

Libya: Ex-US base now headquarters of Al Qaeda-linked forces

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Al Qaeda fighters are now operating out of a base set up by US Special Forces near the Libyan capital of Tripoli, in the aftermath of the 2011 NATO war in Libya. This fact, reported by the *Daily Beast* based on numerous local media reports and statements by US officials, underscores the reactionary character of the Libyan war and Washington's continued reliance on far-right Islamist forces in its Middle East wars.

The base, known as "27" because it is 27 km from Tripoli, had recently been refurbished by a squad of US Green Berets. The US Special Forces team had begun its operation in the summer of 2012, nearly a year after the NATO war against Libya toppled Col. Muammar Gaddafi in an alliance with CIA-backed Islamist militias.

US Special Forces left the base at some unknown point in time, after two raids were carried out against it in the summer of 2013. During these raids, high-tech military equipment was taken. Now, less than a year later, the base is in the hands of jihadist militants.

The reported leader of the camp is Ibrahim Ali Abu Bakr Tantoush. Tantoush was a longtime associate of Osama Bin Laden and was in Pakistan in the early days of the Al Qaeda network, during the CIA-led war against the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan. Tantoush was indicted in 2000 for giving support to the 1998 bombing of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Though Tantoush recently claimed that he has not perpetrated a terrorist attack for Al Qaeda, he is heavily involved in Al Qaeda's Libyan affiliate, the Libya Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG). This group specialized in sending jihadist troops through the port of Derna to Syria.

Today, Derna is the primary port used by Libyan jihadists to transit to Syria. "Libya in general is a major thoroughfare, the I-95 for foreign fighters into Syria

from Africa," an anonymous US defense official told the *Daily Beast*. Libyan Islamists make up the largest single component of the 'foreign fighters' who are playing a leading role in the US-backed sectarian civil war waged in Syria to topple the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Even though the US and its NATO allies are militarily dominant in the region, Tantoush is allowed to continue operating from a US-built base in Libya only 20 minutes' drive from the capital city.

This is no doubt in part because another US-NATO attack on Libyan soil would outrage the Libyan people, who oppose such raids in particular after a war that devastated and impoverished their country. A US raid last year to capture alleged Al Qaeda operative Abu Anas al-Liby led to protests and the kidnapping of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, the head of the NATO puppet regime.

More significantly, however, Tantoush manifestly is operating with unofficial US approval, as part of the broader alliance of convenience between Western imperialism and Al Qaeda—an alliance which underlay the NATO war in Libya and the events at base '27.'

During the Libyan war, Special Forces operatives from the US, British, French, and Qatari governments directed the transfer of weapons to Islamist militias. According to a *New York Times* article published in 2012, the White House gave the go-ahead to weapons shipments in the spring of 2011. "Within weeks," the White House knew that Islamic militant groups were receiving the shipments.

However, these forces, which provided the foot soldiers for NATO to overthrow and murder Gaddafi and install a puppet regime led by the Libyan National Transition Council, turned on their former paymasters.

Many militias were asked to disband but refused to

do so after having armed themselves and gained power locally after the collapse of the Gaddafi regime. The Libyan military has repeatedly clashed with these militias in the past two years. Though many of them are still on the government payroll, they refuse to disarm or accept the authority of the NATO puppet regime.

According to an anonymous US defense official, the initial goal of the Special Forces operations at the “27” base was to train 100 Libyan soldiers. These Libyan special operations soldiers were to participate in US-led Special Forces raids alongside their US counterparts. This training program apparently began in the fall of 2012 and was cancelled some time later.

Carter Ham, a retired general who sat at the head of U.S. Africa Command in 2012, told the *Daily Beast* that the training “program has not achieved the outcomes that we hoped that it would and the Libyans hoped it would.” However, Ham, now retired, denied knowing about jihadist militants having control of the “27” base.

Ham at one point met with a small group of fighters selected by the Green Beret squadron. According to the article, this group was being trained as “emerging leaders” of the unit. Ham told the *Daily Beast* that the meeting “was promising... 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.”

It was amid this spread of Islamist militias and civil war conditions in Libya after the NATO war that attacks were mounted on the US base and Tantoush’s fighters set up operations there. This is only one of the instances of what Washington terms “blowback” in Libya—where US government support for Islamist forces created the conditions for attacks on US forces.

Probably the most prominent was the attack on September 11, 2012, in which four Americans were killed in two separate attacks within eight hours in Benghazi, Libya’s second-largest city. Those dead included US Ambassador Christopher Stevens and two security officers guarding a CIA compound.

A year later, the *New York Times* reported that the attack had been mounted “by fighters who had benefited directly from NATO’s extensive air power and logistics support during the uprising against Colonel Qaddafi.”



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