

## ***The Triple Agent: The Al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA***

Joby Warrick, New York: Doubleday, 2011. 244 pp., incl. illustrations and maps.

***Reviewed by Stephen J. Garber***

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On 30 December 2009, a Jordanian physician named Humam Khalil al-Balawi arrived to much anticipation, at a CIA base near Khost, Afghanistan. The CIA officers there had been instructed by higher officials to greet Balawi as a welcomed guest, so he breezed through the initial security cordons. Although little was actually known about Balawi and no CIA personnel had met him, his impending arrival had been briefed all the way to President Barack Obama. Balawi promised great intelligence windfalls about al-Qaeda. Instead, a tragedy occurred: Balawi detonated his heavy explosives vest, killing seven CIA officers, two other personnel, and himself. This was the most deadly strike against the CIA in 25 years.

Shortly after the attack, Leon Panetta, the CIA director at the time, wrote an op-ed article published in the *Washington Post*.<sup>1</sup> He understandably couldn't make public very many details. Without access to pertinent classified information, students of intelligence history such as this reviewer, were left with many questions. Answers to many of them are attempted in this work by *Washington Post* staff reporter Joby Warrick, who said he interviewed more than 200 unnamed, presumably knowledgeable sources in its preparation. The result is an absorbing book, although a difficult one to evaluate without personal knowl-

edge of the events and without access to the classified internal examinations of the tragedy. The latter have not been made public, although Panetta's public summary of their findings, posted on CIA's website in October 2010, provides something of a guidepost for reading this book.<sup>2</sup>

*The Triple Agent* begins its story in January 2009, when Ali bin Zeid, a Jordanian Mukhabarat intelligence officer, brought Balawi in for interrogation. A seemingly mild-mannered doctor who treated the indigent in Palestinian refugee camps, Balawi had adopted several on-line personas in his highly inflammatory, anti-Western blogs. Balawi seemed to "crack" after three days of relatively mild interrogation so bin Zeid calculated that he could use Balawi for his own aims. In retrospect, this was a grave miscalculation, and one glaring omission in this book is discussion of what led bin Zeid to think this was even worth trying. The closest Warrick comes to addressing this key question is when he writes that bin Zeid knew that sending Balawi to Pakistan was a "gamble," and that the joint approach of the Mukhabarat and CIA was to try "dozens of long shots" to penetrate al-Qaeda's inner circle in the hopes that at least "one of them was sure to stick." (77–78)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-2010/director-panettas-op-ed-on-terrorist-attack-in-afghanistan.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/press-releases-statements/press-release-2010/message-from-the-director-lessons-from-khowst.html>

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While Warrick, who shared a Pulitzer Prize for reporting on domestic US matters in 1996, tends to write more about the CIA personnel killed at Khost than about Balawi, he does point out what might have been red flags in Balawi's background. Although Balawi claimed to oppose violence and disavowed his inflammatory online rhetoric as "just a hobby," he had sought to join the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi insurgency in Iraq. While living in Turkey, Balawi and his future wife, Defne, had attended meetings of an Islamist radical group with ties to al-Qaeda. Ominously, Defne had translated laudatory books about Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. Not only had the couple named their first daughter after an infamous female Palestinian hijacker, they named their second daughter after a woman who had made a film about the hijacker. (51–53)

After being released by the Mukhabarat, bin Zeid tried to sway the young doctor by telling him of the Mukhabarat's exploits and offered large amounts of money in exchange for tips about al-Qaeda's leadership. Balawi proposed that he travel to the notorious tribal areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, where al-Qaeda operatives were known to be harbored.

Although Balawi did not speak Pashto and was from pro-Western Jordan, he lived in South Waziristan for several months and met Baitullah Mehsud, a Taliban commander. By fall 2009, Balawi sent bin Zeid a video of himself with Atiyah Adb al-Rahman, a close aide to bin Laden. (115–16) Then in November, Balawi e-mailed bin Zeid a highly enticing tidbit of information: he was now treating Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's second in command. (126)

This seemed to be pay dirt for the CIA, which worked very closely with bin Zeid and the Mukhabarat on this case. Balawi's medical description of Zawahiri matched what the CIA knew. No Westerner had seen Zawahiri since 2002. Panetta briefed other top national security officials, including President Obama. While Warrick's description and analysis of events is generally credible, it does include

some questionable assertions such as that bin Laden was essentially a figurehead and was actually less important than Zawahiri. (128) In December 2009, Balawi met Sheikh Saeed al-Masri, al-Qaeda's number three, in North Waziristan. Al-Masri plotted to use a staged video of Balawi and Zawahiri to lure bin Zeid. (154–56) The trap worked.

While the CIA had no first-hand experience with Balawi, he apparently held tantalizing information about al-Qaeda. The timing of Balawi "turn[ing] up on the Mukhabarat's doorstep" was fortuitous, given the new Obama administration's search for fresh ways to target al-Qaeda. (83)

Yet Darren LaBonte, bin Zeid's CIA counterpart and friend in Amman, harbored serious doubts about Balawi, noting "This guy is too good to be true." (125) LaBonte, a seasoned operative, had three concerns about the Balawi case: there were too many people involved, it was moving too quickly, and Balawi was dictating the terms. (145–47)

Warrick is largely reluctant to find fault with either high-level policymakers or with overseas CIA personnel such as LaBonte or Jennifer Matthews, the CIA base chief at Khost, who had more of an analytical background than an operational one. Panetta launched two separate investigations, which blamed no single American or single organization. Warrick blandly notes, "Warnings that might have alerted the CIA to Balawi's deception were never passed along." (197–199)

Almost in passing, Warrick mentions a key point, substantiated in DCIA Panetta's public report on internal examinations of the case: there was never a formal counterintelligence vetting of Balawi. Warrick offers at least three reasons for this: CIA was too busy with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Balawi had been recruited by an allied intelligence service, and top policymakers were eager to deal a serious blow to al-Qaeda eight years after the 9/11 attacks. (144)

One other criticism of this worthwhile book is that it essentially reads like a dramatic screenplay rather than an analysis of historical events. Warrick's many interviews in a short time are a credit to him, but he does not provide a list of his interviewees. Thus, his claims to know what specific individuals were feeling or thinking at given times are some-

what grating. There likely are other errors of fact or interpretation that cleared readers will recognize. Despite these flaws, I would recommend this book, as *Triple Agent* raises important questions for students of intelligence and intelligence history to consider.

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