

**Tunisian holy warriors fight in Syria, heightening fears about extremism amid new freedoms**  
**By Associated Press**  
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TUNIS, Tunisia — Sometimes it's a muffled call from Turkey or Lebanon by a son saying he's off to fight in Syria when the family thought he'd gone abroad to study. Other times it's just an anonymous phone call to say the son is now a martyr.

Some Tunisian families only learn of their son's fate upon seeing him on Syrian TV, apparently confessing to be part of al-Qaida and seeking to overthrow the regime of Bashar Assad.

The cradle of the Arab Spring, Tunisia also has a long history of frustrated youth heading off to fight in foreign jihads. Now, according to figures released by the Syrian government, they may make up a large percentage of Arabs who have gone to join the struggle against the regime of Bashar Assad. And that has raised alarm both about radicalization in the Syrian rebel movement, and of rising extremism within newly-democratic Tunisia itself.

It is an awkward situation for the Tunisian government, which has to rely on international organizations to follow up on the fate of its citizens arrested in Syria, since it was one of the first countries to cut ties in protest of the regime's brutal crackdown on the opposition.

It is not known how many Tunisians have gone to fight in Syria, where the violence has grown increasingly chaotic in recent months. An uprising that began with mostly peaceful protests has now evolved into an armed insurgency.

Al-Qaida-style suicide bombings have become increasingly common in Syria, and Western officials say there is little doubt that Islamist extremists, some associated with the terror network, have made inroads in Syria as instability has spread. But the main fighting force looking to oust Assad is the Free Syrian Army, a group made up largely of defected Syrian soldiers.

The Syrian government maintains that they are fighting foreign jihadis and in mid-May issued a letter to the United Nations giving the name of 26 arrested jihadis and alleged members of al-Qaida. Nineteen of them were Tunisian.

Tunisia has long had a reputation for being one of the most secular states in the Arab world, under the iron hand of a regime that savagely repressed Islamists. But underneath a shiny exterior of beach resorts and an espresso-sipping French-speaking elite, there has always been a strong current of ultraconservative Islamists.

"The extremism is the fruit of dictatorship," explained Sami Brahim, who studies such Tunisian Islamic movements and said that many became very religious or turned to jihadi thought amid the despair and repression of the old regime. "These youth are victims of the dictatorship."

A cache of documents discovered by the U.S. military in northern Iraq showed that many Tunisians traveled there to fight alongside al-Qaida.

The records of around 600 foreign jihadis found in Iraq's Sinjar region showed that while the majority of foreign fighters were Libyans and Saudis, per capita, Tunisians came in third.

William Lawrence, the North Africa analyst for the International Crisis Group, said the presence of Tunisians in international jihad was something he studied during his time at the State Department. At the time, U.S. officials concluded that their relatively high numbers were due to a greater ability to travel.

“Tunisia has a bigger middle class,” he said. “There are a lot of people in Morocco and Algeria that would like to be jihadis but don’t have the resources, while in Tunisia there are better networks in Europe and a more open economy.”

With many Tunisians working and living outside the country, wannabe fighters could rely on networks of family and friends to make their way to foreign countries.

Since Tunisia’s revolution deposed Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the country’s Islamist current has come into the open and the North African country is in the midst of a struggle to define the role of religion in public life.

Ultraconservative Muslim youth, known as Salafis, have repeatedly protested against perceived insults to the religion, attacked art galleries and in recent days, taken on police in pitched battles.

Radical preachers are also urging young people to travel to Syria to take up the jihad against what they are calling an illegitimate regime.

“It is the duty of all Muslims to support the struggle of the Syrian people against despotism,” said Bilal Chaouachi, a Tunisian student at the Zaytouna religious university who describes himself as a Salafi.

He called jihad in Syria legitimate and described Syria as being led by an “unbeliever” regime backed by Iranian and Lebanese mercenaries, supported by Russia and China.

Nourreddine Jebnoun, a Tunisian security expert at Georgetown’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, warned that the radical threat in Tunisia could get even worse if those who fought in Syria one day return home, like those who once fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

“Like the ‘Arab Afghans’ who went to their countries in the early 1990s, Tunisia can expect a wave of fighters coming home in few years with new combat skills. This while the country is still struggling in its transition would be a big nightmare,” he wrote in a recent article.

One of the country’s new Salafi groups, Ansar al-Shariah, is actually led by a Tunisian who once fought in Afghanistan: Seifallah Ben Hassine, also known as Abu Yadh, who was imprisoned by the old regime.

Back in May, his group held a rally in the religious city of Kairouan that featured Salafis dressed in the style of Afghan Taliban staging martial arts demonstrations and horsemen brandishing swords, shocking many Tunisians.

Hafedh Ghadboun, a lawyer with the Justice and Equity society that is looking for many of Tunisia’s wayward sons, doubts that many of those arrested were real jihadis or part of al-Qaida.

He accused the Syrian regime of forcing them to confess, though he did admit that some of the names published had been imprisoned by Ben Ali previously on charges of terrorism.

“The Syrian authorities want to justify their pretext that the Assad regime is fighting terrorists,” he said.

Tunisian authorities, meanwhile, are trying to crack down on those encouraging people to go fight.

Sadik Arfaoui of the religious affairs ministry said that the vast majority of imams who preach at the 4,700 mosques in the country follow a moderate version of Islam.

“There exist about 100 imams who don’t recognize the authority of the state, we will take care of them soon,” he said.

Tunisia’s government is run by a moderate Islamist party, Ennahda, which was severely repressed by Ben Ali and has since formed an alliance with two secular parties. Al-Qaida has called for its overthrow because it is not aggressively pushing for the implementation of Islamic law.

Presidential spokesman Adnan Mancer said the government is attempting to follow up on the fate of Tunisians in Syria with the aid of international organizations like the Red Cross, since the countries no longer have diplomatic ties.

“Our youth have good intentions, but it is possible they fell into the hands of manipulators,” he told The Associated Press.

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