

TRACKING THE COURIER ... THROUGH HASSAN GHUL

Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo have fleshed out the story I linked here, describing the threads of intelligence that led to the courier—whose name they report as Sheikh Abu Ahmed—who in turn led to Osama bin Laden. The story includes the following steps:

- Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, months after he was waterboarded and via “standard” interrogation, admits he knows someone named Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, but denies he has anything to do with al Qaeda.
- Hassan Ghul, who was captured in Iraq in 2004, reveals that Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti was an al Qaeda courier
- Under CIA interrogation, Abu Faraj al-Libi admits he learned he was replacing KSM through a courier, but denied knowing al-Kuwaiti so strenuously CIA figured he must be important
- Via still unclear means, CIA learns Abu Ahmed’s real name
- US picks up Abu Ahmed talking to someone else it was monitoring, speaking from a location away from

the compound

▪ US tracks Abu Ahmed back to compound

The story has many more details, so go read the whole thing and then come back for my long-winded discussion.

First, some general comments. This narrative still seems to be missing at least one step: how they learned Abu Ahmed's real name. As I noted earlier, the senior administration official who briefed on this the other day said they learned that name four years ago, so sometime about a year after the time in 2005-2006 when al-Libi's interrogation would have made it clear al-Kuwaiti was a key figure.

Further, the narrative the AP tells now makes it even more clear how ineffective the CIA program was. The AP's sources specify that KSM did not admit he knew al-Kuwaiti while being waterboarded. But that sort of dodges the whole issue: in response to his torture, according to KSM, he made up false locations for OBL. At the same time he was shielding information that could lead to OBL—and he continued to shield it under "standard" interrogation (again, it's a pity FBI's KSM expert never got to interrogate him). And then al-Libi, when he was in the CIA's interrogation program, managed to shield that same information even after the CIA recognized it was important.

The CIA program failed to do one of the most important things it set out to do, break through detainees' efforts to hide OBL.

Now onto the most fascinating part of this story: the role of Hassan Ghul. Here's how AP describes his role.

Then in 2004, top al-Qaida operative Hassan Ghul was captured in Iraq. Ghul told the CIA that al-Kuwaiti was a courier, someone crucial to the terrorist organization. In particular, Ghul said, the courier was close to

Faraj al-Libi, who replaced Mohammed as al-Qaida's operational commander. It was a key break in the hunt for bin Laden's personal courier.

"Hassan Ghul was the linchpin," a U.S. official said.

I've written about Ghul a bunch, largely because his treatment in 2004 appears to have presented legal problems for the Bush Administration with regards to deportation from Iraq, relations between DOD and CIA, and torture itself, all of which bubbled over just as tensions about the interrogation program arose. Just as interesting, Ghul is widely understood to have been disappeared (and there were doubts about his identity). Given the Ibn Sheikh al-Libi precedent—where they disappeared and then suicided a detainee with the most inconvenient information—Ghul's disappearance remains an key unexplained detail. I had, in the past, wondered whether claims that Ghul served as an envoy from al Qaeda to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi were overblown (which would provide one explanation for his disappearance), but Ghul's knowledge of al-Kuwaiti (and the capture of al-Libi nine months after Ghul's interrogation at least appears to have begun in earnest) would seem to confirm he did turn out to be who he said he was: someone with real ties to top al Qaeda leaders.

But here's the other remarkable bit. Ghul was last heard of when the British al Qaeda figure Rangzieb Ahmed claimed to have been held with Ghul in Pakistan from 2006-2007, after which Ghul was moved. But at least according to a Goldman tweet from yesterday, after spending time in Romania, Ghul was freed. Particularly given the legal exposure the Bush Administration might have specifically with Ghul (I'll explain this in a future post), I find that remarkable.