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Al Qaeda Detainee's Mysterious Release

Moroccan Spoke Of Aiding Bin Laden During 2001 Escape

Craig Whitlock
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For more than a decade, Osama bin Laden had few soldiers more devoted than Abdallah Tabarak. A former Moroccan transit worker, Tabarak served as a bodyguard for the al Qaeda leader, worked on his farm in Sudan and helped run a gemstone smuggling racket in Afghanistan, court records here show.

During the battle of Tora Bora in December 2001, when al Qaeda leaders were pinned down by U.S. forces, Tabarak sacrificed himself to engineer their escape. He headed toward the Pakistani border while making calls on Osama bin Laden's satellite phone as bin Laden and the others fled in the other direction.

Tabarak was captured and taken to the U.S. Navy base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, where he was classified as such a high-value prisoner that the Pentagon repeatedly denied requests by the International Committee of the Red Cross to see him. Then, after spending almost three years at the base, he was suddenly released.

Today, the al Qaeda loyalist known locally as the "emir" of Guantanamo walks the streets of his old neighborhood near Casablanca, more or less a free man. In a decision that neither the Pentagon nor Moroccan officials will explain publicly, Tabarak was transferred to Morocco in August 2004 and released from police custody four months later.

Tabarak's odyssey from Afghanistan to Guantanamo and back to his native land illustrates the grit and at times fanatical determination of one bin Laden recruit. Yet his story also shows how little is known publicly about al Qaeda figures who were captured after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on New York and the Pentagon. Major gaps remain in his account, and terrorism experts and intelligence officials continue to debate whether he was a member of al Qaeda's inner circle or its rank and file.

His case also highlights mysteries of U.S. priorities in deciding who to keep and who to let go. As the Pentagon gears up to hold its first military tribunals at Guantanamo after four years of preparations, it has released a prisoner it called a key operative. At the same time, it retains under heavy guard men whose background and significance are never discussed.

Eighteen months after he left Guantanamo, Tabarak, 50, still faces minor criminal offenses in Rabat, the capital, such as passport forgery and conspiracy. But his attorney predicts that it's only a matter of time before the case is dropped and all allegations of terrorist activities are dismissed.

The attorney, Abdelfattah Zahrach, said his client's importance as an al Qaeda figure has been exaggerated, although he acknowledged that Tabarak knew bin Laden and worked for one of his companies.

"He was in bin Laden's environment, but he didn't play an operational role," Zahrach said. "Do you think that if he was really the bodyguard of bin Laden that the Americans would have let him come back to Morocco?"

A Family Affair

A review of Moroccan court documents, including records of his interrogations by Moroccan investigators, shows the U.S. military had good reason to consider Tabarak a valuable catch. In addition to his firsthand knowledge of how bin Laden survived Tora Bora, he had worked for the al Qaeda leader since 1989 and was often at his side as he built the terrorist network from bases in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Sudan.

According to the documents, details of which other foreign intelligence officials confirmed, Tabarak served as a jack-of-all-trades for members of the inner circle. For several years, he received his orders and a regular salary from Saeed Masri, an al Qaeda financier, military training camp leader and relative of bin Laden.

Tabarak also dedicated his family to the cause. One daughter, Asia, married a top al Qaeda operations commander, Abu Feraj Libi, who was captured in Pakistan in May 2005 and is blamed for assassination plots against Pakistan's president, Gen. Pervez Musharraf.

A son, Omar, fought alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan in late 2001 and was captured by Afghan allies of the Americans. When he was released in a prisoner swap, bin Laden threw a feast to celebrate, according to Tabarak's statements to interrogators.

Defense Department officials declined to say why Tabarak was released from Guantanamo, in August 2004, when he and four other Moroccan detainees were handed over to authorities in Rabat. "The decision to transfer or release a detainee is based on many factors, including whether the detainee is of further intelligence value to the United States and whether the detainee is believed to pose a continuing threat to the United States if released," said Navy Lt. Cmdr. J.D. Gordon, a Pentagon spokesman.

According to interviews in Rabat with people who are familiar with Tabarak's case, however, Moroccan officials had pressed the U.S. military for many months to hand over Tabarak, arguing that they would have a better chance of persuading him to reveal secrets about al Qaeda.

Moroccan interrogators visited Tabarak and other Moroccan detainees at Guantanamo on two occasions and urged them to cooperate, according to his attorney and two fellow prisoners. "They came to see us and brought us coffee and sandwiches," said Mohammed Mazouz, one of the Moroccans who was later released with Tabarak. "But the Americans, they would just abuse us."

During a courtroom appearance in Rabat last year, Tabarak looked gaunt and wore a black baseball cap low on his forehead. After consenting to an interview through his attorney, he changed his mind at the last minute; guards in the courthouse audibly warned him not to speak with an American reporter.

In interviews with Arab journalists, Tabarak has given conflicting accounts, sometimes denying membership in al Qaeda or ties to bin Laden. But interrogation records show that he has described in detail to authorities a long and intimate connection with the network.

He left Morocco in 1989, he has said, on the advice of a mentor from a Casablanca mosque who urged him to become involved with Islamic fighters who were battling the communist-backed Afghan government.

After first making a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia, Tabarak recounted, he traveled to Pakistan, a staging area for guerrillas fighting in Afghanistan, and joined bin Laden's network. He received military training at two camps near Khost, Afghanistan, and met with bin Laden at a guest house in the Pakistani city of Peshawar.

Tabarak told his interrogators that he received the equivalent of \$250 a month to help funnel foreign fighters into Afghanistan. When Pakistani authorities decided to crack down on outsiders

in their country, he followed bin Laden to Sudan. There he worked on a farm raising cattle, served as a bodyguard and performed other tasks.

By the time bin Laden returned to Afghanistan in 1996, Tabarak was taking on more important roles. He said he worked for a while in a "precious stones" smuggling operation that raised money for al Qaeda. Eventually, he joined bin Laden's personal security detail, accompanying the Saudi on trips across the country to meet with other figures from al Qaeda and the Taliban movement.

Escape From Tora Bora

Tabarak said he had no warning of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks but helped protect bin Laden after U.S. forces went to war in Afghanistan the following month. He said he spent 20 days hiding with bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders in Tora Bora, in rugged mountainous terrain near the Pakistani border, as U.S. forces and their Afghan militia proxies closed in.

According to Moroccan and other foreign intelligence officials, Tabarak sacrificed himself so the others could escape. He took bin Laden's satellite phone, which the al Qaeda leader apparently assumed was being tracked by U.S. spy technology, and walked toward the Pakistani border as the al Qaeda leadership fled in the opposite direction. The ruse worked, although Tabarak and others were captured.

"I escaped as part of a group that included mostly Saudis and Yemenis towards Pakistan, until we were arrested by Pakistani authorities at a border crossing point and then afterwards handed over to American authorities," he told Moroccan interrogators in August 2004.

Zahrach, Tabarak's attorney, confirmed that his client was caught near the border and handed over to the U.S. military. But he denied Tabarak helped bin Laden escape from Tora Bora. He dismissed the interrogation reports as forgeries. He said Moroccan officials have no evidence for their allegations but are too embarrassed to admit it.

"They have to charge him with something in Morocco to prevent him from talking," Zahrach said. "They have to keep him tied up in court and keep him under pressure." Tabarak's next scheduled court appearance is Friday in Rabat. Officials with the Moroccan Communications Ministry declined to comment on the case.

Mohammed Darif, a Moroccan terrorism analyst and political science professor, said Moroccan intelligence officials have overstated Tabarak's role in al Qaeda. He said bin Laden relied almost exclusively on fellow Saudis and tribal relatives from Yemen to provide for his personal safety and was unlikely to accept an uneducated, poor Moroccan into his inner circle.

"People who have known him all along say that Tabarak was a serious player but that perhaps his reputation is a little overblown," said Darif, who interviewed Tabarak after his release from Guantanamo. "He may have been a loyal worker, but he's not sophisticated. When you talk to him, you see pretty clearly that the guy does not have a strong personality."

But other intelligence sources in Europe and the Middle East suggest that his behavior at Guantanamo is further confirmation of his importance. There, they say, he developed a reputation as a tough-minded leader among the detainees. Moroccan officials have described him as an "emir" of the camp who resisted his American interrogators and catalyzed hunger strikes among prisoners.

Defense Department memos obtained by The Washington Post in 2004 show that Guantanamo officials repeatedly prevented inspectors from the International Committee of the Red Cross from seeing Tabarak.

Although the Red Cross was supposed to have access to all persons in military custody, Maj. Gen. Geoffrey Miller told Red Cross inspectors on Oct. 9, 2003, that they could not visit Tabarak or three other detainees "because of military necessity," according to the memos. On a follow-up visit Feb. 2, 2004, Miller informed Red Cross officials that they could see anyone at the base, except Tabarak. Miller once again cited "military necessity." A Defense Department spokesman declined to comment on the memos.

Tabarak has told his attorney and other detainees that he was kept in an isolation cell during most of his stay at Guantanamo. For about one year, he said, he was interrogated only while blindfolded, so he could not see his captors or even know for certain if he was in Cuba or another country.

Staff writer Scott Higham and researcher Julie Tate in Washington contributed to this report.