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Jihadists Now Control Secretive U.S. Base in Libya

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A camp on the Libyan coastline meant to train terror-hunters has instead become a haven for terrorists and al Qaeda.

A key jihadist leader and longtime member of al Qaeda has taken control of a secretive training facility set up by U.S. special operations forces on the Libyan coastline to help hunt down Islamic militants, according to local media reports, Jihadist web forums, and U.S. officials.

In the summer of 2012, American Green Berets began refurbishing a Libyan military base 27 kilometers west of Tripoli in order to hone the skills of Libya's first Western-trained special operations counter-terrorism fighters. Less than two years later, that training camp is now being used by groups with direct links to al Qaeda to foment chaos in post-Qaddafi Libya.

Last week, the Libyan press reported that the camp (named "27" for the kilometer marker on the road between Tripoli and Tunis) was now under the command of Ibrahim Ali Abu Bakr Tantoush, a veteran associate of Osama bin Laden who was first designated as part of al Qaeda's support network in 2002 by the United States and the United Nations. The report said he was heading a group of Salifist fighters from the former Libyan base.



Amural depicting a victorious battle of the Libyan military forces against a vague enemy lies on the infamous Khamis Brigade headquarters parade ground on August 29, 2011 in Tripoli, Libya. (Benjamin Lowy/Getty)

In other words, Tantoush is now the chief of a training camp the U.S. and Libyan governments had hoped would train Libyan special operations forces to catch militants like Tantoush.

One U.S. defense official told The Daily Beast that the media report matched U.S. intelligence reporting from Libya. Another U.S. official in Washington said intelligence analysts were aware of the reports but had yet to corroborate them, however. A spokesman for Africa Command declined to comment for the story.

Tantoush himself on Tuesday evening gave an interview to Libyan television where he confirmed that he was in the country but also said he had not direct or indirect link to the camp. In the interview, Tantoush, who was indicted in 2000 for his role in the 1998 al-Qaeda bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa, also claimed he has never participated in terror attacks for al Qaeda, and boasted of traveling to Libya on a fake passport.

According to one U.S. official who is read into the training program, the camp today is considered a “denied area,” or a place where U.S. forces would have to fight their way in to gain access. Until now, the Western press has not reported that the base used to train Libyan special operations forces was seized by the militants those troops were supposed to find, fix and finish.

The fact that the one-time training base for Libyan counter-terrorism teams is now the domain of terrorists is a poignant reminder the United States has yet to win its war with al Qaeda, despite the successful 2011 raid that killed its founder and leader.

This is particularly true for Libya. Since the 9/11 anniversary attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, jihadist groups and al Qaeda’s regional affiliates have been gaining territory throughout Libya. News that a veteran like Tantoush is now in charge of a military base only 27 kilometers from Libya’s capital shows just how much the security in Libya has deteriorated.

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Seth Jones, an al Qaeda expert at the Rand Corporation, said Libya is now a haven for many of al Qaeda’s North African affiliates. “There are a number of training camps for a wide range of al Qaeda and jihadist groups that have surfaced in southwest Libya, northwest Libya in and around Tripoli and northeast Libya in and around Benghazi,” he said.

Daveed Gartenstein Ross, a senior fellow at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, added that “We’ve known for some time that Jihadist groups have established training camps throughout Libya. But this is significant because of the camp’s proximity to Tripoli and because rather than creating camps in remote locations they took over a base used by the Libyan government.”

“I suspect they will not keep this camp for very long. It’s close to Tripoli and its location is known by the Libyan government,” he said.

One U.S. official who worked on the program said the U.S. Special Forces began to refurbish the base in the summer of 2012, before the 9/11 anniversary attack in Benghazi. The actual training, however, did not begin until the fall of 2012. One U.S. defense official noted the initial program at Camp 27 endeavored to train 100 Libyan special operations soldiers. But even this modest goal was never really in reach.

“The program has not achieved the outcomes that we hoped that it would and the Libyans hoped it would,” said Carter Ham, the now-retired four-star general who led U.S. Africa Command when the initial training program was established. While Ham said he was not aware of the latest reports that the base was now in the hands of an al Qaeda figure, he nonetheless acknowledged that myriad challenges—from the uncertainty in the leadership of the Libyan military to security on the ground—made it difficult to sustain the special operation forces training.

“The selection process for what Libyan unit and what Libyan soldiers would participate was probably not as rigorous as we would have liked it to have been,” Ham continued. “But this was a Libyan decision and they had to decide what unit and what individuals to enroll in the program.”

Ham said he remembered meeting with a small group singled out by the trainers as the emerging leaders. “That was promising,” he said. “It was not as widespread as we would have liked. The militia these guys came from, they did not have significant military experience and certainly not in a hierarchical organization.”

Things went downhill for Camp 27 in June of 2013 when two rival militias stormed the training facility and seized the equipment therein. At the time, no U.S. personnel were on the base, according to two U.S. officials who spoke to The Daily Beast on condition of anonymity. The only soldiers protecting the base were local Libyans.

Nonetheless, the base itself had a number of American weapons that wound up in the hands of the raiding militias. Those raids were first reported by Fox News. The U.S. defense official confirmed these reports and said the militias were able to seize night vision equipment, M-4 rifles, pistols, military vehicles, and ammunition.

The emergence of Tantoush is particularly troubling to American officials. He is considered one of the original members of al Qaeda's network. In 2000, he was indicted for his role in helping plan the 1998 attacks on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. According to his designation by the United Nations, Tantoush was the head of an al Qaeda support group based in Peshawar known as the Revival of Islamic Heritage Society. In the interview Tuesday with Libyan television, Tantoush said his work in Peshawar was entirely humanitarian.

Jones said, "Tantoush has a long history from the Peshawar days of associating with senior al Qaeda leaders including Osama bin Laden. He has been involved in financing and facilitating al Qaeda activities and he has had a long-standing relationship with Libyan jihadist groups." Tantoush was also a senior member of al Qaeda's one-time franchise in Libya known as the Libya Islamic Fighting Group. In the 2000s, former Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi largely decimated that organization, leading some of its leaders to turn on al Qaeda itself. (Tantoush was not one of those turncoats.) Nonetheless, the group was able to assist al Qaeda's affiliate in Iraq by using the port city of Derna to funnel volunteer fighters to al Qaeda's jihad in Iraq in the last decade. Today, Derna is a key transit point for volunteers to join al Qaeda's holy war in Syria.

Things were not supposed to turn out this way. The training program for Libya's special operations fighters was authorized under section 1208 of the National Defense Authorization Act. 1208 programs differ from other special operations training missions because the funding is specifically for reimbursing foreign governments for assisting with counter-terrorism missions. Other special operations training missions—sometimes known as "white" programs—are meant only to build up another country's military. These programs are designed to produce combat-ready special operators to join U.S. SEALs and Delta Force teams on missions.

"This means in practice that these guys were expected to conduct missions with our guys," the U.S. defense official said. "But of course that never happened."

The raid in June was enough to effectively kill the training effort. The U.S. ambassador canceled the program in Libya until the security of U.S. personnel and equipment could be guaranteed. Those guarantees have not yet been provided. A spokesman for the U.S. embassy in Tripoli did not respond to queries. One U.S. official said the Pentagon was now considering a plan to conduct the special operations training for Libyans in an eastern European country.

For now, Libya looks like it could use as much help as it can get. Since a mix of local and foreign terrorists over-ran a U.S. diplomatic post and CIA base in Benghazi in 2012, jihadist groups have won key gains throughout Libya—and used this territory to help funnel fighters across the region. "Libya in general is a major thoroughfare, the I-95 for foreign fighters into Syria from Africa," the U.S. defense official said.

In March, Gen. David Rodriguez—Ham’s successor as head of U.S. Africa Command—estimated in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee that a couple thousand foreign fighters had transited through northwest Africa to Syria. Rodriguez also said al Qaeda continued to coordinate activities by sharing expertise and resources throughout that region.

And now these militants have a base close to Tripoli, and an array of advanced tactical gear. “The biggest challenge we have is all the arms ammunition and explosives from Libya that continue to move throughout the region to northwest Africa,” he told the committee. When asked if those arms have aided al Qaeda in Africa, Rodriguez answered, “It continues to support them throughout northwest Africa.”