The Triple Agent: The al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA

by Joby Warrick

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Reviewed by CDR Youssef Aboul-Enein

On December 30, 2009, the CIA, in collaboration with Jordan’s General Intelligence Directorate (GID), was expecting to receive a valuable source who had provided evidence of his closeness to such al-Qaida leaders as Atiyah Abdel-Rahman (who rose to be number two after the death of bin Ladin) and access to then number two Ayman al-Zawahiri. They were to meet the source in a CIA post in Khost, Afghanistan. He arrived in Khost, entered the secure base, got out of his car, and detonated a powerful explosive killing himself and eight CIA officers along with Prince Ali bin Zeid, the Jordanian GID handler. Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Joby Warrick of the Washington Post has pieced together the various moving parts in the narrative of Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, the double agent who caused one of the most infamous losses in CIA history. Warrick also discusses the personalities that handled him, from Prince Ali to Jennifer Matthews, the CIA chief of the Khost outpost.

Balawi was born on Christmas Day, 1977. His father, a teacher, was among the thousands of Palestinian refugees who now make up a sizable portion of Jordan’s population. His father lives a middle class lifestyle as a

About the Reviewer: CDR Youssef Aboul-Enein has been on the faculty of the National Intelligence University since 2014, where he teaches graduate-level courses on Islam, and intelligence and national security. He also is a Senior Advisor on Violent Islamist Groups at DIA’s Defense Combating Terrorism Center.
Jordanian citizen among the thousands. Balawi trained as a physician at the University of Istanbul and was drawn to Islamist causes. He married Turk Defne Bayrak, a journalist for an Islamist newspaper and an activist. The book mentions that Bayrak translated a biography of Usama bin Ladin in Turkish. How she impacted her husband is not known, but Balawi served as a physician in Palestinian refugee camps until he gradually began to explore the virtual world of militant Islamist websites.

Counterterrorism operatives, analysts, and collectors play a game of cat and mouse with terrorists in both virtual and physical spaces. Under the name Abu Dujannah al-Khorasani, Balawi rose to the status of rock star on jihadist websites, even running a chat page for websites such as al-Hisbah, a violent Islamist website used by al-Qaida. Many within the jihadist scene speculated who al-Khorasani was, and he began to generate thousands of followers online with his commentaries and videos of U.S. combat troops maimed or killed in Iraq.

Balawi kept his double life from his family. But eventually, he came to the attention of Jordan’s GID, who detained him. During his detention, he apparently gave up his identity and information. The Jordanians then began to explore the possibility of having him infiltrate jihadist groups in Pakistan. Warrick outlines the handling and cultivation of Balawi by Jordan’s Prince Ali, a captain in the GID.

Acting as a Jordanian agent, Balawi successfully infiltrated Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, a group led by the late Baitullah Meshud. At some point he was introduced to the late sheikh Said al-Masri, al-Qaida’s number three and financial manager. Warrick writes that sending Balawi back to conduct the suicide attack was the brainchild of al-Masri. The attack planning is a lesson on patiently developing a narrative to deceive and entice an adversary. In this case, the goal was to entice the Americans operating in Khost to invite Balawi into their base. This deception involved elaborate footage of Balawi sitting next to Atiyah Abdel-Rahman and detailed descriptions of drone strikes on major figures like Baitullah Meshud. Balawi’s claim that he was personally attending to Zawahiri’s medical needs coupled with information about Zawahiri’s medical condition compelled collectors and CIA operatives to want to debrief this Jordanian source.

Warrick explores concerns among the Americans handling the visit—a sense that things were not as they seemed. For instance, Balawi insisted that
he wanted to meet in Taliban–controlled Miranshah and not Peshawar. In hindsight it seems that the kidnapping of Prince Ali was the initial objective, before changing to a suicide mission. The change of al-Balawi’s mission was a result of CIA’s insistence that he meet in a secure base in Khost. Warrick also includes a biography of those lost in Khost, who represented significant experience in counterterrorism. Those interested in counterterrorism, intelligence, and Afghanistan-Pakistan issues will find this book worth perusing.