

THE AL-QAEDA MOLE WHO
INFILTRATED THE CIA

THE
TRIPLÉ
AGENT



JOBY WARRICK

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

The
**TRIPLE
AGENT**

The al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA

JOBY WARRICK

DOUBLEDAY

New York London Toronto

Sydney Auckland



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www.doubleday.com

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Jacket design by John Fontana

Jacket illustration by Associated Press / Taliban video via APTN

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Warrick, Joby.

The triple agent : the al-Qaeda mole who infiltrated the CIA / Joby Warrick.—1st ed.

p. cm.

1. Balawi, Humam Khalil al- 2. Qaida (Organization)—Biography. 3. United States. Central Intelligence Agency—Biography. 4. Counterinsurgency—Middle East. 5. Suicide bombers—Afghanistan—Khowst—Biography. 6. Informers—Jordan—Biography. 7. Spies—Jordan—Biography. 8. Physicians—Jordan—Biography. I. Title.

HV6433.M52Q345 2011

363.325092—dc22

[B]

2011002639

eISBN: 978-0-385-53419-2

v3.1

*For the families of the fallen,
and for my family*

All warfare is based on deception.

—Sun Tzu

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Quotations in this book that are designated by quotation marks are the recollections of individuals who heard the words as they were spoken. Italics are used in cases in which source could not recall the precise language or when a source relayed conversation or thoughts that were shared with him by a participant in the events described.

LIST OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

The White House

President Barack Obama
James L. Jones, national security adviser
John Brennan, chief counterterrorism adviser to the president
Rahm Emanuel, White House chief of staff

Central Intelligence Agency Headquarters, Langley, Virginia

Michael V. Hayden, CIA director, May 2006 to February 2009
Leon Panetta, CIA director, February 2009 to June 2011
Stephen Kappes, CIA deputy director
Dennis C. Blair, director of national intelligence

Amman, Jordan

Darren LaBonte, CIA case officer, Amman station
____, CIA station chief, Amman station (identity classified; name withheld)
Ali bin Zeid, captain, Jordanian General Intelligence Department (GID), aka the Mukhabarat
Ali Burjak, aka Red Ali, Mukhabarat counterterrorism chief, bin Zeid's boss
Humam Khalil al-Balawi, physician and blogger
Khalil al-Balawi, Humam's father
Defne Bayrak, Humam's wife

In Afghanistan

Jennifer Matthews, CIA base chief, Forward Operating Base Chapman ("Khost")
Harold Brown Jr., CIA case officer, Khost
Scott Roberson, CIA security chief, Khost
Dane Paresi, security contractor, Xe Services LLC, aka Blackwater, Khost
Jeremy Wise, security contractor, Xe Services LLC, aka Blackwater, Khost
Arghawan, Afghan detail security chief, Khost (last name withheld)
____, CIA deputy chief of station, Kabul station (identity classified; name withheld)
Elizabeth Hanson, targeter, Kabul station

Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan

Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda founder and leader

Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qaeda's No. 2 commander, deputy to Osama bin Laden

Osama al-Kini (given name Fahid Mohammed Ally Msalam), senior al-Qaeda commander for Pakistan

Abdullah Said al-Libi, an al-Qaeda operations chief, leader of al-Qaeda's "Shadow Army" in Pakistan

Sheikh Saeed al-Masri (given name Mustafa Ahmed Muhammad Uthman Abu al-Yazid), al-Qaeda's No. 3 commander

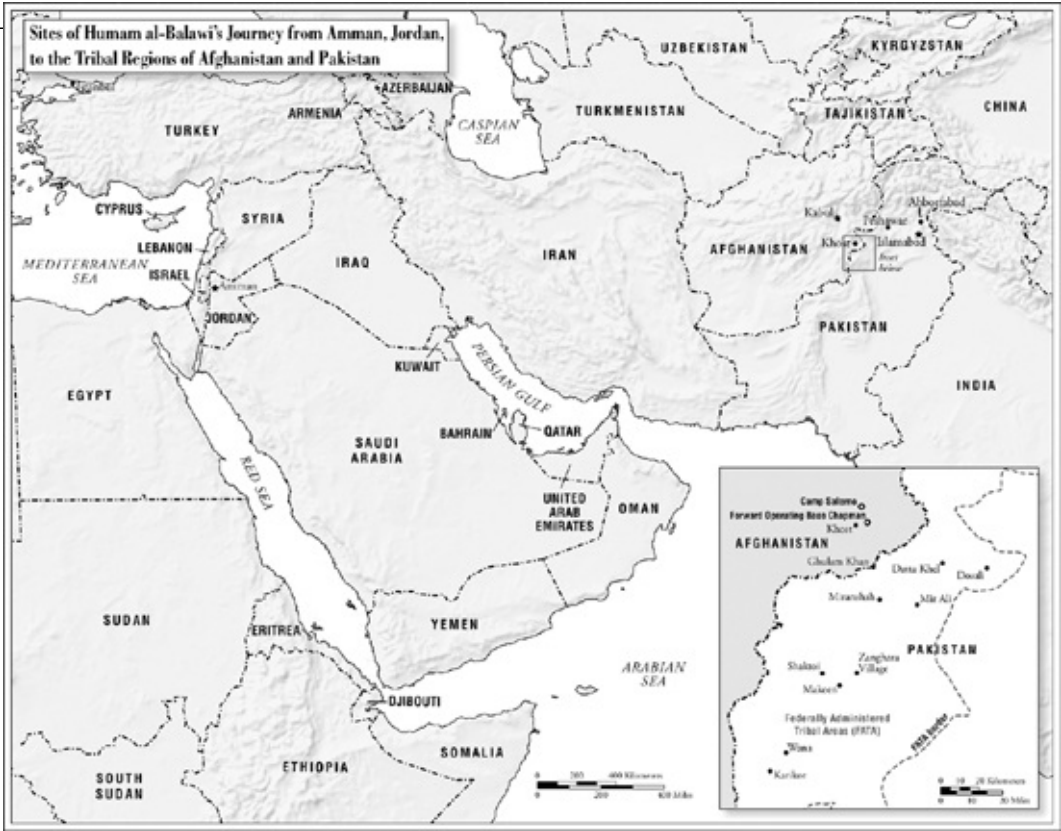
Baitullah Mehsud, leader of Pakistani Taliban alliance, Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP)

Hakimullah Mehsud, deputy TTP leader, cousin to Baitullah Mehsud

Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, al-Qaeda senior leader and Islamic scholar

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (given name Ahmad Fadeel al-Nazal al-Khalayleh), Jordanian-born leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, killed in U.S. missile strike in 2006

Abu Zubaida (given name Zayn al-Abidin Muhammed Hussein), first "high-value" terrorist operative captured by the CIA after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the first to be subjected to waterboarding



Sites of Humam al-Balawi's Journey from Amman, Jordan, to the Tribal Regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan





PROLOGUE

Khost, Afghanistan—December 30, 2009

For ten days the CIA team waited for the mysterious Jordanian to show up. From gloom mid-December through the miserable holidays the officers shivered under blankets, retold stale jokes, drank gallons of bad coffee, and sipped booze from Styrofoam cups. They counted distant mortar strikes, studied bomb damage reports, and listened for the thrum of Black Hawk helicopters ferrying wounded. And they waited.

Christmas morning arrived on a raw wind, and still they sat. They picked at gingerbread crumbs in the packages sent from home and stared at the ceramic Nativity figurines one of the officers had set up in lieu of a tree. Then it was December 30, the last dregs of the old year and the tenth day of the vigil, and finally came word that the Jordanian agent was on the move. He was heading west by car through the mountains of Pakistan's jagged northwestern fringe, wearing tribal dress and dark sunglasses and skirting Taliban patrols along the treacherous highway leading to the Afghan frontier.

Until now no American officer had ever seen the man, this spectral informant called "Wolf," whose real name was said to be known to fewer than a dozen people; this was a double agent who had penetrated al-Qaeda, sending back coded messages that lit up CIA headquarters like ball lightning. But at about 3:00 P.M. Afghanistan time, Humam Khalil al-Murayri would step out of the murk and onto the fortified concrete of the secret CIA base known as Khost.

The news of his pending arrival sent analysts scurrying to finalize preparations. New arrivals arrived base chief Jennifer Matthews, barely three months into her first Afghan posting, had fretted over the details for days, and now she dispatched her aides to check video equipment, fire off cables, and rehearse details of a debriefing that would stretch into the night.

She watched them work, nervous but confident, her short brown hair pulled to the side in a businesslike part. At forty-five, Matthews was a veteran of the agency's counterterrorism wars, and she understood al-Qaeda and its cast of fanatical death worshippers better than perhaps anyone in the CIA—better, in fact, than she knew the PTA at her kids' school back home in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Hard-nosed and serious, Matthews was one of the agency's rising stars, beloved by upper management. She had leaped at the chance to go to Khost in spite of the quizzical looks from close friends who thought she was crazy to leave her family and comfortable suburban life for such a risky assignment. True, she would have much to learn; she had never served in a war zone, or run a surveillance operation, or managed a routine informant case, let alone one as complex as the Jordanian agent. But Matthews was smart and resourceful, and she would have plenty of help from top CIA managers, who were following developments closely from the agency's Langley, Virginia, headquarters. The advice so far: Treat Balawi like a distinguished guest.

Matthews signed off on a security plan for the visit, though not without carping from some of the Special Forces veterans in her security detail. Her primary concern was not so much for the agent's physical safety—the men with the guns would see to that—but rather for preserving his secret identity. The CIA could not afford to allow him to be seen by any of the scores of Afghans working at the base, except for the trusted driver who was now on his way

to pick him up. Even the guards at the front gate would be ordered to turn away to avoid the risk that one of them might glimpse Balawi's face.

Matthews picked a secure spot for the meeting, a gray concrete building in a part of the base that served as the CIA's inner sanctum, separated by high walls and guarded by private security contractors armed with assault rifles. The building was designed for informant meetings and was lined on one side by a large awning to further shield operatives from view as they came and left. Here, surrounded by CIA officers and free from any possibility of detection by al-Qaeda spies, the Jordanian would be searched for weapons and wires and studied for any hint of possible deception. Then he would fill in the details of his wildly improbable narrative, a story so fantastic that few would have believed it had the agent not backed it up with eye-popping proof: Humam al-Balawi had been in the presence of al-Qaeda's elusive No. 2 leader, the Egyptian physician Ayman al-Zawahiri, one of the twisted brains behind dozens of terrorist plots, including the attacks of September 11, 2001. And now Balawi was going to lead the CIA right to Zawahiri's door.

When the debriefing was over, a medical officer would check Balawi's vitals, and a technical team would outfit him for the dangerous mission to come. Then everyone could relax, have a bite to eat, perhaps even a drink.

And there would be a surprise, a birthday cake.

The Jordanian had just turned thirty-two on Christmas Day, a trivia plum that Matthews had been pleased to discover. In fact his special birth date had very nearly caused him to be named Isa—Jesus, in Arabic—before his parents changed their minds and decided instead on Humam, meaning "brave one." And now this same Humam was speeding toward Khost with what could well be the agency's greatest Christmas present in many a season, an intelligence windfall so spectacular that the president of the United States had been briefed in advance.

As she waited for the Jordanian, Matthews's head swirled with questions. Who was this man? How did anyone get close to Zawahiri, one of the most reclusive and carefully protected humans on the planet? So much about the Balawi case was confusing. But Matthews had her orders, and she would not fail or flinch.

Balawi would be given a fitting reception. There were no birthday candles at the CIA forward base in violent eastern Afghanistan. But the Jordanian would have his cake.

That is, if he ever showed up.

By 3:30 P.M. the entire team was ready and waiting outside the interrogation building. Another thirty minutes dragged by without news from the Jordanian, and then an hour, and now the sun was slumping toward the tops of the mountain peaks west of Khost. The temperature dropped, and the nervous adrenaline congealed into plain nervousness.

Had something happened? Had Balawi changed his mind? There were no answers and nothing to do but wait.

The group of men and women beneath the metal awning had grown to fourteen, an odd large gathering for an informant meeting. Normally, the imperative to shield a spy's identity dictates that no more than two or three officers are ever allowed to see him. But as was quickly becoming clear, there was nothing normal about the Balawi case. There was a sense of destiny, of history being made, one CIA participant in the events later recalled "Everyone," the officer said, "wanted to be involved in this one."

Gradually the officers segregated themselves into small groups. The security detail, two CIA employees, and a pair of guards working for the private contractor Xe Services LLC, commonly known as Blackwater, stood near the gate, talking in low voices, M4s slung over their backs. Three of the men were military veterans, and all four had become chummy. Pip, a smoking Dane Paresi, a former Green Beret and one of the oldest in the group at forty-six, had joined Blackwater after a career that included stints in multiple hellholes, most recently Afghanistan, where his conduct under fire had earned him the Bronze Star. Iraq veteran Jeremy Wise, thirty-five, an ex-Navy SEAL with an infectious grin, had signed up with the security contractor to pay the bills after leaving active service and was struggling to figure out what to do with his life. Security team leader Harold E. Brown Jr., thirty-seven, was a former army intelligence officer and devoted family man who taught Roman Catholic catechism classes and led Cub Scouts back in Virginia. Scott Roberson, thirty-eight, had been a narcotics detective in Atlanta in a previous life, and he was looking forward to becoming a father in less than a month.

Nearer to the building, two men in civilian jeans and khakis chatted with the ease of longtime friends. Both were guests at Khost, having flown to Afghanistan from Jordan to be present at Balawi's debriefing. The big man with ink black hair was Jordanian intelligence captain Ali bin Zeid, a cousin of King Abdullah II of Jordan and the only one in the group who had ever met Balawi. Darren LaBonte, an athletic ex-Army Ranger who sported a goatee and a baseball hat, was a CIA officer assigned to the agency's Amman station. The two were close friends who often worked cases together and sometimes vacationed together along with their wives. Both had been anxious about the meeting with Balawi, and they had spent part of the previous day blowing off steam by snapping pictures and puttering around on a three-wheeler they had found.

A larger group clustered around Matthews. One of them, a striking blonde with cobalt blue eyes, had been summoned from the CIA's Kabul station for the meeting because of her exceptional skills. Elizabeth Hanson was one of the agency's most celebrated targeters, an expert at finding terrorist commanders in their hiding places and tracking them until one of the CIA's hit teams could move into place. She was thirty but looked even younger, bundled up inside a jacket and oversize flannel shirt against the December chill.

The wind was picking up, and the late-afternoon shadows stretched like vines across the asphalt. A frustrated boredom set in, and officers fidgeted with their cell phones.

Paresi set down his weapon and tapped out an e-mail to his wife. Mindy Lou Paresi was airborne at that moment, flying back to Seattle from Ohio with the couple's youngest daughter after holiday visits with family. As he often did, Paresi would leave a message that his wife would see when she landed, just letting her know that he was OK.

"E-mail me when you get to the house," he wrote. "I love you both very much."

Jeremy Wise stepped away from the others to make his phone call. The Arkansas native was feeling strangely anxious, so much so that he wondered if he was coming down with something. He dialed his home number, and when the answering machine picked up, the disappointment clearly registered in his voice. "I'm not doing very well," he said, speaking slowly. He hesitated. "Tell Ethan I love him."

Bin Zeid was the only one with a direct line to Balawi, and his phone had been distressingly silent. The big man now sat quietly, clutching his mobile between thick fingers. It was b

Zeid who had gone over the arrangements with the agent—Balawi had been his recruit after all—and now the possibility of failure loomed over him like a leaden cloud. On top of it all, both he and his CIA partner, LaBonte, had personal reasons for wanting out of Afghanistan in a hurry. LaBonte's entire family, including his wife and their baby daughter, was waiting for him in an Italian villa they had rented for the holidays, and the delays had already eaten up most of his vacation. Bin Zeid, who was newly married, had made plans to spend New Year's Eve with his wife back in Amman.

When his phone finally chirped, it was a text message from dark-haired Fida, asking her husband if he was positive he would be home the following evening. Bin Zeid tapped out a terse reply. "Not yet," he wrote.

Just after 4:40 P.M. bin Zeid's phone finally rang. The number in the caller ID belonged to Arghawan, the Afghan driver who had been dispatched to the border crossing for the pickup. But the voice was Balawi's.

The agent apologized. He had injured his leg in an accident and had been delayed, he said. Balawi had been anxious about his first meeting with Americans, and he asked again about the procedures at the gate. *I don't want to be manhandled*, he kept repeating.

You'll treat me like a friend, right? he asked.

By now a column of dust from Afghawan's red Outback was already visible from the guard tower. The driver was moving fast to thwart any sniper who might happen to have a scope trained on the road in time to see an unescorted civilian vehicle heading for the American base. In keeping with the CIA's instructions and, coincidentally, with Balawi's wishes, there would be no fumbling or checking IDs at the gate. On cue, the Afghan army guards at the front gate rolled back the barriers just enough to let Arghawan roar past. The Afghan driver then veered sharply to the left and followed a ribbon of asphalt along the edge of the airfield to a small second gate, where he was again waved through.

Now Matthews could see the station wagon entering the compound where she and the others were waiting. Matthews had asked bin Zeid and LaBonte to greet Balawi while she and the other officers kept a respectful distance, spread out in a crude reception line beneath the awning. She began making her way to a spot at the front of the line, straightening her clothes as she walked.

Security chief Scott Roberson and the two Blackwater guards unslung their rifles and made their way across the gravel lot, but the arriving Outback cut them off. The car rolled to a halt with the driver's door positioned directly in front of the spot where Matthews was standing. Arghawan was alone in the front seat, his face nearly obscured by the thick film of dust that coated the windows. The figure sitting directly behind him in the backseat was hunched forward slightly, and Matthews strained to make out the face. The engine was cut, and in an instant Roberson was opening the rear door next to Balawi.

The man inside hesitated, as though studying the guards' weapons. Then, very slowly, he slid across the seat away from the Americans and climbed out on the opposite side of the car.

Now he was standing, a short, wiry man, perhaps thirty, with dark eyes and a few matted curls visible under his turban. He was wearing a beige, loose-fitting kameez shirt of the type worn by Pashtun tribesmen and a woolen vest that made him look slightly stout around the middle. A long gray shawl draped his shoulders and covered the lower part of his face and

beard. The man reached back into the car to grab a metal crutch, and as he did, the shawl flew away to reveal a wispy beard and an expression as blank as a marble slab.

As the others watched in confused silence, the man started to walk around the front of the car with an awkward, stooped gait, as though struggling under a heavy load. He was mumbling to himself.

Bin Zeid waved to Balawi but, getting no response, called out to him.

“*Salaam, akhoya*. Hello, my brother,” bin Zeid said. “Everything’s OK!”

But it wasn’t. Blackwater guards Paresi and Wise had instinctively raised their guns when Balawi balked at exiting on their side of the car. Paresi, the ex-Green Beret, watched with growing alarm as Balawi hobbled around the vehicle, one hand grasping the crutch and the other hidden ominously under his shawl. Paresi tensed, finger on the trigger, eyes fixed on the shawl with instincts honed in dozens of firefights and close scrapes. One shot would drop the man. But if he was wrong—if there was no bomb—it would be the worst mistake of his life. He circled around the car keeping the ambling figure in his gun’s sight. Steady. Wait. But where’s that hand?

Now he and Wise were shouting almost in unison, guns at the ready.

“Hands up! Get your hand out of your clothing!”

Balawi’s mumbling grew louder. He was chanting something in Arabic.

“*La ilaha illa Allah!*” he was saying.

There is no god but God.

Bin Zeid heard the words and knew, better than anyone, exactly what they meant.

OBSESSION

McLean, Virginia—One year earlier

For nearly three years the whereabouts of Osama bin Laden and his top generals had been Michael V. Hayden's daily obsession, a throbbing migraine that intruded on his consciousness at odd hours of the night. But as he turned the page on his final month as CIA director, it was a different Osama that was costing him sleep. Before New Year's Day was over, Hayden would have to decide whether the man would live or die.

The man was called Osama al-Kini, and he had been the subject of an increasingly frantic search. The boyish onetime soccer player from Kenya had moved up in al-Qaeda's ranks, starting as a truck driver and bomb maker and rising to become a top operations planner with a flair for the spectacular. He was preparing a list of targets for a wave of strikes across Western Europe when the CIA caught a lucky break. In late December, the agency had spotted one of al-Kini's top deputies in a town in northwestern Pakistan, and now it was following him, with eyes on the ground and robot planes circling silently above. Cameras whirring, it trailed him as he wandered through the bazaars, sat for tea, or climbed the hillside street to the abandoned girls' school where he sometimes stayed the night. Agents watched for hours, and then days, waiting to see who would come to meet him. As the graveyard shift at the CIA's Langley, Virginia, headquarters rang in the first minutes of 2009, the watchers sensed that they were finally getting close.

New Year's Day found Hayden attempting to enjoy a rare day off. He tried to relax with his family and even took in a couple of football games, but the phone summoned him back to the hunt. From his basement office, with its twenty-four-hour security detail and secure line to headquarters, he mulled the latest updates from Pakistan. *Keep watching*, he ordered. Then, when late evening arrived without further news, Hayden decided to turn in for the night. He switched on his TV and sat on the bed. It was the Orange Bowl game from Miami, and Virginia Tech was pounding Cincinnati. He stretched out and tried to concentrate on the game.

At sixty-three, Hayden was no one's vision of a killer. The retired four-star general had been a career intelligence man in the air force who moved up to become head of the National Security Agency, overseeing the country's vast overseas eavesdropping network. In 2006 he was President George W. Bush's pick for the CIA's third director in two years, inheriting a demoralized spy agency in need of a wise uncle to pay bail and clean up the damage. Hayden's charge, simply put, was to restore stability and even a kind of bureaucratic blandness to the CIA after multiple scandals over the alleged kidnapping and torture of suspected terrorists. One of his stated ambitions going in: to get the CIA out of the headlines. "The agency needs to be out of the news, as source or subject," he told the *Washington Post* in an interview.

Hayden was born to Irish Catholic parents in Pittsburgh and maintained lifelong ties to the working-class city, returning home on fall weekends to root for the Steelers or for the football squad at his alma mater, Duquesne University. He liked talking in sports analogies and, as CIA director he enjoyed mingling with young analysts in the agency cafeteria, his barrel chest and easy smile making him a reassuring, rather than an intimidating, presence for junior staffers. The mechanics of finding and eliminating specific terrorist threats seemed to fall more naturally to Hayden's chief deputy, Stephen R. Kappes, a legendary case officer who had made his mark matching wits against the Soviet KGB in Moscow.

But now, in his third year as director, Hayden was in charge of the most relentlessly lethal campaign in the spy agency's history. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the CIA had devoted itself to hunting down bin Laden and his followers with the aim of capturing, imprisoning, and interrogating them. Now the agency had a different goal: killing the terrorists and their allies wherever they could be found. The agency had slowly built up a fleet of pilotless aircraft, called Predators, capable of firing missiles by remote control. In mid-2008, as the Bush administration entered its final months, the CIA unleashed the planes commonly referred to as drones, in an all-out war against al-Qaeda. CIA missiles blasted terrorist safe houses and training camps week after week, and the finger on the trigger was Hayden's.

The transformation had been years in the making. In the middle years of the decade, as the Bush administration poured troops and resources into Iraq, al-Qaeda had staged a comeback in the mountains of northwestern Pakistan. The demoralized bands of Arab fighters who had streamed out of Afghanistan in late 2001 regrouped under their old generals, bin Laden and his operations chief, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and a new generation of aggressive commanders replaced those who had been killed or captured. From new sanctuaries in the rugged no-man's-land between the two countries, they quietly began reopening training camps, raising money, and plotting new attacks against the United States and Western Europe. The agency's wire intercepts crackled with vague but ominous talk about surveillance missions and drone runs targeting airliners, shopping centers, tourist resorts, and hotels—threats most Americans would never hear about.

By 2007 al-Qaeda's ability to wreak havoc nearly rivaled the group's pre-2002 peak. In some ways, the threat was even worse: Al-Qaeda had effectively merged with some of Pakistan's extremist groups, while spawning new chapters in North Africa, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Qaeda's propagandists harnessed the Internet's formidable powers to spread al-Qaeda's hateful gospel to millions of Muslims through Web sites and chat rooms. New streams of cash and recruits spilled into northwestern Pakistan and to regional affiliates from Yemen to Southeast Asia. Many of the newcomers signing up for jihad carried Western passports and could slip undetected into American and European capitals. Some had blond hair and light skin.

What Hayden saw as he surveyed the world in early 2008 truly frightened him. So early that year, during his weekly intelligence briefings at the White House, he began to make the case to President George W. Bush.

"This is now a bona fide threat to the homeland," Hayden told the president during one Oval Office visit. Another September 11-style terrorist strike was inevitable, he said, and would come from the tribal region of Pakistan.

To prevent such an attack, the United States must take the fight to the enemy, Hayden argued. That meant attacking al-Qaeda on its home turf inside Pakistan, disrupting its communications, killing its generals and field commanders, and depriving it of sanctuaries. Only the CIA had the legal authority to reach targets deep inside Pakistan, and the agency already possessed the perfect weapon, the Predator. It was time to take the fetters off the CIA's fleet of unmanned hunter-killer planes, he said.

Bush and his advisers listened sympathetically. The problem, everyone knew, was Pakistan. Islamabad was a crucial ally, and it officially opposed foreign missile strikes on its soil, no matter the target. Pakistani officials argued that American air strikes only worsened the terrorism problem by radicalizing ordinary Pakistanis and driving more of them to join with the extremists—a concern shared by some U.S. terrorism experts as well. In private discussions, Pakistani intelligence officials chided the Americans for what they perceived as two dangerous obsessions: an overdependence on expensive technology, and an absurd fixation on the person of Osama bin Laden.

“Al-Qaeda is not very strong, but you’ve made it into a ten-foot-tall giant,” one senior Pakistani government official recalled telling a visiting Bush administration delegation. “How can a handful of core al-Qaeda leaders seriously threaten the greatest empire in the world?”

Eventually, Pakistani leaders agreed to allow a limited number of Predator strikes, and for months Washington and Islamabad engaged in an awkward dance over when an attack was permissible. If the CIA discovered a potential target, the agency could pull the trigger only after both governments agreed. In practice, it rarely happened. “If you had to ask for permission, you got one of three answers: either ‘No,’ or ‘We’re thinking about it,’ or ‘Oops, where did the target go?’ ” said a former U.S. national security official who was involved at the time. A whole year passed without a single significant success against al-Qaeda on its home turf. “We’re at zero for ’07,” Hayden complained to the White House.

After months of debate Bush decided in July 2008 to give the CIA what it wanted. New reports later characterized the policy change as an informal agreement by Pakistan to allow more U.S. air strikes in remote tribal regions that were largely outside of Islamabad’s control. In reality, the shift was much simpler: The CIA stopped asking for permission. The new policy, communicated to Pakistani officials in a meeting that month, required only “simultaneous notification” when the strikes occurred.

Over the next six months Predators hit targets in Pakistan thirty times, more than triple the combined number of strikes in the previous four years.

U.S. elections in November 2008 signaled the coming end of Republican control of the White House and likely Hayden’s tenure at CIA. But in the final weeks, as the clock ran down on the Bush presidency, the number of Predator strikes soared, prompting speculation within the agency that Hayden was hoping to flush Osama bin Laden himself out of hiding as the Bush administration’s final payback for September 11. It was amid the scramble for bin Laden targets in the final days of 2008 that a familiar name popped up in one of the agency’s phone intercepts.

The name belonged to an East African man named Sheikh Ahmed Salim Swedan, a midlevel al-Qaeda operative linked to several terrorist bombings. But Swedan was most interesting because of whom he worked for, the former soccer player known as Osama al-Kini, now the senior al-Qaeda commander in Pakistan. The two men had been on a bloody two-year

rampage, killing hundreds of people in a series of increasingly spectacular attacks in Pakistani cities. On January 1, 2009, they were preparing to take their brand of mass murder on the road.

All by himself, Swedan would have made a worthy target. At the time he stumbled into the CIA's surveillance net, he was on the most wanted lists for both the CIA and FBI and had been indicted in New York for assisting the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. His apparent hideout in late 2008—an abandoned girls' school on the outskirts of a village called Karikot—had also drawn keen interest. The CIA's informants identified the building as a training academy for al-Qaeda's bomb makers.

Hayden mulled his options and decided to wait. As important as he was, Swedan was only a deputy, and he wasn't going anywhere. On the morning of January 1 he was under constant surveillance, not only by CIA operatives on the ground but also by a pair of Predators flying above the village. Sooner or later Swedan would have to communicate with his boss, and then Hayden would have a much bigger prize.

The CIA had been waiting for such an opportunity for more than a decade. Like his deputy Osama al-Kini was also linked to the 1998 African bombings and had a five-million-dollar bounty on his head. Slim and athletic with tightly curled locks, al-Kini had been part of Osama bin Laden's entourage since the early days and had been promoted to operational planner. By 2007 he was al-Qaeda's top regional commander for all of Pakistan, and he was good at his job. His cell assisted the Pakistani Taliban in the assassination of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and carried out bombings and suicide attacks against police stations, army camps, a civilian court, and a naval academy. Then, in September 2008, he achieved something far more ambitious, a massive truck bombing at Islamabad's luxurious Marriott Hotel. The blast killed more than fifty workers and guests, wounded two hundred others, and made headlines around the world.

Al-Kini was now muscling his way into al-Qaeda's senior ranks while putting his personal stamp on the organization. Aggressive and charismatic, he was popular with the group's younger fighters, and he was beginning to pose a challenge to al-Qaeda's more experienced leaders, particularly a commander named Sheikh Saeed al-Masri, a cruel-tempered Egyptian who controlled the group's purse strings and claimed the top leadership spot after Zawahiri. Most ominously, al-Kini was preparing to go international, dispatching some of his top trainees to Western Europe. CIA officials concluded that the Kenyan was attempting to lay the groundwork for a network of terrorist cells across Europe that could begin casing major hotels and other landmarks for future attacks.

It was this threat that weighed most heavily on Mike Hayden on January 1 as he waited for news from northwestern Pakistan. The CIA director had not yet fallen asleep when the phone rang at 10:30 P.M. with fresh word from the hunt. Hayden rolled out of bed and trudged to his basement office to get on a secure phone line.

It was already daylight in Pakistan, and one of the CIA's Predators had been hovering nearby as Swedan left the girls' school for an early appointment. As the CIA watched, Swedan met with a man he appeared to know, and the two traveled back to the girls' school together. The second man's face was obscured, but everything about him matched the description of the terrorist commander the CIA had been looking for. The duty officer at the Counterterrorism Center had made a judgment call and phoned Hayden for his consent.

Permission to strike?

Hayden had a standard set of questions for situations such as this, and he proceeded to go through them.

How long have you watched this location?

What is the history of this location, and how many times have you looked at it?

Have you seen women and children in this compound, ever?

From its vantage point a half mile above the village, the lead Predator, which had followed the two men, had already locked its video tracking system on the girls' school while awaiting further instructions. The odd-looking aircraft with its narrow fuselage and bowling alley-length wingspan cut lazy circles in the sky above the town, moving at speeds barely above those of freeway traffic. With a full tank and the usual complement of missiles, it could have continued to hover for fourteen hours without a pause. Instead, with a subtle shift in the engine's pitch, the aircraft widened its arc to line up its body with the building below. At Langley, the live video feed flickered on a pair of flat-screen TVs in the operations center while the aircraft's two-man crew, in a separate building, made small adjustments to the aircraft's movements with joysticks and the click of a computer mouse.

Hayden thought for a moment. Swedan was inside the building; that was certain. The man with Swedan was doubtlessly an accomplice and very possibly al-Kini himself. The building was a known training facility for al-Qaeda that probably contained explosives and was far enough from the village to ensure that no one else would be harmed. Three for the price of one, Hayden thought.

One or two of the Predator's Hellfire missiles would probably do the job, but Hayden wanted to be doubly sure.

Use the GBU, he ordered. At the command, the Predator's flight crew bypassed the aircraft's fourteen-pound Hellfire missiles and switched on a far larger weapon hidden inside the bomb bay cavity, a five-hundred-pound laser-guided GBU-12 Paveway. The weapons officer checked the guidance system, made one last tweak, and pressed a button. He counted backward as the missile hurtled toward the village at a speed slightly faster than sound. Three, two, one, the operator called. And then: "Impact."

The building in the black-and-white screen erupted in a massive fireball.

The drone lingered for hours, to record the recovery of two mangled corpses. A local Taliban official confirmed the deaths of the two men he called foreign fighters and "close friends."

By then, the drone operators had ended their shift and climbed into their cars for the journey home, a commute made refreshingly easy by Washington standards because of the holiday.

Hayden sat on his bed to watch the last few minutes of the football game and then fell into a deep sleep. The next morning an intercepted phone call in Pakistan confirmed the death of Osama al-Kini, the last high-ranking al-Qaeda leader to be killed by orders of the Bush administration.

The whereabouts of the other Osama remained unknown.

Weeks later, Mike Hayden was officially out of a job. Newly elected President Barack Obama had opted for a fresh start by naming an old Washington hand, Leon Panetta, to run the CIA. Panetta had no significant intelligence experience but was a proven manager, having been

chief of staff in the Clinton White House. One of his first decisions was to retain Hayden's popular deputy, Steve Kappes, as the agency's deputy director and to keep the agency's entire counterterrorism team intact.

Hayden's initial meeting with his successor was cordial, if occasionally awkward. Panetta had gotten off to a poor start inside the CIA by publicly criticizing the agency's harsh treatment of al-Qaeda captives, some of whom had been locked in secret prisons and subjected to waterboarding, an interrogation tactic that mimics the sensation of drowning. Panetta testified in his confirmation hearing that he believed such techniques constituted torture, a criminal offense.

Hayden made a curt reference to the controversy. "You should never use 'torture' and 'CIA' in the same paragraph," he advised dryly. But the retired general was mostly interested in talking about something else. Using notes he had written on an index card, he cautioned Panetta against being lulled into underestimating al-Qaeda. Although the terrorist group was being hammered in northwestern Pakistan by Predator strikes—a practice Obama had already heartily embraced—it remained capable of hitting Americans in ways that were both unexpected and potentially devastating. Just three months earlier, a Taliban-allied terrorist group from Pakistan had launched commando-style attacks on Mumbai, raking hotels, rail stations, and other buildings with automatic weapons and grenades, and killing more than 170 people.

Hayden now looked directly at Panetta. This was the important part.

"I don't know if you understand this yet, but you are America's combatant commander in the war against terrorism," he said. More than the Pentagon, the FBI, or anyone else, Hayden continued, the CIA was responsible for hunting down terrorists in foreign countries and stopping them before they could strike. Other CIA directors had carried out similar missions in bygone years, but now the job was different: For the first time in the agency's history, "stopping" the bad guys meant killing them.

"You will be making decisions," Hayden said, "that will absolutely surprise you."

Panetta listened politely, but Hayden's final point struck him as a bit dramatic. At military posts, a change of command was often greeted with ceremonial flourish: boot clicks and salutes and theatrical rhetoric. It would be weeks before Panetta fully understood what Hayden meant.

On his way out, Hayden stopped by the White House for a final meeting with the newly elected president. In an Oval Office briefing with Barack Obama, the general mentioned a pair of targets the agency had been monitoring in northwestern Pakistan. Hayden had authorized a strike, and the agency's team was waiting for the right moment, he told the president.

Later that morning, after the meeting had moved into the White House's Situation Room, Hayden was asked about the Pakistani operation. What about those two targets?

Hayden made a quick call on his secure phone.

"Check," he said, "and check."

Hayden left the meeting a few minutes later amid appreciative smiles and handshakes.

They certainly seem supportive, he thought, appraising the young president and his security team with guarded approval.

He had officially passed the baton. Now it was their turn.

HAUNTED

London—January 19, 2009

A winter squall was whipping through central London's Grosvenor Square, scattering newspapers and tourists and pelting Franklin Roosevelt's caped statue with sheets of rain. Jennifer Lynne Matthews peered from her office window into the thick weather, barely able to see.

It was another soggy Monday in London and the start of the final stretch of a nearly four-year stint as the CIA's chief liaison on counterterrorism to Britain. Soon she would be on her way either back to Virginia or to an entirely different location—perhaps even Afghanistan—and the uncertainty was making her anxious. The morning's cable traffic had brought unsettling news. The FBI was chasing a possible threat by Somali terrorists to blow up the inaugural parade for the newly elected president, Barack Obama, due to begin in less than twenty-four hours. In Afghanistan, insurgents had attempted an unusually sophisticated double suicide bombing just outside the CIA's secret base near the city of Khost. First, a minivan was blown up at the front gate, killing and wounding mothers and young children who had been waiting in line to see the base doctor. As guards and troops rushed to help the wounded, a truck, sagging under the weight of a massive bomb, came barreling down the main highway. A few well-aimed gunshots by an Afghan soldier had killed the truck's driver and averted a bigger disaster.

She studied the item, habitually fingering the thick shock of brown hair that spilled across her forehead. Was this the kind of place she wanted to be? Matthews was forty-four now but looked younger, her body lean from years of running and her angular features showing no trace of wrinkles. She was nowhere near retirement, but after two decades of CIA work, her career choices were becoming increasingly momentous. If nothing else, another overseas posting would mean a better pension when the time finally came.

Still. Afghanistan.

Matthews sat back in her chair and stared into the gloom outside her window. Office workers were slogging through the square with their umbrellas, and some of them would be heading to pubs later that day for celebrations marking the end of George W. Bush's presidency. Glad though she was to see certain members of Bush's security team leave town, Matthews would not be celebrating. She reserved great disdain for Bush's former defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, one of a half dozen men she blamed for letting Osama bin Laden slip away when the CIA had had the terrorist in its crosshairs. But the prospect of an Obama presidency had been more unsettling to some of her former comrades in the agency's Counterterrorism Center. Candidate Obama had condemned the agency's past use of waterboarding and had even called it torture, suggesting that investigations, public hearings, and even criminal charges were on the agenda.

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