

DRONES AND DOUBLE AGENTS: HASSAN GHUL

On September 30, 2011, a drone killed Anwar al-Awlaki, a person long suspected of being a US double agent gone bad.

On October 1, 2012, a drone killed Hasan Ghul (see this post for background on Ghul), whom a new report from Aram Roston reports was a double agent gone bad.

In 2006, the U.S. sent Ghul back to Pakistan, where he was taken into custody by the Inter-Service Intelligence agency, the country's version of the CIA. The next year, the ISI quietly set him free, with the full agreement of American intelligence authorities, according to a Pakistani insider. "He was released and both parties agreed on this," he says. "Both countries were on board in releasing him."

The insider declined to discuss Ghul's status as an informant. But three intelligence sources with knowledge of the issue say Ghul was one of those who agreed to cooperate and provide information about terrorists if he was released.

[snip]

Yet another source says that Ghul initially agreed to the project while he was still in American custody, before he was released to the Pakistanis. "Hassan Ghul," says one former counterterrorism official who is familiar with the case but declined to discuss it in depth, "may have been, probably, one of the highest penetrations of Al Qaeda."

[snip]

Whatever Ghul's agreement with the

Americans or Pakistanis, by the time Bin Laden was killed, it appears to have ended. One Pakistani source with knowledge of the case says that Ghul eventually “vanished” and that “the deal was rescinded.” Yet he would not say anything about exactly when after his release Ghul lost contact with the ISI.

Now, there are a number of aspects of this story that are unclear, which (if clarified) might explain this further. For example:

- The report does not note the chronology of Ghul’s torture. According to Dianne Feinstein and Carl Levin, Ghul was cooperative right after being captured in 2004. Yet we proceeded to torture him. This chronology would suggest Ghul was cooperative, then tortured, then cooperative, then not cooperative.
- The report makes no mention of Ghul’s alleged ties to Lashkar-e-Taiba, a crucially important detail when you’re discussing whether the US or the Pakistanis were running him as a double agent. We would have a real incentive to recruit Ghul to inform on LET (which is, after all, what we did with David Headley and may have been what Ray Davis was trying to do, recruit LET informants).

But the Pakistanis would never stand for it. If Ghul indeed was a "triple agent," his ties to LET (and Pakistani interest in obscuring LET to us) may explain that entirely.

- The report states, without citing any source, that Ghul is the person referred to in a May 2005 OLC memo (sources told the AP in 2011 he was not that detainee; though Roston also states he was a large man, which would support the claim). I will show why, in an follow-up post I've been noodling for months, why this is so crucially important. But suffice it to say that if Ghul is the detainee in the memo, anonymous sources have a very significant incentive to spin his torture positively right now (and we will be hearing far far more about him in the coming weeks).

In any case, the report presents important new explanations and questions about Hassal Ghul.

It also makes you wonder how many of our drone strikes have been used to take out our former informants.