

“My view has changed a lot concerning the ‘Islamic State’ as it is no longer an Islamic state. I also found that it was divided into two currents: Binalism (Al-Binaliah), led by the Bahraini Grand Mufti of ISIS, Turki Binali; and Hazmism (Al-Hazmieh), led by Saudi Sheikh Ahmed bin Omar Al-Hazmi.” - **Tunisian jihadi Mohammed Al-Fahem**

Tunisian writer Hadi Yahmad recently published a book in Arabic about Tunisian jihadi Mohammed Al-Fahem. Born in 1990, Fahem travelled to Syria in late 2014 to join the “The Islamic State”(ISIS) — for him and his extremist cohorts, a dream come true. Fahem fled ISIS territory a year later and settled in Turkey.

The writer says that his book is unprecedented: the first time a young man who lived in the “Islamic State” freely shares his harrowing experience with the public. Yahmad gathered the details of the story through a long series of 5- and 6-hour interviews with the ex-fighter in Turkey over November and December 2017.

Yahmad opines that by simply condemning ISIS fighters as evil, one loses the opportunity to understand how they think, what motivates them, and how they developed an extremist mindset and penchant for brutality. He strives to learn the answers, as well as gain insight into the more specific case of ISIS recruitment in Tunisia — a country with a tradition of liberalism which has nonetheless become the highest per capita source of ISIS foreign fighters.

Fahem relays details of his life in Raqqa, among other cities in Syria and Iraq, as well as his secret travel route from Tunisia via Libya, through Istanbul airport, and then across the Turkish-Syrian border into the Syrian city of Tel Abyad. He describes relations between the fighters, the lives of the migrants, the organizational hierarchy, the “princes” of ISIS, their soldiers, and the battles they fought. He also tells the story of his departure from ISIS. The latter segment is fuzzy and disappointing: While critical of ISIS, it is not clear whether he feels remorse for his own role in the group. Yet Fahem admits to committing various crimes — such as stoning an adulteress, cutting off the hand of a thief, and taking part in the destructive occupation of Palmyra and siege of Tel Abyad. Declining to return to Tunisia, the nature of his new life and plans is also unclear.

Al-Fahem recalls that the declaration of the establishment of the Caliphate in the June 2014

was a milestone in his life, and, as noted earlier, taking up residence in the “Islamic State” was his dream come true. He also highlights the symbolic significance of the prophesied battle in the Syrian town of Dabiq. But he complains that ISIS sent its fighters into losing battles yet refused to withdraw. (Thousands of IS fighters were killed in the losing battles of Kubani, Tel Abyad, and Kuwayress airport, and others.) “I was overwhelmed by questions and concerns,” Fahem says. “If the Islamic State was sure of the fall of these areas, what was the purpose of sending us?” When on one occasion Fahem shared his opinion with a superior, he faced “trial.”

Nostalgia for Tunisia

In retrospect, Fahem compares life in his native Tunisia favourably with his experience of the Islamic state. On the one hand, he says, “In a few of our meetings, we ridiculed some of the princes of the [Islamic] State. But some in attendance urged us to stop. They said, ‘In Tunisia, you can freely bribe the president, but in ISIS if you even criticize the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or Raqqa “governor” Abu Luqman, you can have your head cut off!’” He later says that he and other Tunisian ISIS fighters “believe that all the security harassment we have experienced in Tunisia was nothing compared to the ruthlessness of the security apparatus of the Islamic State and its sponsors.” He describes grand-scale torture and summary executions. Criticism of these policies is stigmatized and severely punished. The leaders justify these measures as enforcement of the principle to “listen and obey” — part of the ISIS oath of allegiance.



Tunisian Flag: Getty Images

Divisions within ISIS

In gripping detail, Fahem recalls the death sentences meted out by the organization to some of its own leaders, including his Tunisian friend Mohammed Zain (“Abu Dujaina”), one of the organization’s co-founders.

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‘Kharijites,’ thereby legitimizing their killing.”

Hazmi and his followers reject the principle of “excusing the ignorant” which was adopted in a fatwa by Sheikh Bin Ali. Fahem, a supporter of al-Hazmi’s ideology, found that a state that preaches leniency toward ignorant Sunnis implicitly shares in their disbelief. As a result, ISIS leaders, including the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, are essentially unbelievers. Fahem and some of his fellow Tunisians come across as more extremist than the leadership and even Baghdadi himself. It was their ultra-extremism — not their brutality, criminality, and terror against Sunnis, Shi’ites, Christians, and Yezidis.

The number of Tunisian fighters within ISIS has been estimated at three thousand by Tunisian authorities and six thousand by Western authorities. Approximately 500 Tunisian “jihadis” are believed to have been executed — a reflection of the divisions Fahem describes, as well as the enormity of the tragedy for its villains as well as victims.

[This article first published at Al- Mesbar Studies & Research Centre](#)

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