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*Black Flags - Rise of Zarqawi and United States Failure*

*Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* by Joby Warrick was a book that covered the rise of terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the eventual rise of ISIS in the Middle East. The book was split into three sections: The Rise of Zarqawi, Iraq, and ISIS. Throughout the book, Warrick intertwined United States foreign policy and its many pitfalls in intervening in the conflict. The book was educational and informative as conflict in the Middle East has been taking place for many years, but people know little about it. While the book focused on the rise of ISIS through Zarqawi, it also touched on two important concepts: how the environments that Zarqawi found himself in fostered him becoming a destructive terrorist leader and the naivety of the United States during the conflict.

Throughout the book, Warrick explained different characteristics of Zarqawi, along with his faithful followers and partners. The characteristics that Zarqawi already possessed, along with those he developed in environments such as prison, fostered his growth into a destructive terrorist leader. Zarqawi's eyes displayed a lack of emotion. Warrick described, "Neither welcoming or hostile, his look was that of a snake studying the fat young mouse that had just dropped into his cage," (Warrick 18). Battikhi also described Zarqawi as holding an aggressiveness that reminded him of an animal (Warrick 49). His past consisted of criminal activity such as stabbings, beatings, pimping, and drug dealing, and before entering prison, he

already had a reputation for impulsive violence (Warrick 22). He was not set up to be a peaceful man.

It was clear that Zarqawi may have suffered from a split personality disorder, because he adored his mother and sisters and was also soft with those who were ill or injured, but was ruthless with anything or anyone else (Warrick 23-25). He was also greatly affected by his past and always felt guilty. This may have been a reason why he became so religious and wanted to become a martyr (Warrick 53). Due to his criminal past, Zarqawi's family encouraged him to join a religious group. Unfortunately, Zarqawi became a religious fanatic and zealot, which led to dangerous beliefs and behaviors (Warrick 49). His gangster personality and religiousness led him to be described as "the worst of both worlds," (Warrick 49). These characteristics and parts of his early life, coupled with a few important factors such as his time in prison and a dire need for a leader (no matter how dangerous), led to the rise of Zarqawi.

Unlike other inmates, Zarqawi did not speak to prison employees, and when he spoke at all, he did not sound friendly (Warrick 22). At the start, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi was the sect leader, but while Maqdisi was interested in books, Zarqawi was interested in physical violence, which increased his popularity within the prison (Warrick 22). He demanded obedience from other inmates, and rather than returning to his home of Zarqa when he was released from prison, he returned to the prison (Warrick 23, 44). Zarqawi was unsure of who he was or who wanted to be outside of prison. Despite the harsh environment, prison gave him an identity and a community (Warrick 57). Prison fostered his growth as a terrorist leader because the people there were also violent and believed the same as he did.

Zarqawi also rose to power because no matter how dangerous the person, people always look for someone or something to believe in that is greater than themselves. Under Hussein, Sunnis and Shiites did not have much conflict. Zarqawi, however, forced the Sunnis and Shiites against each other, which in turn also made the United States' role in the conflict more difficult (Warrick 135). Sunni tribal leader Zaydan al-Jabiri said, "People accept him because they are sheep without a shepherd," (Warrick 168). Even though some people thought that Zarqawi's actions were horrendous, the video in which he sliced off Nicholas Berg's head went viral, which allowed Zarqawi to gain popularity (Warrick 157). Finally, Zarqawi was personable to those who followed him; during a war council session, he told jokes and stories. He was a great leader to his followers, and because people wanted something to believe in and he was popular (whether for good or evil), he continued to increase his popularity.

One of the major factors that facilitated the rise of Zarqawi and later the rise of ISIS, which was also a major concept of this book, was the numerous pitfalls of the United States during the conflict. When the United States first occupied Iraq, the Iraqis were fine with it and smiled and waved to United States agents. After the occupation continued for longer than expected, however, they only stared and drew their blinds (Warrick 102). Meanwhile, Bush's administration "seemed permanently fixed on settling the score with its political rivals in Washington," (Warrick 102). Even United States agents started to wonder if those in the White House were even listening to their observations or suggestions (Warrick 103). Without full cooperation and support of each other, the United States was destined to make detrimental mistakes.

The United States thought they were being helpful in trying to locate Zarqawi, but in the process they invaded the homes of innocent people. They raided Iraqi houses, where many times innocent people were sleeping or huddling together to keep warm (Warrick 130). In one instance, McChrystal forced men outside and forced them to lie facedown on the concrete. When a boy who was only four years old saw his father doing this, he also did so (Warrick 130). Children who knew nothing about what was going on were forever changed by the conflict and by the United States invading their homes, which could lead to justified anger later in their lives.

The sheer lack of understanding by Bush and his administration, followed by later presidents and leaders, allowed for the rise of Zarqawi and ISIS. In July 2004, Bush increased the reward for Zarqawi, and when Zarqawi saw it, he believed he was even more important and started planning more attacks (Warrick 169). Bush was unaware that Zarqawi had killed diplomat Sergio Vieira de Mello in the bombing of the United Nations building. He said, “He killed Sergio?... I didn’t know that,” (Warrick 188). Later, one of the reasons that Obama was elected was because he promised to end America’s involvement in war in the Middle East. He rejected the CIA plan of action, however, because Assad, the president of Syria, had not crossed the administration’s “red line,” (Warrick 280). This was later noted as a costly failure. After being questioned by Senator John McCain, Robert Ford, the United States ambassador to Syria, said, “I don’t mind fighting, but when my integrity is being challenged by people who don’t even know what’s going on – it’s ridiculous,” (Warrick 295). Ford implied that the people above him did not understand the conflict, but still made decisions that later proved harmful.

Finally, United States involvement in the conflict helped to strengthen leaders such as Zarqawi and Baghdadi because, “Had it not been for the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Islamic State’s

greatest butcher would likely have lived out his years as a college professor,” (Warrick 253).

Baghdadi was religious and devoutly followed religious rules and practices. When the United States invaded Iraq starting on March 20, 2003, it reminded Baghdadi of the Koran’s teachings that all should defend Muslim land against invaders, which led him to fight for his land in any way he deemed necessary (Warrick 255). This means that not only did the United States indirectly facilitate the rise of militants in Iraq and other places in the Middle East, it also directly influenced them.

I was surprised by much of the book because, admittedly, I knew nothing about the United States invasion of Iraq or of the rise of Zarqawi and ISIS before reading this book. The book was enlightening about the conflict that I have heard of my entire life, but have been taught relatively little about. The book confirmed my pre-existing view that people who do horrendous things usually dealt with a difficult early life and trauma like Zarqawi. Unfortunately, it seems as though those who commit acts of domestic terrorism such as school shootings come from similar backgrounds. Information is always revealed that describes the person’s mental illness. What are we doing to help these people? Are domestic terrorists being fostered in the same way as Zarqawi? In addition, I was surprised that with how much intelligence the United States seems to possess, we have been so naive and have made so many mistakes. How can we do better?

Lastly, I leave the book with a few questions. Why do we always hear about Osama bin Laden, but not about Zarqawi? Bin Laden founded al-Qaeda, and Zarqawi founded al-Qaeda in Iraq; they worked together. Maybe it was because I was so young when Zarqawi was killed, but I do not remember hearing anything about him, even with regard to terrorism. What can we do as citizens to empower our leaders to make better-informed decisions regarding these types of

conflicts? United States decision making and foreign policy made this conflict much worse, so how can we prevent that in the future using what we have learned from this conflict?

Though I was not personally interested in the subject prior to reading the book, Warrick is a great author and did a fabulous job at both providing facts about the conflict as well as challenging beliefs about terrorism. The book was educational, and I feel much more informed to talk about United States foreign policy and the conflict in the Middle East after reading it. Warrick described many factors that fostered the rise of Zarqawi, especially United States involvement in the conflict. Maybe the conflict could have turned out differently had the United States not been so naive, but we will never know. I appreciate this book, and I am glad to have read it.

Works Cited

Warrick, Joby. *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*. Anchor Books, 2016.