

**Aaron Y. Zelin, Your Sons Are at Your Service: Tunisia's Missionaries of Jihad** (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2020), 400 pp., US \$120.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 40.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-2311-9377-1.

Reviewed by Fabio Merone

This book is an historical account of the Tunisian Salafi-jihadi movement, covering the period from the 1980s until to the late 2010s when the participation of Tunisians foreign fighters in the Syrian jihad became a prominent news story. The book's focus is on jihadism and Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia (AST), which emerged as the most important Salafi-jihadi movement between 2011 and 2013, in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Zelin argues that the expansion of AST between 2011 and 2013 was the consequence of the Islamist party Nahdah's "light touch" approach when in government (p.96). The author calls it "the original sin" of the transitional government (p.97) and this argument is the major thread of the story. While the organization was born when its members were in prison, it began to operate freely thanks to the 2011 amnesty law, which allowed for the release from jail of most of the country's jihadis (p. 94-95).

The author must be praised for the enormous effort he made in collecting primary source material, such as online data, trial investigation documents and police reports about the group. However, the book's flaw is that this descriptive knowledge and data are not exploited for original analytical insights and fails to explain satisfactorily why jihadism became a force, so a broader political and sociological story is missing from the account.

AST became a central actor not simply because the transitional government allowed it to exist through its light-touch approach to freedoms and liberties. The author's main interest is 'recruitment' and the book revolves mainly around this issue. Tunisian fighters became numerous around the world because of the successful jihadi 'recruitment' campaigns; itself the consequence of AST's ability to make use of the country's permissive environment to build those networks between 2011 and 2013. Therefore the book's main preoccupation is to understand the logic and success of AST's recruitment.

The Tunisian experience of a jihadi movement that tries to build a new type of jihadi organization deserved more in-depth analysis than offered in this book, and it is a pity that the author fails to achieve it despite his extensive knowledge of the topic. The author could have gone beyond the focus on recruitment strategy and could have better exploited the information and the data collected. For example, the author maps the geography of AST's local groups, which he himself argues is a nation-wide organization (chapter 6). However, there is no analysis as to what this map might actually represent from a sociological perspective. Tunisian jihadis come from different backgrounds, but their social base is typical of the urban disenfranchised neighborhoods, which should lead to ask questions about motivations for mobilization and for participation in the political life of the country beyond the slogans of democratization and not simply about the recruitment in terrorist networks.

Most surprisingly, the book's account lacks an in-depth engagement with AST's dawa-first approach, although an entire chapter is dedicated to the issue (chapter 5). The book also does not elaborate on the implications of the movement's focus on social and charitable activities. The author himself argues that the latter became the core of AST's work (pp.143-153). However, the only conclusion that is drawn from this is that it simply represents a façade transformation, in line with al-Qaeda's evolution, a movement and an ideology (for the author) that is violent by nature. Therefore, what is potentially the evidence of a jihadi group transformation into a social movement that merges in and represents specific social groups and organizes social and political contention, is looked at by the author as a mere deceiving strategy aimed to attract more recruits for a future violent jihad. As a consequence of this approach, the context of the process of democratization is no longer an opportunity for the political transformation of the movement but an opportunity for recruitment of members for more violence. The problem with this approach is that the author does not see beyond the 3,000 Tunisians

who joined the Syrian, Iraqi and Libyan jihads. There is no real discussion, for instance, of why so many young people, in the many thousands, and not necessarily inspired by the group's carrying out violence, were attracted to the movement. The author could have offered a more complex questioning of the movement's particular path.

The author might have looked at the Tunisian context in a slightly different way. The particular reality within which AST developed in Tunisia was one of democratization, and AST's dawa-first approach was also an attempt to integrate the new political field as a social mass movement that organized contention mainly through peaceful means. It was not simply a terrorist-recruiting enterprise. This was a major transformation for an ideologically oriented jihadi movement that the author should have emphasised. The reason for the failure of this transformation was the violent polarization in society and the evolution of the political process in which the main contenders (Islamists and nationalists) looked at each other as enemies. The author does not incorporate this complexity and draws mainly on the narrative of the secular elites that see all Islamists, including Nahdah, as potential terrorists. This polarization in society is the key within which to contextualize Islamism, be it moderate or radical.

In conclusion, this volume presents valuable research on the international jihadi networks when it comes to Tunisian foreign fighters and it provides an in-depth collection of data on AST, but it is not an original contribution for the understanding of the evolution of the jihadi movement. It is an important research that offers raw material for policy analysts and those who in the future would want to employ it for more theoretically sophisticated discussions on Salafi-Jihadism.

*About the reviewer: Fabio Merone is an Italy-based independent research on political Islam. He obtained his PhD in Political Science from the University of Ghent in Belgium, with his dissertation titled "Tunisian Islamism Beyond Democratization."*