



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on December 13, 2010

Uncle Sam's Afghan Drug Lord

Governments' dealings with paid informers are always risky. By his willingness to snitch on his friends and associates, the informer has demonstrated his untrustworthiness, so it is difficult for his handlers to know when he is telling the truth and when he is fabricating information either to settle old scores or simply to keep the largess flowing. The problem of knowing whom to trust only becomes more intractable when operating in foreign countries.



It is easy for crafty natives to take advantage of outsiders' unfamiliarity with their culture to enrich themselves or to sow confusion among the ranks of the government employing their services.

These lessons, well known to previous imperial powers, are still being learned the hard way by the U.S. government. Not long ago the *New York Times* reported that a former drug dealer serving as a U.S. informant in Pakistan was [one of the key plotters](#) of the 2008 Mumbai, India, terrorist attacks. Now the Gray Lady [informs us](#) that Washington employed an Afghan drug lord as a paid informant for years after the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan only to turn around and arrest him in 2008 for reasons that remain unclear — and will continue to remain so if the government has its way. According to the *Times*, Washington is “quietly” negotiating a plea bargain with its former ally; such an agreement, if reached, “might keep many of the details of his relationship to the United States out of the public record.”

The *Times* has, however, uncovered quite a bit about the relationship between the U.S. government and its former informant, one Hajji Juma Khan; and none of it puts the government — or its wars on drugs and terrorism — in a very good light. The report begins:

When Hajji Juma Khan was arrested and transported to New York to face charges under a new American narco-terrorism law in 2008, federal prosecutors described him as perhaps the biggest and most dangerous drug lord in Afghanistan, a shadowy figure who had helped keep the Taliban in business with a steady stream of money and weapons.

But what the government did not say was that Mr. Juma Khan was also a longtime American informer, who provided information about the Taliban, Afghan corruption and other drug traffickers. Central Intelligence Agency officers and Drug Enforcement Administration agents relied on him as a valued source for years, even as he was building one of Afghanistan's biggest drug operations after the United States-led invasion of the country, according to current and former American officials. Along the way, he was also paid a large amount of cash by the United States.

A brief history of the U.S.-Juma Khan relationship: He was picked up by American forces in 2001; but, says the *Times*, “he was quickly released, even though American officials knew at the time that he was involved in narcotics trafficking ... because American military commanders believed that policing drugs



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got in the way of their core counterterrorism mission.” With the ouster of the Taliban, writes the paper, “opium and heroin production soared, and the narcotics trade came to account for nearly half of the Afghan economy.” Juma Khan took advantage of the opportunity to expand his drug business, an expansion that grew even more rapidly after the United States arrested one of his rivals in 2005.

In 2006, as he was in the process of taking over for his former rival, Juma Khan “was secretly flown to Washington for a series of clandestine meetings with C.I.A. and D.E.A. officials,” according to the story, by which time he “had been working as an informer for both agencies for several years,” having “been paid large amounts of cash,” including “a share of as much as \$2 million in payments to help oppose the Taliban.” The CIA wanted to use Juma Khan to obtain information about the Taliban, while the DEA wanted to know about other drug traffickers. After the meetings, Juma Khan was permitted to stop over in New York for shopping and sightseeing before returning home.

“It is not clear,” reported the *Times*, “how much intelligence Mr. Juma Khan provided on other drug traffickers or on the Taliban leadership.” What is clear is that Juma Khan remained on the government’s payroll “for some time after the Washington sessions,” officials told the paper. “In fact,” the report continues, “when the drug agency contacted him again in October 2008 to invite him to another meeting, he went willingly, believing that the Americans wanted to continue the discussions they had with him in Washington. He even paid his own way to Jakarta, Indonesia, to meet with the agency, current and former officials said.” This time, however, he was arrested and flown to New York, not for shopping but for indictment.

In 2006, the government “claimed to have no solid evidence that [Juma Khan] was smuggling drugs into the United States, and there were no criminal charges pending against him in this country.” Two years later the tune had changed, perhaps because Juma Khan had outlived his usefulness. Armed with a 2006 law that, says the *Times*, “makes it easier for American prosecutors to go after foreign drug traffickers who are not smuggling directly into the United States if the government can show they have ties to terrorist organizations,” the Justice Department charged that Juma Khan was making payments to the Taliban in exchange for protection and was therefore supporting a terrorist organization.

Paying for protection, however, is not quite the same thing as making a contribution out of solidarity. Juma Khan’s New York lawyer denies that his client had ever supported the Taliban (or, for that matter, that he had ever worked for the CIA); and, writes the newspaper, “even some current and former American counternarcotics officials are skeptical of the government’s claims that Mr. Juma Khan was a strong supporter of the Taliban,” pointing out that he also paid off Afghan government officials in order to stay in business.

“Oh, what a tangled web we weave,” penned Sir Walter Scott, “when first we practice to deceive!” The wars on drugs and terrorism are both predicated on lies and maintained by deception, and both Americans and foreigners have been caught in their webs to their everlasting regret. Indeed, shifting priorities and rationales for both wars seem to have been the cause of Juma Khan’s downfall: The *Times* writes that his case “shows how counternarcotics policy has repeatedly shifted during the nine-year American occupation of Afghanistan, getting caught between the conflicting priorities of counterterrorism and nation building, so much so that Mr. Juma Khan was never sure which way to jump.” The use of paid informants to fight these unwinnable wars only makes matters worse, adding to the deception, uncertainty, and injustice. The evidence that led to Juma Khan’s arrest was, ironically, supplied by yet another informer. In a few years, we may very well learn how corrupt this U.S. “asset” is as well.



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