



New York:
Doubleday, 2011

272 pages

\$26.95

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

by Joby Warrick

Reviewed by Dr. W Andrew Terrill, Research Professor, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College and the author of *Global Security Watch Jordan*

On 30 December 2009 Dr. Humam al-Balawi, an al Qaeda suicide bomber, killed seven CIA agents and a Jordanian intelligence officer in Khost, Afghanistan. The Khost tragedy was widely viewed as a failure of CIA tradecraft whereby an unusually large number of officers allowed themselves to be placed in a situation where they could be killed in a single suicide strike. The background to this incident and the reasons such problems occurred is the subject of Joby Warrick's *The Triple Agent*. Additionally, this book is also a consideration of the larger war against al Qaeda and the ways in which the combatants wage that struggle.

The most important figure in this story is the suicide bomber himself, Dr. Humam al-Balawi, a married Jordanian physician, with two daughters, who maintained a seemingly stable life in his own country. Balawi was a tremendous believer in the actions of al Qaeda including those of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a terrorist detested in Jordan where his agents bombed three Amman hotels causing 60 deaths in 2005. The victims of this assault included a number of guests at a Jordanian/Palestinian wedding reception, although Balawi called Zarqawi a "tiger" who should inspire true Muslims. The Jordanian physician asserted this outlook and other views in Internet chat rooms where he posted radical essays under a false name. These postings often appeared to be that of a leader who was speaking for al Qaeda rather than a mere follower or fan. As such, they rapidly attracted the attention of the Jordanian intelligence service which easily established Balawi's true identity.

As an Internet tough guy and dreamer, Balawi was no match for his Jordanian interrogators. He broke rapidly under interrogation even without torture; he was faced, however, with a number of threats to his livelihood and the future of his family. The Jordanian intelligence service viewed Balawi as soft and weak and eventually decided that he might be pliable enough to serve them as an intelligence asset. His case officer was Captain Ali bin Zaid, a top intelligence professional and distant relative of the Jordanian king. Bin Zaid made the fateful decision to assume that this apparently timid man could be managed through implied threats to his future and that of his family, and thereby turned against al Qaeda as a double agent. In his conversations with Balawi, bin Zaid was quick to point out the successes of Jordanian intelligence included helping the United States track down and kill Zarqawi. These types of discussions were meant to suggest Jordan was part of the winning coalition and

was also more than capable of tracking down its enemies should Balawi ever chose to betray the monarchy.

At bin Zaid's instigation, Balawi was sent to Pakistan as a low value Jordanian agent who cost little but was unlikely to produce much valuable intelligence. Balawi's background as a physician and his previous online extremism were viewed as potential ways to enter al Qaeda circles. If al Qaeda executed him for security reasons, little would be lost. Yet this did not happen. Instead, in a remarkable short period of time, Balawi was proven to be in contact with al Qaeda's mid-level leaders. He also claimed to have met with al Qaeda's then second in command (now its leader), Ayman al-Zawahiri. Although Zawahiri is a physician, he was described as seeking out Balawi for medical advice on his supposed diabetes and his help in acquiring difficult-to-obtain medicines. This mesmerizing story seemed too good to be true, and it was. Rather than cracking al Qaeda open, Balawi had quickly changed sides in line with his core convictions about that organization. Moreover, as the agent's information became more compelling, Warrick maintains that the CIA quickly became involved as partners with the Jordanians. Warrick asserts that the intense frustration in Washington over the government's inability to find bin Laden and Zawahiri generated increasing CIA excitement over Balawi and led to a fatal lack of skepticism. According to Warrick, the CIA had no leads on the whereabouts of either terrorist leader at the time. This frustration may have caused the CIA to become especially willing to take the bait and believe an increasingly unbelievable cover story which then led to disaster.

In summary, this is a well-researched book that has a great deal to say about the ways in which intelligence organizations under pressure can be drawn into the deadliest of traps. Warrick's discussion of the grinding war against al Qaeda and the Jordanian role in it is also particularly interesting and worthwhile. Less valuable is the extensive biographic information about the Americans killed in the Khost strike. The biographical aspects of the book are apparently meant to portray the bombing victims as human beings rather than statistics, but this can easily become excessive. Somewhere there might be someone who wants to know the details of how various CIA people met their spouses, fell in love, or viewed their religious principles, but most readers will not care. Some details such as a female CIA officer's favorite hairdo (pigtails) come across as especially irrelevant. Nevertheless, on balance, this is an exceptionally valuable book that is well worth the short time required to read it.