mobilize in the future. It draws two critical conclusions that are relevant for policies aimed at preventing the next wave of foreign fighters.

1. Interpersonal networks facilitated the recruitment of Tunisian foreign fighters in hubs and kept new joiners involved in the group until they were fully indoctrinated. Properly designed programs can mobilize these friend and family networks to stop recruitment as well.

Interpersonal networks were critical to recruiting IS foreign fighters. Recruiters used personal connections to gather information and customize their pitch for potential recruits before approaching them. Once recruiters convinced someone to join, they deliberately re-shaped that person's personal network to surround him with like-minded members of the group, reinforcing their beliefs and practices to such an extent that their radicalization seemed normal.

Like recruiters, programs aimed at countering recruitment can also use a recruit's personal network to help dissuade them from joining or to help facilitate their departure from terrorist groups like IS. My interviews with friends and family revealed that someone was almost always aware of the fact that a person was being recruited. Rather than using security services to force families to give up this information – a process that often accelerates radicalism rather than helps reduce it – grassroots non-governmental efforts to counter recruitment should be built to help those who are aware that a person is being recruited find support. In the hub this paper studied, those who wanted to report their concerns about a friend or relative being recruited could not find anyone to help them. With careful programming, this can change.

2. Effective counter-terrorism policy must start with effective counter-recruitment, and this can only succeed if it invests in three complementary lines of effort.

2.1. Support state-led programs that offer new opportunity structures in neighborhoods where recruitment was most prevalent.

Jihadi Salafist groups in Tunisia did not just offer spiritual benefits, new joiners had access to material, social, and psychological benefits as well. Jihadi Salafi groups gave members micro-credit loans and economic cooperatives that helped new members start businesses or design activities that benefitted their community. These opportunities provided structure, meaning, and personal advancement that had previously not been available for new joiners.

Neighborhoods like the hub of IS foreign fighters studied here need state investments that can provide residents with opportunities that go beyond employment. Foreign government support works best if it helps develop state capacity; otherwise, it is too short term to make the kinds of transformational and inter-generational impacts that these neighborhoods need. In the immediate period, programs could focus on improving municipal governance and economic development, such as giving access to micro-credit banking in poor neighborhoods, increasing funding for social work, subsidizing grassroots economic cooperatives. In the long term, multi-national investment needs to help develop urban renewal programs that offers mixed-income developments and give residents better access to public transit systems.

2.2. Focus grassroots organizations on addressing the individual-level appeal of Jihadi Salafi recruitment campaigns.

In the hub this paper studied, it was clear that Jihadi Salafis recruited at an individual level whenever possible. In order to counter this recruitment, support is urgently needed to help local non-governmental organizations 1) identify individuals who are vulnerable to being recruited and 2) intervene before those individuals can become indoctrinated. These programs can only succeed if residents in hubs trust them. In Tunisia they do, but this is a critical problem undermining counter-recruitment efforts in countries in North Africa like Morocco and Egypt.

2.3. Prioritize limited law enforcement and intelligence capacity on prosecuting the most influential recruiters.

Law enforcement and domestic security agencies should prioritize identifying the individuals most responsible for recruiting new members. The majority of Tunisia's 3,000 foreign fighters were recruited by 20-30 people. Identifying and prosecuting these individuals should be the primary focus of law enforcement and domestic security. This approach is just as applicable to dealing with returning foreign fighters: law enforcement should identify and monitor individuals in the network who are most influential, which is not necessarily the same as the most "radical." Returnees are more of a threat if they persuade many others to carry out attacks than those who seek to perpetrate them on their own.

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Introduction

An estimated 3,000 Tunisians joined the Islamic State (IS), proportionally the highest rate of foreign fighters who joined IS of any country in the world.¹ Relative to its population of 10.98 million, Tunisia had approximately 27 people fight for IS per 100,000 citizens.²

Tunisia also had a preponderance of “hubs” – regions inside countries where the number of foreign fighters at least doubled that which was predicted by their population. Tunisia’s hubs were unusual because they were geographically dispersed, unlike most countries around the world where fighters were mostly concentrated in a specific region. For example, 85% of fighters in Libya came from Derna and Benghazi; 67% of Saudi fighters came from Riyadh, Mecca, and Qassim; and 72% of Russian fighters came from Dagestan and Chechnya.³

Tunisia’s hubs were also some of the largest in the world. Eight of the world’s 20 largest hubs came from Tunisia.⁴ The fact that hubs of Jihadi Salafist recruitment formed so freely across Tunisia makes it a critical case study to showcase how foreign fighters are recruited and mobilized.⁵

This paper discusses how one hub of recruitment for foreign fighters who joined IS emerged in the suburbs of the capital Tunis. The “Hub”⁶ was similar to many other areas in Tunisia where foreign fighters came from: a massive, poorly planned, densely populated peri-urban slum comprised mostly of people who recently moved to the city from underdeveloped rural regions looking for access to better paying jobs and more reliable services.⁷

I selected this particular hub not just because it exemplified the conditions of communities where recruitment was common, but also because it had some of the highest concentrations of IS foreign fighters recruited of any town, village, or city neighborhood in Tunisia. Conversations with experts and local residents lead me to estimate that the rate of mobilization in this area was, conservatively,

¹ “Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters Into Syria and Iraq,” *The Soufan Group*, December 2015. http://soufan-group.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_Foreign-FightersUpdate3.pdf

² The rate for Tunisia would be 27 fighters joining IS per 100,000 citizens. The low estimate for Tunisia is 2,926 (Per Soufan group figures), and the population of Tunisia is 10,980,000 per the 2014 national census (Source: Tunisia’s Institute for National Statistics). $2926/10,980,000 = 27$ fighters per 100,000 residents.

³ Rosenblatt, Nate, “All Jihad is Local,” *New America International Security Program*, June 2016, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/all-jihad-is-local/>

⁴ By “largest” I mean those with the highest per capita concentration of foreign fighter recruits to IS. Source: Rosenblatt, “All Jihad is Local.”

⁵ “Jihadi Salafism” is one strain of thought that branches off from Salafism, a strain of extremely conservative Islamic thought that calls for people to return to the practices of the Prophet Mohammed and his followers (the *Salaf* – “predecessors”). Jihadi Salafism is a branch of Salafist thought that obliges followers to use violence to bring this practice into modern times. For more on Jihadi Salafism, please see: Maher, Shiraz. *Salafi-jihadism: The History of an Idea*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2016.

⁶ Because my research is ongoing in this neighborhood, and because this research is sensitive, I will not include the actual name of the neighborhood in this paper. Instead, neighborhood that became a hub will be simply called the “Hub.”

⁷ Author’s interview with Bakr, June 7, 2019 – Bakr described these regions as the “Black Belt” of Tunis. See also, “Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge,” February 2013, *International Crisis Group*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°137

150 fighters per 100,000 residents. That is five times larger than the rate of fighters who came from Tunisia as a whole, already the highest rate of foreign fighters in the world.⁸

This paper will explain how recruitment into Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), and later IS, took place in this hub. It is structured around four questions:

1. How was the neighborhood transformed into a hub?
2. What was the experience like being recruited into AST?
3. What was it like to be a member of AST?
4. How were Tunisians recruited from AST to join IS?

By focusing on how *hubs* of foreign fighters emerged, in this case in Tunisia, I can focus on why so many Tunisians joined the fight in Syria by studying a place where the highest number were recruited. Tunisian foreign fighters were diverse and joined IS for many reasons.⁹ These individual motivations may be impossible to generalize: research on a person's motivations for joining a terrorist group have yet to develop a general pathway for understanding how people are radicalized as individuals.¹⁰

But a focus on hubs helps us understand the social forces that shaped an individual's choices. Rather than try to explain why individuals made the choices they did, I will explain how people made their choices by comparing them to the ones they believed were available to them at the time. The choices we make in life, and the choices we believe are available to us, are heavily influenced by the people around us.¹¹ This is why hubs matter – they influence our understanding of what is possible and what is popular.

Focusing on these hubs, I learned from my fieldwork in Tunis this summer that a loose network of AST supporters was the critical link connecting Tunisians to IS. In the Hub, recruiters were so successful at convincing people to fight for IS in Syria that they were no longer recruiters, but *filters*. Their concern was no longer finding participants but selecting the *right* participants. How and why they became so successful at this – and what it means for the future of foreign fighters – is the subject of this paper.

It is critical to understand the lessons from the past mobilization of foreign fighters in order to put in place policies that can prevent them from mobilizing at such a large scale in the future. It is not a question of 'if' foreign fighters will mobilize for a future conflict but 'when' that next conflict involving foreign fighters will occur. This paper looks at the local and social processes by which foreign fighters eventually joined IS from Tunisia in order to understand the conditions that led to their emergence.

⁸ Author's interview with Bakr, June 7, 2019; Author's interview with Mostafa, June 19, 2019; Author's interview with Mohsen, June 22, 2019.

⁹ Zelin, Aaron, "Tunisian Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Policy Note 55, November 2018.

¹⁰ John Horgan, "Speaking of Psychology: Getting into a terrorist's mind," *American Psychological Association*. <http://www.apa.org/research/action/speaking-of-psychology/terrorist-mind.aspx>.

¹¹ There is a large body of academic research that describes the influences of our interpersonal networks on the choices we make. One of the most significant early works was written by Mark Granovetter, "Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology*, 1985, Vol. 91(3): pp.481-510.

Background and Methods

Methods

My research examines how hubs of foreign fighters emerged in the Arabic speaking world, using the mobilization to IS as a case study. This paper focuses on how one hub of Tunisian foreign fighters to IS emerged in Tunis from 2011-2014.

I selected the Hub in Tunis mainly because of strong personal connections I had to people who worked in this neighborhood. These people introduced me to people they knew who were involved in Jihadi Salafism from the Hub. In total, I interviewed 37 people, roughly one person per day of fieldwork. Due to the sensitive nature of these interviews, all interview names in which only the first name is included are anonymous. For the added protection of residents who might be identified by personal details alone, I added a second layer of anonymity: if I interviewed the mother of a child who went to Syria, that person might become her sister, aunt or cousin. No details of the story were changed to save the relationship of the person I interviewed to the person who was recruited. This was done in order to share as many details of their story as possible while still protecting their identity.

The people I interviewed included some who had tried to reach Syria but were stopped for a variety of reasons. They also included friends and family of people who had gone to fight with IS in Syria. Through these interviews, I met several social workers in the community who shared with me their memories of how Jihadi Salafists took over their neighborhood. All of these interview subjects transferred their trust of my friends onto me, and I was only able to have candid interviews with them because of these personal connections. After one or more interviews, some people I interviewed trusted me enough to introduce me to others they knew.

My interviews lasted at least 1 hour but were often 2 hours and sometimes occurred over several days. These interviews were “semi-structured,” which gave me the chance to ask pre-determined, but open-ended questions that centered around what happened to people they knew who were recruited to join the network of Jihadi Salafists that would eventually channel fighters to Syria.

I supplemented these interviews with walks through the neighborhood at different times and an additional 15 interviews with Tunisian politicians and local and foreign experts on Tunisian jihadism. I also used statistical analysis where possible to provide context, mainly drawn from the Tunisian government’s national institute for statistics (INS).

Background: Jihadi Salafism in Tunisia

This section includes a brief summary of how Jihadi Salafism emerged in Tunisia and why it was able to attract so many followers after the 2010-11 revolution. It is possible to summarize the emergence of Jihadi Salafism due to the wealth of valuable studies that explore the topic that are already available.¹²

¹² On Jihadi Salafism before the 2011 revolution, see: Allani, Alaya, “The Islamists in Tunisia between Congratation and Participation, 1980-2008,” *Journal of North African Studies*, 14(2): 2009, pp. 257-72; Wolf, Anne. *Political Islam in*

The success of AST in mobilizing and organizing Jihadi Salafis in Tunisia was perhaps the most important factor in determining the number of Tunisians who went to fight with IS in Syria.¹³ The freedom with which AST operated in Tunisia from 2011-2013 was the main reason Jihadi Salafism, the intellectual foundation of IS, became so popular in Tunisia.¹⁴ Because of how important AST's operations were to the size of the Tunisian mobilization to IS, this section will answer two questions: 1) why was AST so popular, and 2) why were they allowed to organize so openly?

Why Did AST Become so Popular?

AST became popular after the Tunisian revolution because it organized without resistance from state security in a religious community that had not been able to practice freely in decades.¹⁵ This gave AST the opportunity to reach tens of thousands of potential recruits who were interested in Islam and, for the most part, uneducated in Islamic principles. The initial base of AST consisted of three main components:

1. Ex-prisoners who were either already Jihadi Salafis (i.e., returnees from Afghanistan and Iraq) or those imprisoned on other charges but were indoctrinated in prison. These prisoners, numbering roughly 1-2,000, were virtually all granted amnesty in the months after the 2010-2011 revolution.¹⁶
2. Exiles (forced or self-imposed) who held Jihadi Salafi beliefs and who were trained abroad. Many of these exiles, such as Sami Essid in Milan, were already active in Jihadi Salafi recruitment networks.¹⁷

Tunisia: The History of Ennahda. London: Hurst Publications, 2017; Pargeter, Alison. "The Suleiman Affair: Radicalism and Jihad in Tunisia." *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 2011; "Extremism in Tunisia: Fertile Ground?" Wikileaks Cable, 2008. "2006/2007 Terror Cell in Tunisia" Wikileaks Cable, 2008. Retrieved from: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08TUNIS75_a.html.

On Jihadi Salafism after the 2011 revolution: Marcusa, Michael, "Radicalism on the Periphery: History, Collective Memory, and the Cultural Resonance of Jihadist Ideology in Tunisia," *Brown University – Political Science Department*, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 2018; Work by Aaron Zelin, including his upcoming book *Your Sons Are At Your Service*, New York: Columbia University Press, January 2020, and current published work, including: Zelin, Aaron. "Tunisia: Uncovering Ansar Al-Shari'a." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. October 25, 2013. Retrieved from: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/tunisia-uncovering-ansar-al-sharia>; Miller, Alyssa, "Kin-work in a Time of Jihad: Sustaining Bonds of Filiation and Care for Tunisian Foreign Combatants," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol 33(4): 2018, pp. 596-620; Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game: Dawa, Hisba, and Jihad," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, May 2013; "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge," *International Crisis Group*, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 137, February 2013; Fabio Merone, "Enduring Class Struggle in Tunisia: The Fight for Identity beyond Political Islam," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42 (December 2014), 74–87; Hajj Salem, Jihad, "Jihadist Youth in Douar Hicher: an Ethnographic Case Study," (Ar.) in Mohamed al-Hajj Salem, Ed. *Jihadi Salafism in Tunisia: Reality and Consequences*. Tunis: The Tunisian Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014.

¹³ Not all Jihadi Salafists in Tunisia were AST members, and not all AST members joined IS. But AST's efforts to unite Jihadi Salafis – their high-profile media appearances, large demonstrations and conferences – lifted the profile of the entire Jihadi Salafi movement by giving it sense of legitimacy and normalcy in Tunisian religious and political spheres. As many as 2,000 Tunisians traveled to Syria before IS ever emerged and joined other groups, but after IS emerged most Tunisians who went to fight abroad joined IS.

¹⁴ Zelin, Aaron, "Maqdisi's Disciples in Libya and Tunisia," *Foreign Policy*, 14 November 2012; Gartenstein-Ross, Daveed, "Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia's Long Game."

¹⁵ Author's interview with former Ministry of Interior, Ali Laarayedh, July 3, 2019.

¹⁶ ICG, "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge."

¹⁷ Joscelyn, Thomas, "From al Qaeda in Italy to Ansar al Sharia Tunisia," *Long War Journal*, November 21, 2012.

3. A small number of intellectually curious young people whose main influences were hardline preachers from Egypt and Saudi Arabia, whose teachings were broadcast on satellite television.¹⁸

With few ideologically near-peer competitors, AST used this network of early adopters to build a following that numbered as many as 100,000 people.¹⁹ The popularity of AST normalized Jihadi Salafism in Tunisia and was the main reason why Tunisia's foreign fighter population was so large, diverse, and geographically widespread. The reason why this paper focuses so heavily on how recruits to IS were indoctrinated by AST is because, when IS emerged in Spring 2013, many Tunisians who would become IS foreign fighters had been Jihadi Salafists for a year or more. By the time Tunisians eventually joined IS, it was the logical extension of a set of beliefs they had already developed in Tunisia.²⁰

How Could AST Organize so Freely?

The second question is why AST was able to recruit so openly for so long in Tunisia.²¹ I asked this question to experts on AST and Tunisian politicians while conducting my fieldwork. This section will describe three factors that help explain why AST was allowed to operate with so few constraints from 2011 until 2013. It focuses in particular on the role of Tunisia's Ennahda party in the rise of AST, because Ennahda were in charge of Tunisia's government when AST emerged.

1. An overriding belief that, over time, democracy would moderate AST's violent, anti-establishment beliefs.

Ennahda's executive committee started holding debates about what to do with the rising popularity of AST at the beginning of 2012.²² Ali La'arayedh, the Minister of Interior (2011-2013), took a hardline position in these debates, explaining to the executive council of Ennahda "to prepare for a fight" with AST.²³

But other leaders in Ennahda, particularly those exiled abroad and not imprisoned like La'arayedh, argued that including AST in the post-revolution political process would moderate it. Rachid Ghannouchi, Ennahda's co-founder, exemplified this position: "We understand democracy not just as a tool of government but also of education," he explained in an interview in 2012, "through democracy, they [Jihadi Salafists] will slowly be part of this democracy, rather than destroying it."²⁴

2. Ennahda feared a counter-revolution by ex-regime secularists more than an Islamic uprising.

¹⁸ Author's interview with Bakr, June 7, 2019; ICG, "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafist Challenge."

¹⁹ Author's interview with Aaron Zelin, August 2, 2019.

²⁰ The Jihadi Salafi and IS connections were strong among AST deputies like Kamal Zarrouk, who took on more of a leadership role after Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi fled to Libya at the end of 2012. In February 2014, Zarrouk also left to join IS in Syria. Roggio, Bill, "Ansar al Sharia Tunisia deputy leader reportedly in Syria," *Long War Journal*, February 27, 2014. Retrieved from: https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/02/ansar_al_sharia_tuni_7.php

²¹ Recruitment is a two-way street – one seeks out the group just as they seek out members. For the simplicity's sake, I describe how AST recruited new members, but that by no means implies that new recruits did not try to join on their own as well.

²² Author's interview with Samir Dilou, MP from Ennahda Party, June 12, 2019.

²³ Author's interview with Ali La'arayedh, former Interior Minister (2011-13) and Prime Minister (2013-14) from Ennahda Party, July 3, 2019.

²⁴ Fisk, Robert, "Rached Ghannouchi says he doesn't want an Islamic state in Tunisia. Can he prove his critics wrong?" *The Independent*, October 24, 2012, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/rached-ghannouchi-says-he-doesn-t-want-an-islamic-state-in-tunisia-can-he-prove-his-critics-wrong-8225092.html>.

In less than one year, Ennahda went from an oppressed religious opposition party in a tightly controlled, highly secular dictatorship to winning the popular mandate to run a post-revolutionary state. In such an environment, Ennahda simply was not prepared for the responsibility of government. “Ennahda, as with other issues, did not have the experience to run the country,” explained Oussama Sghaier, an elected member of Ennahda at the time.²⁵

Ennahda was deeply concerned in the years after the revolution that there would be a counter-revolution staged by an alliance of former government officials and the secular political and business elites who profited under the Zine el Abidine Ben Ali dictatorship.²⁶ Several experts and MPs I interviewed agreed that Ennahda believed the potential for a counter-revolution was their most pressing national security issue. It was the driving force behind Ennahda’s reconciliation with secular political parties on a variety of topics, including Ennahda removing its insistence that Sharia law be part of Tunisia’s new constitution. This set Ennahda apart from more conservative-minded activists, some of whom joined AST, who felt their interest in bringing Islam in political life was being abandoned.

It is safe to say that Ennahda lacked the capacity to manage all the issues it had to deal with and focused more on the potential for a counter-revolution than an Islamic uprising. As a result of being pre-occupied with the possibility of a counter-revolution, leadership in post-revolutionary Tunisia constantly misread the rise of AST and the extent to which it threatened the state from 2011-13.

3. Ennahda leadership did not want to impose on AST the harsh treatment they experienced under Ben Ali. Finally, although many members of Ennahda had their suspicions of the intentions of AST, it was not clear that AST members or leaders had committed a crime. “A big part of our challenge was to convince the people that we were not just arresting [them] because they had long beards and were praying a lot,” explained La’arayedh.²⁷

Many members of Ennahda’s leadership faced long prison sentences under the Ben Ali dictatorship and were reluctant to imprison AST without clear evidence of illegal activity. Sahbi Atig, an Ennahda MP from Ettadhamen, a neighborhood similar to the Hub, was imprisoned in 1991 when his wife was pregnant with their first child and did not meet his son for 10 years.²⁸ Ali La’arayedh was tortured and isolated in prison from 1990 until 2004, during which time Ben Ali’s security services harassed and sexually abused his wife.²⁹

As a result of the trauma of their own experience in prison or exile, Ennahda leaders were very reluctant to oppress AST. On the one hand, it gave AST greater freedom to organize and mobilize, but on the other, it was hard to charge the group with crimes before late 2012. In the end, all Ennahda MPs I interviewed acknowledged that they made a mistake with AST: “there was a debate

²⁵ Author’s interview with Oussama Sghaier, MP from Ennahda Party, June 11, 2019.

²⁶ Author’s interview with Oussama Sghaier, MP from Ennahda Party, June 11, 2019.

²⁷ Author’s interview with Ali La’arayedh, former Interior Minister (2011-13) and Prime Minister (2013-14) from Ennahda Party, July 3, 2019.

²⁸ Author’s interview with Sahbi Atig, MP from Ennahda Party, June 25, 2019.

²⁹ Medien, Ahmed, “Ali Laarayedh,” *Tunisia Live*, December 17, 2011, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120119091551/http://www.tunisia-live.net/2011/12/17/ali-laarayedh/>

between human rights and security” explained Samir Dilou, an MP in Ennahda, “but we took more time than we should have [to start arresting members of the group].”³⁰

At first, the network of Jihadi Salafis in Tunisia was centered around ex-convicts, youth activists and returning exiles. It was informal and highly localized – built around local charismatic preachers and groups of interested followers. It gained strength in certain villages and in poor city neighborhoods like the Hub. Only later did it become part of the AST movement, as AST consolidated control over the Jihadi Salafi movement in a political atmosphere that did not sufficiently restrict their activities until after they had recruited tens of thousands of people. How they recruited those people is the subject of the next section.

The ‘Hub’

This section will describe how a hub of recruitment for Tunisian foreign fighters to IS emerged in the suburbs of Tunis, Tunisia’s capital. This section will describe the conditions in which a hub of recruitment for Jihadi Salafists emerged, how people were recruited into that network, what it was like to be a member of the Jihadi Salafist network, and how that network was transformed into a pipeline for IS recruits.

Although many fighters came from the Hub, the conditions in which they emerged were hardly unique. The Hub is a neighborhood on the outskirts of Tunis, Tunisia’s capital. It is near an industrial area, which developed in the 1960s and 70s, drawing tens of thousands of migrants to the city from Tunisia’s hinterland looking for better paying jobs. Due to a lack of state investment in developing infrastructure in Tunisia’s interior, these migrants also sought better services like health care, safe drinking water, and education for their children.³¹

By the 1980s and 1990s, neighborhoods like the Hub on the outskirts of Tunisia’s cities grew to as much as ten times their size.³² This massive wave of rural-urban migration, totally unsupervised and unregulated, turned the Hub into one of Tunisia’s many large, poorly planned, densely packed peri-urban slums. Tunisia’s 2014 census counted the Hub’s population as just over 80,000 people, making it one of the largest and most densely populated neighborhoods in all of Tunisia.³³

How did the ‘Hub’ become a hub?

After the fall of the Ben Ali dictatorship in January 2011, local study groups of Jihadi Salafis started to form in the Hub and many other places around the country. These groups were comprised of youth who were interested in learning more about Islam, recently released prisoners indoctrinated in prison, and returning ideologues who had been living in forced or self-imposed exile.³⁴ At first, this network was informal, highly localized, and mainly built around small study groups led by local charismatic leaders and preachers. Over time, these groups coalesced into a loosely organized

³⁰ Author’s interview with Samir Dilou, MP from Ennahda Party, June 12, 2019.

³¹ Amara, Mohamed, Mohamed Ayadi, and Hatem Jemmali, “Rural–urban migration and income disparity in Tunisia: A decomposition analysis,” *Papers in Regional Science*, July, 2018.

³² Picouet, Michel R., “Migration et changements démographiques en Tunisie: quelques résultats d’une prospective de villes en 2009,” *Cahiers de la Méditerranée*, 1990. Retrieved from: https://www.persee.fr/doc/camed_0395-9317_1990_num_40_1_1016

³³ The 2014 national census, Tunisian Institute for National Statistics (INS): <http://www.ins.tn/>

³⁴ Author’s interview with Bakr, June 7, 2019; Author’s interview with Habib Sayah, June 8, 2019.

coalition of like-minded individuals calling itself AST. Poor neighborhoods like the Hub on the outskirts of Tunisia's cities were fertile recruiting grounds for AST because they had conservative social norms brought in from rural regions, anti-establishment politics, and a large population of criminals who may have been radicalized in prison.³⁵

AST took two crucial steps to turn the Hub into a hub.

1. They installed imams who were part of the movement in the neighborhood's mosques. This gave them a physical space in which to indoctrinate new followers and organize activities.
2. They enforced public safety by protecting residents. Criminal activity and gang violence were so common in the Hub that only Tunisia's National Guard entered the neighborhood, and mainly to arrest criminals, not to ensure public safety. Within months, AST achieved a local monopoly on violence that virtually eliminated crime. Residents were initially grateful, and this gave the group community acquiescence, if not support.³⁶

Capturing Mosques in the Hub

Taking over the mosques was the first critical step. During the revolution, residents in the neighborhood raided the local political party office of the former dictator. These political offices were basically part of the former dictator's extensive police state.³⁷ During the raid, residents uncovered a trove of documents naming the government's informants in the neighborhood. These documents did not just include the names of the neighborhood informants, it listed what their salaries were and what information they were expected to provide. All the imams in this neighborhood were included in this list because they were an integral part of the state's mass surveillance of Tunisia's conservative religious community.³⁸

The mass release of information about these imams – Tunisia's version of a Wikileaks-style information dump – led many to flee their mosques and, in some cases, clear out of the neighborhood entirely.³⁹ The result was AST's growing network of Jihadi Salafi imams could just walk into many mosques abandoned by their previous imams and take control of them.⁴⁰ At the time, official Tunisian government sources reported that they had "lost control" of 400 out of 3-5,000 mosques countrywide.⁴¹ But in the hubs, the rate was much higher. In Douar Hicher, a neighborhood similar to the Hub, one Tunisian researcher reported that in 2013, 10 out of the neighborhood's 11 mosques had fallen into AST's hands.⁴² In addition to mosques captured by departing imams, several new ones were built in the Hub by AST supporters or foreign donors.⁴³ In the Hub, all or nearly all mosques were controlled by Jihadi Salafists.

³⁵ Recruitment is a two-way street – one seeks out the group just as they seek out members. See, for example, Hegghammer, Thomas, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia*, 2010, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For the simplicity's sake, I use AST and Jihadi Salafi recruitment as interchangeable links for Tunisians who eventually joined IS.

³⁶ Author's interview with Imad, July 3, 2019.

³⁷ Anne Wolf, *Political Islam in Tunisia*, 2018.

³⁸ Author's interview with Mostafa, June 19, 2019.

³⁹ Author's interview with Omar, May 1, 2019.

⁴⁰ Author's interview with Mostafa, June 19, 2019.

⁴¹ Wolf, Anne, "The Radicalization of Tunisia's Mosques," *CTC Sentinel* Vol. 7(6): June, 2014. This is out of an estimated 5,000 mosques in Tunisia. Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/world/africa/rift-widens-in-tunisia-as-government-cracks-down-on-mosques.html>

⁴² al-Hajj Salem, Jihed, "Jihadist Youth," 2014.

⁴³ Author's interview with Bakr, June 7, 2019.

The locus for AST's control of the neighborhood was the mosque. They turned mosques into more than just religious spaces. They filled social, commercial, organizational, cultural, and educational roles as well. Members would socialize there before and after prayer,⁴⁴ would often organize activities in the mosque,⁴⁵ and sell second-hand goods or fruits and vegetables outside the mosque.⁴⁶ Members would debate politics and study the Quran there. The mosque became the center of everyday life for members of the group and taking over the mosques gave AST's informal network a physical gathering point that most other political organizations in Tunisia lacked.

The mosque was crucial for recruitment purposes as well because it gave AST a friendly and innocuous place to bring new recruits after they were first approached. Although the initial recruitment 'pitch' varied, the goal was usually to get potential recruits to agree to come to a nearby mosque. This gave the recruiter a chance to speak in private and surround the potential recruit with other members of the group who could peer pressure him.⁴⁷ The use of the mosque also appealed to the potential recruit's identity as a Muslim, as the recruitment appealed to his or her sacred religious values in a place of worship.⁴⁸

Recruits were, if not practicing Muslims, almost universally socialized to respect the fact that Islam represented a set of moral beliefs that transcended the material world. These moral beliefs were used in different ways by recruiters to strengthen their appeal to convince new recruits to come to the mosque and pray, opening them up to indoctrination. A brief example, since it will be treated in greater depth in the next section: one person recruited to the group explained to me how he had just recently witnessed the death of a close friend. Recruiters knew he was traumatized by the experience and offered him the chance to talk about the experience. They also suggested he visit the mosque to pray for his friend's soul, and perhaps save his own. "Only God knows when our time will be up in this world," they explained.⁴⁹

Taking Control of Public Safety

The second important thing AST did to take control over the neighborhood was to take the place of the police and ensure public order. Before the revolution, police services hardly entered the community at all due to high rates of criminal activity and gang violence. The neighborhood was seen as too 'rough,' so it was a zone where only the armed National Guard would enter.⁵⁰ After the revolution, when conditions were particularly chaotic, AST supporters would form local religious accountability police (*bishab*) who eliminated petty crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and gang violence in the neighborhood.

⁴⁴ Prayer times formed the basis of the daily schedule for Jihadi-Salafis, who do not actually keep time but plan their schedules around the five daily prayers. See Jihad al-Hajj Salem, 2014.

⁴⁵ Aaron Zelin collected activities advertised by Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia on Facebook and certain websites affiliated with the group in 2012-13. He shared this database in support of the development of this paper, and the full database will be available with the publication of his book *Your Sons Are At Your Service*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. References to these activities will be cited herein "Aaron Zelin's AST Activities – Full Database."

⁴⁶ Author's observations and informal conversations, in particular on June 25, 2019.

⁴⁷ Author's interview with Mohsen, June 22, 2019.

⁴⁸ This type of appeal is best described in the discussion of "sacred values" as explained in Atran, Scott. 2010. *Talking to the enemy: Violent extremism, sacred values, and what it means to be human*. New York, NY: Penguin.

⁴⁹ Author's interview with Suleiman, June 12, 2019.

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Zain, February 18, 2019.

As a social worker explained, before AST, women in the neighborhood would get up at six o'clock in the morning and go to work, commonly as cleaners downtown or as workers in the nearby factories.⁵¹ They would leave their children in daycare and walk long distances to catch buses or find shared taxis. It was at this point in the morning that delinquents, who had been up all night drinking and using drugs, would try to rob them.⁵² But gangs of Jihadi Salafi police, who were leaving the mosques after early morning prayer, ended this practice quickly by intimidating criminals and delinquents before they approached these women. As Chaima, a resident and local activist explained: "There were people who came to the neighborhood to convince people to take a new path," and part of that effort to convince people involved protecting residents.⁵³

The rapid deployment of AST's community police gave people I interviewed the sense that the community changed overnight. From the perspective of the community, AST had accomplished something in a span of only a few months that state police had not managed to resolve for years. AST's policing of delinquent behavior was mostly a welcome change from streets that even residents wouldn't walk past at night. From the perspective of mothers whose children were involved in these activities, at first, they were thrilled at the rise of AST. Their sons, many of whom had been involved in drinking, fighting, and petty crime, started behaving like pious Muslims. They were reading the Quran, praying regularly, and giving back to the community by protecting and supporting its residents.

Because this was, at first, a welcome development, it gave participating in AST community sanction along with wide-ranging powers and prestige. The group held evening festivals in which residents would approach them to help resolve disputes or provide a small amount of money they needed to afford medicine.⁵⁴ Later, when AST exerted its full control over the community and started mobilizing its residents for militancy, their control over the community felt more like subjugation than liberty.⁵⁵

This was how the hub formed: by taking over mosques and public safety, Jihadi Salafists started to see themselves as a replacement government for the neighborhood. A policeman working in one of these hubs summarized how difficult it was to work in the neighborhood at the time: "The Salafis locate their street vendors at key points in the neighborhood to earn better profits and recruit new followers," he explained. "They have a fruit and vegetable stall right next to the police station so they can observe our movements. We can do nothing if we arrest a jihadi for committing a crime because they give a signal and their 'brothers' arrive with reinforcements to free them."⁵⁶

What was the recruitment experience like?

Once the hub formed, AST transformed the community in every conceivable way. From the point of view of new members, indoctrination into the group's violent and radical beliefs seemed

⁵¹ Although national employment figures note that men work more often than women (CITE), the author witnessed far more women commuting to work in the early mornings than men, possibly because their menial jobs in factories and as cleaners required them to arrive at work earlier in the day.

⁵² Author's interview with Hanin, June 10, 2019.

⁵³ Author's interview with Chaima, February 20, 2019.

⁵⁴ Author's interview with Chaima, June 11, 2019.

⁵⁵ Author's interview with Imad, July 3, 2019.

⁵⁶ ICG, "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge," p. 38-9.

completely normal. This made it easy, even desirable, for members to eventually want to fight for IS in Syria.

This section will describe what it was like to be recruited to join AST, the experience of members inside it, and the process through which some were mobilized to fight for IS in Syria. The key takeaway in this section is that interpersonal networks not only helped AST recruit new members, but also to slowly radicalize them to eventually join IS.

As AST took over the neighborhood, they developed contacts who facilitated the recruitment of new members by giving them information on new possible recruits. This information helped them make their recruitment pitch seem customized for each new joiner. Then, once a new recruit was part of AST, the group filled their days with other like-minded individuals in an attempt to radicalize their worldview by slowly promoting an in-group vs. out-group mentality.⁵⁷ In effect, this meant that interpersonal networks not only facilitated the recruitment of new members, but built a network of socially reinforced beliefs that kept people from leaving the group.

Because AST controlled the neighborhood, AST recruiters could use their local contacts to learn everything they needed to know about potential new recruits before convincing them to join. This was the beginning of an indoctrination process that led many members to eventually join IS. The AST control over the neighborhood also allowed them to raise money to finance its operations. This section will describe how AST recruited new members and financed its activities in the Hub.

To recruit someone new, AST “made a case study” of that person before they ever approached them, according to multiple individuals I knew who were targeted for recruitment or who told me stories of family members who were recruited.⁵⁸ The ideal recruitment process went like this: a recruiter would pick a target, collect information about that person, approach them at a particularly vulnerable moment in that person’s life. Once they initiated contact, they would adapt their pitch to perfectly fit the target’s concerns, making an appeal that, for some, felt almost impossible to resist.

Chaima recounted how her father had just been diagnosed with a mental disorder because he had been going through a particularly acute psychological episode. “One day” during this period, she explained, “my father brought a man to our house to convince him to participate in jihad. The man looked like an angel – he had a nice voice, good hygiene, and he made sitting with him so easy and comfortable. He told my father that he would be okay as long as he prayed to God. He told us stories from the Quran and cited *Suras* (passages) from memory. It was wonderful to hear it – I did not have any evidence to refute it.”⁵⁹

After weeks of visits, Chaima’s mother convinced her father to stop allowing this person to visit. But without her mother, Chaima recalled that her father was convinced to spend more time with this man. He had been praying five times a day in the mosque and growing a beard. Chaima’s mother finally stopped him after he tried to convince her to wear the black veil (*niqab*).⁶⁰ But “leaving” the

⁵⁷ The importance of in-group vs. out-group dynamics for cultivating the ideology of an extremist group is explained in detail in Berger, J.M. *Extremism*. Cambridge: MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series, 2018.

⁵⁸ Author’s interview with Suleiman, June 12, 2019; Author’s interview with Alma and Zeinab, June 13, 2019; Author’s interview with Chaima, February 20, 2019 and June 11, 2019.

⁵⁹ Author’s interview with Chaima, February 20, 2019.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

group was not easy. By that point, he was known by members beyond just the recruiter. Chaima's father had to confront these members in the neighborhood and literally fight them off. When I asked her how the recruiter had known about her father, to begin with, she answered: "We have a culture of everyone knows everyone. He knew my father had [mental] problems and approached him."⁶¹

Aside from personalized interventions, recruiters would sometimes approach young men in the neighborhood directly, often at local cafes where many gather. The high level of youth delinquency made these young men an easy target – they felt like they had no future no matter what, and recruiters provided them, if not with a future, at least with something new and interesting.

Omar explained how much peer pressure existed in these neighborhoods to drop out of school and join these youth. A popular slogan among youth in the area is: "Study and get a degree or not, you still have no future" (*Taqra ma tarrach, mostaqbal ma famech*). "This is the stuff people were telling me and my friends," he explained, "they would say '*taqra ma tarrach*' and then tell me to 'take a shortcut from all that suffering [studying] and come hang out with us instead.'"⁶²

Before the revolution, delinquents like those pressuring Omar to drop out of school would join neighborhood gangs and commit petty crimes. But after AST had taken over the Hub, their power over the community and local law enforcement attracted many of these same young people. "Every rascal had become a Salafi," explained a military officer, "if I were a rascal, I would have done the same thing. Wearing a beard was a passport to immunity."⁶³

One of the reasons why recruiters were so successful at just showing up in cafes in the neighborhood is because young people had so little to do. They had nowhere to go and nothing else to do but to listen to these recruiters. Weekdays in local cafes are filled with young men with few job prospects.⁶⁴ It was easy to speak to them at any time. Often, recruiters would talk to them about issues that they could easily guess were on the top of their list – making money, avoiding police, the injustice and unfairness of life.⁶⁵ At the end of the conversation, recruiters would give these young people some money and ask them if they were available to participate in prayers at the mosque.

Mariam, a mother of three sons, described living in constant fear of her sons being recruited to Syria in this way: "I am afraid when I call my son that he won't answer," she explained, worried that he'd be in Syria, "It's only when he enters the door that I am relieved."⁶⁶ The social worker involved in his case explained to me that "Mariam's son told me directly 'if they offer money to me, I will go without thinking.' Lots of people went on the promises of being paid."⁶⁷

Ibtesem, another mother in the same neighborhood with two sons in their early 20s, described how this process worked in such detail that it was clear this was a major concern for her. "The group [AST] had people specifically for recruitment," she explained, "First they would buy him a coffee

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Author's interview with Omar, May 5, 2019.

⁶³ "Tunisia: Violence and the Salafi Challenge," p. 21.

⁶⁴ Author's informal observations, June-July, 2019.

⁶⁵ Author's interview with Bakr, June 7, 2019.

⁶⁶ Author's interview with Mariam, June 20, 2019.

⁶⁷ Author's interview with Alma, June 20, 2019.

and they would speak about his life and then they would speak about religion. After that, they would give him a small amount of money so he would not suffer. The net result was very good for this person. He will have a new friend, he will not have to worry about money for a little while, and he will learn something about his religion.” She concluded: “Eventually, the person would ask [the recruiter] ‘What do you want from me? Whatever you want me to do I will do it.’”⁶⁸

Despite this, mothers and family members are often the reason why recruits ultimately decide not to go. Ibtesem said she keeps telling her son “Be patient, things will change. But it’s hard to say that you should be patient when conditions are so bad...I don’t want to push him...because I am afraid I will drive them into the arms of these people. My son uses very harsh language with me; he is very aggressive. I know he is under a lot of stress so I don’t push him.” But she stays up at night waiting for him to come home: “I don’t even let him hang around outside our house. I am only comfortable when he enters our home.”⁶⁹ Ibtesem referred her son to a local social worker, and they are working together to provide him some measure of psycho-social support, which is better than nothing but hardly enough.

Because virtually all the mosques in the Hub were part of AST’s recruitment network, the first step for convincing a new recruit to join was to get them inside the mosque. Jihadi Salafis would even set up temporary tents for proselytizing (*Da’wa*) – their express purpose was to convince people to pray in their mosques. After that, through a combination of persuasion, money, peer pressure, and religious appeals, they convinced many new recruits to return to the mosque. Family members of recruits would explain how members spent long hours in the mosque, sometimes even overnight, coming home after the dawn prayer.⁷⁰

In sum, AST used its network of informants in the community to identify targets for recruitment and to study them in advance in order to pick the right time to approach them. Their pitch was often customized and persuasive, and within months after the revolution, they began to control the community. For those young men who were joining gangs and loitering in cafes before the revolution, the AST recruitment pitch offered something better. The group also had money, much of which was raised from ideological supporters inside Tunisia.⁷¹ This gave AST the chance to increase their initial appeal to young men by giving them small amounts of cash.

But, as we will see in the next section, being a member offered meaningful material and spiritual benefits. Those who were vulnerable to recruitment had a hard time resisting the appeal to join. Once a member, it was even harder to leave. Only those with close personal relationships actively trying to prevent them from joining the group stood a chance of either leaving the group or refusing to join in the first place.

⁶⁸ Author’s interview with Ibtesem, June 20, 2019.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ Author’s interview with Suleiman, June 12, 2019; Author’s interview with Mohammed Iqbel Ben Rejeb, June 13, 2019.

⁷¹ I found that grassroots donations in the Hub, although small in individual amounts, helped AST raise quite a lot of local money. One key source was donations by people who wanted to support the group but could not be seen openly participating in their activities. Businessmen, athletes, even civil servants gave some of their salary. And sometimes, supporters of the group gave their expertise. For example, several high-profile lawyers would defend AST leaders in court. One of them was called “the State’s attorney” (a pun on the word “state” (*dawla*) that was in reference to IS). This type of support did not necessarily help the group raise money, but it defrayed some potentially high costs. Source: Author’s interview with Mustafa, February 18, 2019; Author’s interview with Bakr, June 7, 2019.

What was it like to be a member of AST?

Being a member of AST was the beginning of a deliberate indoctrination process that made the adoption of Jihadi Salafism's violent, radical beliefs seem normal. This section will describe how members were indoctrinated into the group's ideology not only through a detailed curriculum of readings, but also by constant activities with other like-minded members, which socially reinforced the beliefs that would eventually lead members to join IS.⁷²

The most important part about being a member was showing up. The more active you were, the more benefits you might receive from participating.⁷³ "Events" included attending prayers, participating in religious lessons, and helping organize special group activities like charity events, soccer games, or proselytizing tours (*Da'wa*). According to Suleiman, whose cousin was killed fighting with IS, these activities deliberately occupied Suleiman's cousin as much as possible: "they filled up each of his days with activities so that there was always something to do."⁷⁴ This was to make sure Suleiman's cousin was surrounded by like-minded members of the group. They drew his cousin away from interacting with people like Suleiman who tried to convince him that the group's ideology was dangerous and extreme. Yet for many, the activity was a welcome respite from simple boredom. I interviewed several young men who were involved in the group's activities who might otherwise spend an entire day drinking a single cup of cheap coffee in a local café.⁷⁵

Members of the group were always busy: an example of a day's activity included attending dawn prayers (*Fajr*, roughly 4:15am in Tunisia in the fall season) followed by Quranic recitation lessons, after which were morning activities, such as to help one of the brothers run his businesses. Attend mid-day prayers (*Dhuhr*, roughly 12:30pm), followed by lunch. Afternoons might be set aside for special activities, such as *Da'wa* (proselytization), picking up trash, charity work, or organizing soccer games. Those who had businesses would return to them. The group would meet again for afternoon prayer (*Asr*, roughly 4:10pm) followed by gatherings that would lead to the final two prayers of the day (*Maghrib*, roughly 7:30pm; and *Isha*, roughly 8:45pm) dinner, and lengthy debates into the night about religion and politics. They could always meet at the mosque for these discussions, although by 2013 more of the sensitive discussions (i.e., about operations) took place in the private home of a trusted member or supporter.⁷⁶

The daily life of a Jihadi Salafi in the Hub was designed to be distinct. Being a member meant being different. And, for members, this feeling of being different gave members a powerful feeling of connection to others in the group and, often for the first time, a sense of harmony in their environment. Members gave each other nicknames and used certain phrases to distinguish their speech. They dressed differently, wore special types of perfumes, styled their hair in specific ways, and were instructed to hold their right hand on top of their left while standing or talking as a sign of

⁷² Author's interview with Suleiman, June 12, 2019.

⁷³ Author's interview with Aaron Zelin, August 2, 2019.

⁷⁴ Author's interview with Suleiman, June 12, 2019.

⁷⁵ Author's observations, June 23, 2019.

⁷⁶ Author's interview with Imad, July 3, 2019.

respect.⁷⁷ Members would come to believe that they were following the behavior of the Prophet Muhammed and his followers at the time.

In addition to the sacred feeling of participating in the group, activities also cultivated a strong anti-establishment sentiment. Jihadi Salafism ultimately seeks to overthrow the secular state (either the “near enemy” or the “far enemy”) and replace it with one that represents the “true” religion. One of the most common ways to recruit people in the neighborhood was to strike up a conversation with them about the injustice of the state. Most young men I spoke with in the neighborhood only experienced the state through its police, which they nicknamed “pigeons” or “serpents” as code in order to warn friends when police patrons drove by.⁷⁸ Using Jihadi Salafi doctrines that talk about tyrannical leaders (*Taghut*), recruiters could easily strike up a relationship based on shared experiences of police brutality.⁷⁹ As one of the Jihadi Salafis interviewed by Jihed Hajj Salem, a Tunisian sociologist, explained: “I hated tyrants even before it became the curriculum.”⁸⁰

Even though these simple rituals and activities were designed to fill a recruit’s day, the activities themselves were often very meaningful. As Habib Sayah, a Tunisian expert on Salafi Jihadism explained, “The participants, most of them for the first time, had the opportunity to engage in collective positive action...the key to AST’s success was engaging its target population in positive collective efficacy and in actually addressing the population’s revolutionary grievances when no one was doing that.”⁸¹

AST’s social services campaign is a perfect example of an activity whose chief benefit was not so much directed toward the community but instead for improve intra-group cohesion. It was less important to their recruitment pitch, as some have argued,⁸² and did not replace the Tunisian government’s services, as some members of the group have argued.⁸³

It is unclear how much these services – later given the slogan “Your Sons Are At Your Service” (*Abnakum fi Khidmatikum*) – actually benefited ordinary Tunisians. Virtually no residents I interviewed from the Hub recalled actually seeing any of this charity work taking place. Aaron Zelin, who collected all activities AST promoted on its various websites and Facebook pages, found that AST conducted only 10 activities that could be construed as community work in the Hub in all of 2013.⁸⁴

AST social services likely helped some people, but their impact on the community was minor. Rather, the effect was much more pronounced for those members of AST who carried it out.

⁷⁷ al-Hajj Salem, Jihed, “Jihadist Youth,” 2014.

⁷⁸ Author’s interview with Hanin, June 10, 2019.

⁷⁹ See, for example, Melagrou-Hitchens, Alexander, “As American as Apple Pie: How Anwar al-Awlaki Became the Face of Western Jihad,” *The International Center for the Study of Radicalisation*, September 2011. p. 19. Retrieved from: <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/ICSR-Report-As-American-As-Apple-Pie-How-Anwar-al-Awlaki-Became-the-Face-of-Western-Jihad.pdf>.

⁸⁰ al-Hajj Salem, Jihed, “Jihadist Youth,” 2014, p. 32.

⁸¹ Author’s interview with Habib Sayah, June 8, 2019.

⁸² Petré, Christine, “Tunisian Salafism: The Rise and Fall of Ansar al-Sharia,” *ETH Zürich*, October 2015. Retrieved from: <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/194245/pdf>.

⁸³ Zelin, Aaron. “Meeting Tunisia’s Ansar al-Sharia,” *Foreign Policy*, March 8, 2013.

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/03/08/meeting-tunisia-ansar-al-sharia/>

⁸⁴ “Aaron Zelin’s AST Activities – Full Database.”

Mostafa remembered giving food aid to poor residents in his neighborhood during Ramadan in 2011: “It was a special thing and unusual when we saw the joy in the people” he explained, “and the amount of energy we got from that was great.”⁸⁵ The purpose of these charitable activities was more of an attempt to bring members of the group closer together by giving them a chance to do work that felt meaningful, rather than to serve as a recruitment campaign or an effort to replace the state.

How were Tunisians recruited to join IS?

The extensive indoctrination of Jihadi Salafists in Tunisia made their eventual decision to join IS seem like a natural extension of their own struggle at home. Their desire to leave Tunisia for Syria was brought on by increased pressure from state security, which resulted in the empowerment of hardliners in the group’s leadership who favored IS. Many AST members across Tunisia, including those in the Hub, decided to flee to Syria when faced with the potential for arrest: in this way, joining IS offered the path of least resistance. And when it came time to travel to Syria, few had a choice as to which militant group they joined: for them, joining the fight in Syria meant joining IS. Their choices were mediated through the people involved in smuggling them to Syria. This section will describe how Tunisians mobilized for IS.

The year 2013 marked heightened tensions between members of AST and the state. Then-Minister of Interior, Ali La’arayedh, explained that he directed his internal security services to consider AST a *de facto* terrorist group by the start of the new year. La’arayedh wanted to gather more intelligence on the group before officially designating them in order to understand the scope of their organization and capability. “We didn’t want to make the declaration prematurely,” he said, because it might spark a conflict that the security services were not yet prepared for.⁸⁶

These tensions also exposed a rift inside AST over whether to avoid confrontation with the state over tightened security measures, or whether to strike back against it.⁸⁷ Those who advocated for the tougher stance generally supported IS when it emerged in the spring of 2013. Meanwhile, those inside AST calling for a softer approach was weakened when AST’s leader, Abu Iyadh al-Tunisi, was forced to flee to Libya at the end of 2012.⁸⁸ When he left, the balance of power in AST shifted, and when IS declared itself a new organization in the Syrian war in spring 2013, AST would become a *de facto* facilitator for IS among Tunisians who wanted to fight in Syria.

Many of Abu Iyadh’s deputies, such as Abu Ayoub al-Tunisi and Kamal Zarrouk, strongly supported IS.⁸⁹ As these deputies started taking on larger leadership roles, AST transformed from a grassroots social movement into an underground militant organization whose main purpose was to fight the Tunisian state and send members abroad to Syria.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Author’s interview with Mostafa, June 19, 2019.

⁸⁶ Author’s interview with Ali La’arayedh, July 3, 2019.

⁸⁷ Author’s interview with Habib Sayah, June 8, 2019.

⁸⁸ Greenberg, Nathaniel, “The Rise and Fall of Abu ‘Iyadh: Reported Death Leaves Questions Unanswered,” *Jadaliyya*, July 13, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32287>

⁸⁹ Author’s interview with Habib Sayah, June 8, 2019.

⁹⁰ Author’s interview with Habib Sayah, June 8, 2019.

These hardliners benefitted from the fallout after opposition politician Choukri Belaid was shot four times in the neck and head on the way to work on 6 February 2013.⁹¹ It is unclear whether AST leadership supported his assassination collectively, or whether a hardline faction executed the attack.⁹² They benefitted because Belaid's assassination elevated Ali La'arayedh to the position of Prime Minister, which meant that the confrontation between the state and AST started to take shape whether non-confrontational members of AST wanted it or not.

La'arayedh's elevation to the premiership signified that Tunisia's government would take a harder line against the Jihadi Salafists who were seen as behind Belaid's assassination. Yet even this new government could not stop the second assassination of a second high-profile leftist politician. After gunmen on a motorbike sprayed Mohammed Brahmi with bullets in Tunis on July 25, 2013, La'arayedh decided to act.⁹³ Without informing the rest of the executive council of Ennahda, La'arayedh appeared on television on August 2013 and declared AST a terrorist organization.⁹⁴

When AST was finally declared a terrorist organization by the government of Tunisia in August 2013, it criminalized the activities of hundreds of young men in the Hub. "They would arrest you even on the suspicion that [you] were involved with AST," explains Wissem, a member of AST at the time.⁹⁵ Many, like Wissem, tried to flee Tunisia out of fear of being arrested.⁹⁶

For those in the Hub facing the prospect of returning to Tunisia's prisons, Syria was not only a logical choice, but the path of least resistance. There was widespread support in Tunisia for overthrowing President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.⁹⁷ For Jihadi Salafis, going to fight in Syria was not only the path of least resistance but the logical conclusion of their indoctrination. And so, as the noose of state security started to constrain their efforts in Tunisia, hundreds, including those in the Hub, started organizing ways to get to Syria.⁹⁸

It would seem incredible in retrospect to believe that so many people would prefer joining IS in Syria to prison in Tunisia. But that was the logic of many at the time. One famous example of this was Marwan Douiri. Douiri was one of Tunisia's most famous rappers to emerge after the 2010-11 revolution. Nicknamed "Emino," he was arrested in 2012 for marijuana and sentenced to two years in prison. When Emino was released in 2013 after eight months in prison, he contributed to "Police are Dogs" (*Policia Klab*), one of the most popular rap songs released in Tunisia. The video, which

⁹¹ Ryan, Yasmine, "Who Killed Tunisia's Choukri Belaid?" *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2013/09/201394183325728267.html>

⁹² Habib Sayah described the group who planned the attack as a splinter faction comprised of AST members. Ali La'arayedh described the assassination as an attempt by a hardline faction, led by Abu Ayoub al-Tunisi, to take over AST. Author's interview with Habib Sayah, June 8, 2019; Author's interview with Ali La'arayedh, July 3, 2019.

⁹³ "Tunisian politician Mohamed Brahmi assassinated" *BBC News*, July 25, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23452979>

⁹⁴ "This was the first time I had heard of it," explained Oussama Sghaier, an Ennahda MP in the executive council, when he saw La'arayedh make the announcement in a press conference the following month. "Tunisia declares Ansar al-Sharia a terrorist group," *BBC News*, August 27, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-23853241>

⁹⁵ Author's interview with Wissem, June 30, 2019.

⁹⁶ Author's interview with Wissem, June 30, 2019.

⁹⁷ The Minister of Religious Affairs at the time, Noureddine al-Khadmi, called on Tunisians to join the Syrian jihad in a Friday sermon in August 2011. Video of the sermon is available here: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2mho38>

⁹⁸ Author's interviews with Mustafa, February 18, 2019 and June 19, 2019.

included rappers calling police “dogs” in front of the Ministry of Interior headquarters in downtown Tunis, caused an immediate controversy.

The video was published in March 2013, amid a swirl of tensions between state security and Tunisians. State security, sensitive to its image in Tunisia and to any incitement of violence, tried to arrest everyone involved in making the video. The main singer in the song, Weld el XV, was beaten and arrested by police at one of his concerts in August 2013.⁹⁹

Even though the case was ultimately dismissed against all participants in the video, it changed Emino. In order to avoid arrest, he had run away from the police hid with Jihadi Salafis in Douar Hicher according to one of his friends, another of the 10-20 most popular young rappers in Tunisia. Emino met some of these Jihadi Salafis in prison, Suleiman explained, and when the police went out looking for him he hid in one of their houses near Douar Hicher. Through their influence, Emino was hooked into the Jihadi Salafi network.

During 2013, Emino slowly transformed from someone who rapped about his material wealth and parties at night to one that became increasingly interested in religion and geopolitics. In one of his last popular hits, “Oh God [be] Loyal” (*Allabomma Amin*), released in October 2013, he sings in the chorus: “We don’t like to bring down our hearts, [but] we die like Saddam Hussein, Oh God [be] loyal.” The song describes how desolate life is in Tunisia, and the Muslim world in general, where even someone as powerful as Saddam Hussein would die a humiliating death. The reference to Saddam Hussein is deliberate: his death by a US-backed Iraqi government speaks to the Jihadi Salafi idea of *taghut* – the injustice of the West and the powerlessness of the Muslim world, comprised of morally compromised rulers who bow to Western pressures. Saddam Hussein is, in some cases, lionized for standing up to the West rather than capitulate when threatened.

By March 2015, Emino smuggled himself into Syria and joined IS, releasing an announcement on his Facebook page.¹⁰⁰ There, he would become one of ISIS’ most popular media figures and would produce propaganda material in which he would call on Tunisians to travel to ISIS. His message was potent: the Tunisian revolution had failed young people and their best efforts would not prevent the injustices of the state.

Despite the assumption by many experts that it was easy to travel to Syria from Tunisia, by 2013, the trip was more complicated due to increased state surveillance. For example, by 2013 the Tunisian government required young men traveling alone under 35 to submit at the airport a letter from either their father or their employer stating that they were allowed to travel.¹⁰¹ At first, this was effective, because parents and employers were often not informed about the date their children would travel to Syria.¹⁰² In addition, Tunisian authorities started to develop profiles of AST members, making it difficult for them to leave the country legally.

⁹⁹ Green, Julien, “Le Long Combat Du Rap Tunisien,” *SURL*, October 28, 2015, <https://www.surlmag.fr/rap-tunisien-emino-2015/>

¹⁰⁰ This is still available on Emino’s Facebook fan page: <https://www.facebook.com/emino.0fficiel?fref=nf>

¹⁰¹ Author’s interview with Zain, February 20, 2019.

¹⁰² Author’s interview with Alma, June 13, 2019.

By the end of 2013, few could simply sign up and be sent abroad to fight in Syria. Mostafa, for example, had to smuggle himself in via Libya because he was being monitored by police. His father and brother had already gone to Syria. Because of tightening state security, AST worked more like an underground militant organization. “Their main concern was that someone would infiltrate the movement,” recalled Mostafa.¹⁰³

After Mostafa had won the trust of AST through a series of commitment tests, his last test was to raise 2,000 Tunisian dinars. This money went to help smuggle him into Libya. Once there, he and others who made it across the Tunisian border near the town of Ben Guerdane would drive 17 hours to the eastern Libyan city of Derna. There they would spend two months training before flying to Istanbul, and from Istanbul, they would travel to the Syrian border and enter the country.¹⁰⁴

Although other stories of reaching Syria during this time are different than Mostafa’s in terms of their detail, the key issue they share in common is that, by 2013, their travels were too complex for them to undertake on their own. Because they needed AST to get to Syria, and because AST’s hardline leaders supported IS, most fighters had no choice but to join IS if they wanted to leave Tunisia for Syria.

¹⁰³ Author’s interview with Mostafa, February 18, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Author’s interview with Mostafa, February 18, 2019.

Conclusion – Lessons Learned

There are two key takeaways from this study that we can apply to address future foreign fighter mobilizations.

First, recruitment relied on social networks to convince people to participate, to keep them involved, and to eventually guide them to join IS. In hubs where recruitment was popular, the potential pathways to participating were much broader than normal. People joined not only for individual benefits (i.e., spiritual or material), but for many other reasons as well: to join other friends and family, or to be protected by police, to gain social prestige, or because the group offered a network of friends and an opportunity to learn about Islam that had not been previously available. Once a recruit was a part of the group, however, social dynamics inside the group were designed to keep people involved in a process that would eventually indoctrinate them into violent radical beliefs.

Second, this paper finds that the lack of a secure economic future was a base structural condition common to many who were recruited from the Hub to join AST and, later, IS. But as this paper outlined, the process of being radicalized is lengthy and far more complex. Although some recruits quickly went from Tunisia to Syria, many more were a part of local organizations that shaped their beliefs to such an extent that joining IS became a natural, almost logical option when the group faced pressure from state security. Solutions for addressing these issues must begin with improving the living conditions in some of the poor neighborhoods growing on the periphery of Tunisia's cities.

Recruiters made an individual study of many recruits before they approached them. Recruiters often used connections in the community to learn about who to recruit and how to recruit them. And, even when they did not have direct personal information about recruits before approaching them, members of the group applied deliberate peer pressure to encourage new joiners to remain committed.

Although interpersonal networks were critical for foreign fighter recruitment campaigns to spread rapidly in certain areas, these networks can also prevent individuals from participating or to help facilitate their departure from the group.¹⁰⁵ Chaima's mother successfully convinced her father to stop participating in AST activities, despite the costs he faced when leaving the group. Suleiman failed to convince his cousin to leave the group, and he eventually died fighting with IS in northern Syria.

Solutions to countering these recruitment efforts must focus on local conditions and interpersonal networks in order to be successful. My impressions were that someone was almost always aware of the fact that a person was being recruited. The challenge is not necessarily figuring out who those people are, but instead helping them find the help they need early enough in the process where interventions are possible. This involves offering confidential channels for friends and family to voice their concerns, psycho-social support networks, and, later, alternative opportunities to divert potential recruits into social networks investing in their future. These opportunities didn't exist in the Hub – those who were aware that their relative or friend was being recruited had nowhere to turn.

¹⁰⁵ This is not only described here but also explained in Chernov Hwang, J (2018) *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

This study also describes how the lack of economic opportunity was a critical structural condition that led to recruitment into Jihadi Salafi groups. In the Hub, young people had few job prospects, and this meant a limited sense of self-worth, the inability to get married and raise a family, and the near-total lack of future opportunities. People recruited from the Hub were far from the poorest in Tunisia, but their lack of consistency and reliability made them very easy to recruit.

Yet it is misleading to suggest economic hardships were solely responsible for the recruitment of IS foreign fighters in the Hub. While making money was often difficult for youth in the Hub, for each and every individual, it was a much longer road to Damascus.

The common thread through the stories of many joiners is the importance of their social networks in facilitating their recruitment into the group. As recounted in this paper, people went to the mosque because they wanted to pray for their dead friend's soul or in order to get mental health care in the absence of such services being available through the state. Once a member, their personal networks were deliberately shaped in order to reinforce an indoctrination that made it easy, even desirable, to eventually join IS in Syria.

Tunisian fighters were diverse geographically and socioeconomically. But when you zoom into the places where the largest number of fighters were recruited, individual stories start to resemble one another. By studying how hubs form, rather than the complex set of geopolitical factors that gave rise to foreign fighters in the Syrian war, we can better understand the social forces involved in influencing the recruitment of thousands to transnational jihadism.

Appendix I. Origins of Foreign Fighters in Tunisia (By Governorate)¹⁰⁶

| Province Name | No. of Foreign Fighters | Province Population (Local, Sunni) | Province Population (% of Country Total) | Per Capita Rate (out of 100,000) | Fighter % (by country) |
|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|--|----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Ariana | 41 | 576088 | 5% | 7.20 | 7% |
| Béja | 4 | 303032 | 3% | 1.30 | 1% |
| Ben Arous | 17 | 631842 | 6% | 2.70 | 3% |
| Bizerte | 58 | 568219 | 5% | 10.30 | 10% |
| Gabès | 13 | 374300 | 3% | 3.50 | 2% |
| Gafsa | 11 | 337331 | 3% | 3.30 | 2% |
| Jendouba | 4 | 401477 | 4% | 1.00 | 1% |
| Kairouan | 28 | 570559 | 5% | 5.00 | 5% |
| Kasserine | 25 | 439243 | 4% | 5.70 | 4% |
| Kebili | 27 | 156961 | 1% | 17.40 | 5% |
| Kef | 3 | 243156 | 2% | 1.20 | 1% |
| Mahdia | 8 | 410812 | 4% | 2.00 | 1% |
| Manouba | 17 | 379518 | 3% | 4.50 | 3% |
| Medenine | 29 | 479520 | 4% | 6.10 | 5% |
| Monastir | 34 | 548828 | 5% | 6.30 | 6% |
| Nabeul | 27 | 787920 | 7% | 3.50 | 5% |
| Sfax | 5 | 955421 | 9% | 0.50 | 1% |
| Sidi Bouzid | 35 | 429912 | 4% | 8.20 | 6% |
| Siliana | 6 | 223087 | 2% | 2.70 | 1% |
| Sousse | 39 | 674971 | 6% | 5.80 | 7% |
| Tataouine | 10 | 149453 | 1% | 6.80 | 2% |
| Tozeur | 0 | 107912 | 1% | 0.00 | 0% |
| Tunis | 136 | 1056247 | 10% | 13.00 | 23% |
| Unknown/Not Recorded | 11 | N/A | N/A | N/A | 2% |
| Zaghouan | 1 | 176945 | 2% | 0.60 | 0% |

¹⁰⁶ Source: 2016 leaked IS foreign fighter registration documents. As analyzed in Serman and Rosenblatt, “All Jihad is Local II.”