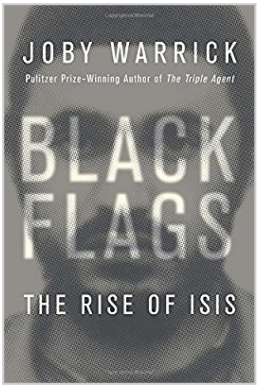


# Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS

*By Joby Warrick*



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**WINNER OF THE 2016 PULITZER PRIZE FOR GENERAL NONFICTION**

**"A Best Book of 2015"—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *People* Magazine, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Kansas City Star*, and *Kirkus Reviews***

*In a thrilling dramatic narrative, awarded the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction, Joby Warrick* traces how the strain of militant Islam behind ISIS first arose in a remote Jordanian prison and spread with the unwitting aid of two American presidents.

When the government of Jordan granted amnesty to a group of political prisoners in 1999, it little realized that among them was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a terrorist mastermind and soon the architect of an Islamist movement bent on dominating the Middle East. In *Black Flags*, an unprecedented character-driven account of the rise of ISIS, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Joby Warrick shows how the zeal of this one man and the strategic mistakes of Presidents Bush and Obama led to the banner of ISIS being raised over huge swaths of Syria and Iraq.

Zarqawi began by directing terror attacks from a base in northern Iraq, but it was the American invasion in 2003 that catapulted him to the head of a vast insurgency. By falsely identifying him as the link between Saddam and bin Laden, U.S. officials inadvertently spurred like-minded radicals to rally to his cause. Their wave of brutal beheadings and suicide bombings persisted until American and Jordanian intelligence discovered clues that led to a lethal airstrike on Zarqawi's hideout in 2006.

His movement, however, endured. First calling themselves al-Qaeda in Iraq, then Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, his followers sought refuge in unstable, ungoverned pockets on the Iraq-Syria border. When the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, and as the U.S. largely stood by, ISIS seized its chance to pursue Zarqawi's dream of an ultra-conservative Islamic caliphate.

Drawing on unique high-level access to CIA and Jordanian sources, Warrick weaves gripping, moment-by-moment operational details with the perspectives of diplomats and spies, generals and heads of state, many of whom foresaw a menace worse than al Qaeda and tried desperately to stop it. *Black Flags* is a brilliant and definitive history that reveals the long arc of today's most dangerous extremist threat.

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**Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS By Joby Warrick Bibliography**

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## Editorial Review

Review

**Named a Best Book of 2015 by Michiko Kakutani of *The New York Times, The Washington Post, People* Magazine, *San Francisco Chronicle, Kansas City Star,* and *Kirkus Reviews***

“Gripping … Mr. Warrick has a gift for constructing narratives with a novelistic energy and detail, and in this volume, he creates the most revealing portrait yet laid out in a book of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, the founding father of the organization that would become the Islamic State … For readers interested in the roots of the Islamic State and the evil genius of its godfather, there is no better book to begin with than *Black Flags*.”**—Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times***

“Warrick charts Zarqawi’s rise from booze-swilling Jordanian street tough to one of the most brutal jihadists in the world. He demonstrates how much the militants of the Islamic State owe to Zarqawi, who was killed in 2006—not only their ideology but even the color of the jumpsuits that prisoners wear in execution videos. The militants of ISIS, one of Warrick’s sources explains, are the ‘children of Zarqawi.’”***—The New Yorker***

“A revealing, riveting and exquisitely detailed account of the life and death of Zarqawi, the improbable terrorist mastermind, and the rise of the movement now known as the Islamic State (also known as ISIS).”***—San Francisco Chronicle***

"A detailed, step-by-step narrative demonstrating how repeated miscalculations by the United States, Arab leaders and al-Qaeda wound up empowering the Islamic State ... *Black Flags* provides answers in this still-unfolding history of what happens when religious radicals try to outdo one another for the mantle of God’s favorite."***—Dallas Morning News***

"Invaluable for anyone struggling to understand the gruesome excesses and inexplicable appeal of ISIS ... [a] seminal book."***—Los Angeles Times***

"Warrick’s book might be the most thorough and nuanced account of the birth and growth of ISIS published so far. *Black Flags* is full of personalities, but it keeps its gaze carefully focused on the wider arc of history." ***—Boston Globe***

"The sort of work every journalist would love to write and few can: a detailed and perceptive analysis that's also a page-turner ... necessary reading for anybody who wants to put Islamic State into the context of both contemporary jihadism and the long history of Muslim fundamentalism."***—Chicago Tribune***

"[*Black Flags*] is clear and well-told, a good guide for those horrified by the group's emergence but not familiar with every step of the crumbling of Iraq and Syria over the past dozen years ... [It] lays out in strong detail just how rough a neighborhood, both geographically and ideologically, the struggle against ISIS is taking place in."**—Associated Press**

“Joby Warrick … [has] a great eye for memorable characters. In *Black Flags* he puts faces on the amorphous organizations we hear about all the time, namely ISIS and the CIA. Learning about the origins of ISIS is key to understanding the organization today—and key to understanding why we failed to halt ISIS’s growth.” **—GQ.com**

“Joby Warrick moves easily through the intelligence warrens of Washington and the shattered landscape of the Middle East to tell this insightful narrative of the rise of the Islamic State. *Black Flags* is an invaluable guide to an unfolding tragedy that must be understood before it can be ended.”
**—Lawrence Wright, author of *Thirteen Days in September* and *The Looming Tower***

“Joby Warrick is one of America's leading national security reporters, so it's no surprise that *Black Flags* is the most deeply reported and well-written account we have about ISIS and its terrorist army.”
**—Peter Bergen, author of *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad***

“Joby Warrick weaves *Black Flags* with the tradecraft of a spy, the mind of an investigative reporter, and the pen of a novelist. The picture that emerges is sometimes hard to bear: of brutal ISIS torturers and Jordanian interrogators, of bumbling U.S. leaders, of American intelligence services that still can't get it right quickly enough. We should all thank Warrick for telling a hard truth the government will not want to hear: how U.S. policies helped give birth to the so-called Islamic State.”
**—Dana Priest, two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* reporter and author of *Top Secret America***

“Drawing on his unrivaled sources and access, Joby Warrick has written a profoundly important and groundbreaking book, one that reads like a novel, riveting from the first page to the last. If you want to know the story behind ISIS, and all of us *should*, this is the book you must read.”
**—Martha Raddatz, Chief Global Affairs Correspondent, ABC News, and author of *The Long Road Home: A Story of War and Family***

“A page-turner and a flat-out great book. This is *the* inside account of how we ended up with the Islamic State, with one revelation after another. If you read one book on ISIS, this is it.”
**—Robert Baer, author of *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War on Terrorism***

“Joby Warrick is an exceptional storyteller, and *Black Flags* is both illuminating and spellbinding. No book better explains the miscalculations, wrong turns, and bad luck that led to the rise of ISIS.”
**—Rick Atkinson, author of *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944-1945***

“[A] crisply written, chilling account … Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* reporter Warrick confidently weaves a cohesive narrative from an array of players—American officials, CIA officers, Jordanian royalty and security operatives, religious figures, and terrorists—producing an important geopolitical overview with the grisly punch of true-crime nonfiction … The author focuses on dramatic flashpoints and the roles of key players, creating an exciting tale with a rueful tone, emphasizing how the Iraq invasion's folly birthed ISIS and created many missed opportunities to stop al-Zarqawi quickly.”
**—*Kirkus Reviews* (Starred Review)**

“Joby Warrick has written a penetrating and fascinating look at the birth and evolution of the world’s most violent terrorist network, ISIS, or ISIL. This is an eye-opening book … The author tells his story through rich details and revealing anecdotes that bring you into the violent world of Islamic extremism. At times, you feel as if you’re sitting in a tent in a remote region of Iraq, watching and listening to al-Zarqawi as he claws his way to the top of the terrorist chain … The writing is crisp, the reporting incredible, a combination of extensive digging and terrific use of sources.”
**—*Buffalo News***

About the Author
JOBY WARRICK has been a reporter for *The Washington Post* since 1996. He has twice won the Pulitzer Prize, for journalism and for his book *Black Flags: The Rise of Isis*. He is also the author of *The Triple Agent*.



PROLOGUE
*Amman, Jordan, February 3, 2015*

Just after nightfall, a warrant arrived at the city's main women's prison for the execution of Sajida al-Rishawi. The instructions had come from King Abdullah II himself, then in Washington on a state visit, and were transmitted from his private plane to the royal court in Jordan's capital. A clerk relayed the message to the Interior Ministry and then to the prisons department, where it caused a stir. State executions are complicated affairs requiring many steps, yet the king's wishes were explicit: the woman would face the gallows before the sun rose the next day.

The chief warden quickly made the trek to the cell where Rishawi had maintained a kind of self-imposed solitary confinement for close to a decade. The prisoner, forty-five now and no longer thin, spent most of her days watching television or reading a paperback Koran, seeing no one, and keeping whatever thoughts she had under the greasy, prison-issued hijab she always wore. She was not a stupid woman, yet she seemed perpetually disconnected from whatever was going on around her. "When will I be going home?" she asked her government-appointed lawyer during rare meetings in the months after she was sentenced to death. Eventually, even those visits stopped.

Now, when the warden sat her down to explain that she would die in the morning, Rashida nodded her assent but said nothing. If she cried or prayed or cursed, no one in the prison heard a word of it.

That she could face death was not a surprise to anyone. In 2006, a judge sentenced Rishawi to hang for her part in Jordan's worst-ever terrorist attack: three simultaneous hotel bombings that killed sixty people, most of them guests at a wedding party. She was the suicide bomber who lived, an odd, heavy-browed woman made to pose awkwardly before TV cameras showing off the vest that had failed to explode. At one time, everyone in Amman knew her story, how this thirty-five-year-old unmarried Iraqi had agreed to wed a stranger so they could become a man-and-wife suicide team; how she panicked and ran; how she had wandered around the city's northern suburbs in a taxi, lost, stopping passersby for directions, still wearing streaks of blood on her clothes and shoes.

But nearly ten years had passed. The hotels had been rebuilt and renamed, and Rishawi had vanished inside Jordan's labyrinthine penal system. Within the Juwaida Women's Prison, she wore a kind of faded notoriety, like a valuable museum piece that no one looks at anymore. Some of the older hands in the state security service called her "Zarqawi's woman," a mocking reference to the infamous Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who ordered the hotel bombings. The younger ones barely remembered her at all.

Then, in the span of a month, everything changed. Zarqawi's followers, it turned out, had not forgotten Rishawi. The terrorists had rebranded themselves over the years and were now known in Jordan by the Arabic acronym Daesh—in English, ISIS. And in January 2015, ISIS asked to have Rishawi back.

The demand for her release came in the middle of Jordan's worst domestic crisis in years. A Jordanian air-force jet had crashed in Syria, and its young pilot had been captured alive by ISIS fighters. The group had broadcast photos of the frightened, nearly naked pilot being paraded around by grinning jihadists, some of them reaching out to embrace this great gift that Allah had dropped from the sky.

From the palace to the security agencies, the king and his advisers steeled themselves for even more awful news. Either the pilot would be publicly butchered by ISIS, they feared, or the terrorists would demand a terrible price for his ransom.

True to form, ISIS announced its decision in macabre fashion. Less than a week after the crash, the captured pilot's family received a call at home, from the pilot's own cell phone. On the other end, a stranger, speaking in Iraqi-accented Arabic, issued the group's singular demand.

*We want our sister Sajida,* the caller said.

The same demand was repeated, along with several new ones, in a constantly shifting and mostly one-sided negotiation. All the requests were routed to the headquarters of the Mukhabarat, Jordan's intelligence service, and all eventually landed on the desk of the imposing forty-seven-year-old brigadier who ran the department's counterterrorism unit. Even in an agency notorious for its toughness, Abu Haytham stood apart, a man with a burly street fighter's physique and the personality of an anvil. He had battled ISIS in its many incarnations for years, and he had famously broken some of the group's top operatives in interrogation. Zarqawi himself had taken several turns in Abu Haytham's holding cell, and so had Sajida al-Rishawi, the woman ISIS was now seeking to free.

Outside of Jordan, the demand made little sense. Rishawi had no value as a fighter or a leader, or even as a symbol. She was known to have participated in exactly one terrorist attack, and she had botched it. Hardly "Zarqawi's woman," she had never even met the man who ordered the strike. If ISIS hadn't mentioned her name, she would likely have lived her remaining years quietly in prison, her execution indefinitely deferred for lack of any particular reason to carry it out.

But Abu Haytham understood. By invoking Rishawi's name, the terrorists were reaching back to the group's beginnings, back to a time before there was an ISIS, or a civil war in Syria; before the meltdown in Iraq that gave rise to the movement; even before the world had heard of a terrorist called Zarqawi. The Mukhabarat's men had tried to keep this terrorist group from gaining a foothold. They had failed—sometimes through their own mistakes, more often because of the miscalculations of others. Now, Zarqawi's jihadist movement had become a self-declared state, with territorial claims on two of Jordan's borders. And Rishawi, the failed bomber, was one of many old scores that ISIS was ready to settle.

In summoning this forgotten ghost, ISIS was evoking one of the most horrifying nights in the country's history, a moment seared into the memories of men of Abu Haytham's generation, the former intelligence captains, investigators, and deputies who had since risen to lead the Mukhabarat. Once, Zarqawi had managed to strike directly at Jordan's heart, and now, with the country's pilot in their hands, ISIS was about to do it again.

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Abu Haytham had been present that night. He could remember every detail of the crime for which Rishawi had been convicted and sentenced to hang. He could remember how the night had felt, the smell of blood and smoke, and the wailing of the injured.

Mostly he remembered the two girls.

They were cousins, ages nine and fourteen, and he knew their names: Lina and Riham. Local girls from Amman, out for a wedding party. They were both dressed in white, with small faces that were lovely and pale and perfectly serene. "Just like angels," he had thought.

They still wore the nearly identical lacy dresses their parents had bought for the party, and stylish shoes for dancing. Almost miraculously, from the neck up neither had suffered a scratch. When Abu Haytham first saw them, lying side by side on a board in those chaotic first moments at the hospital, he had wondered if they were sleeping. Injured, perhaps, but sedated and sleeping. *Please, let them be sleeping,* he had prayed.

But then he saw the terrible holes the shrapnel had made.

The girls would have been standing when it happened, as everyone was, whooping and clapping as the bride and groom prepared to make their entrance in the ballroom at Amman's Radisson Hotel, which was lit up like a desert carnival on a cool mid-November evening. The newlyweds' fathers, all big grins and rented tuxedos, had taken their places on the podium, and the Arabic band's bleating woodwinds and throbbing drums had risen to a roar so loud that the hotel clerks in the lobby had to shout to be heard. The party was just reaching its gloriously noisy, sweaty, exuberant peak. No one appeared to have noticed two figures in dark coats who shuffled awkwardly near the doorway and then squeezed between the rows of cheering wedding guests toward the front of the ballroom.

There was a blinding flash, and then a sensation of everything falling—the ceiling, the walls, the floor. The shock wave knocked guests out of their beds on the hotel's upper floors and blew out thick plate-glass doors in the lobby. A thunderclap, then silence. Then screams.

Only one of the bombs had gone off, but it cut through the ballroom like a swarm of flying razors. Hundreds of steel ball bearings, carefully and densely packed around the bomb's core, sliced through wedding decorations, food trays, and upholstery. They splintered wooden tables and shattered marble tiles. They tore through evening gowns and fancy clutches, through suit jackets and crisp shirts, and through white, frilly dresses of the kind young girls wear to formal parties.

Abu Haytham, then a captain, was winding down another in a string of long shifts on that Wednesday in early November 2005. It was just before 9:00 p.m. when the first call came in, about an explosion of some kind at the Grand Hyatt across town. The early speculation was that a gas canister was to blame, but then came word of a second blast at the Days Inn Hotel, and then a third—reportedly far worse than the others—at the Radisson. Abu Haytham knew the place well. It was an Amman landmark, glitzy by Jordanian standards, perched on a hill and easily visible from most of the town, including from his own office building, nearly two miles away.

He raced to the hotel and pushed his way inside, past the rescue workers, the wailing survivors, and the recovered corpses that had been hauled out on luggage carts and deposited on the driveway. In the ballroom, through a haze of smoke and emergency lights, he could see more bodies. Some were sprawled haphazardly, as though flung by a giant. Others were missing limbs. On the smashed podium lay two crumpled forms in tuxedos. The fathers of both the bride and the groom had been near the bomber and died instantly.

Abu Haytham assembled teams that worked the three blast sites through the night, gathering whatever remnants they could find of the explosive devices, along with chunks of flesh that constituted the remains of three bombers. Only later, at the hospital, standing over a wooden slab in a makeshift morgue, was he

overwhelmed by the horror of the evening: The broken bodies. The scores of wounded. The smell of blood and smoke. The girls, Lina and Riham, lying still in their torn white dresses. Abu Haytham, a doting father, had girls the same age.

"How," he said aloud, "does someone with a human heart do a thing like this?"

Just two days later came the news that one of the attackers—a woman—had survived and fled. A day after that, Sajida al-Rishawi sat in a chair in front of him.

She would surely know something, tied as she was to such an obviously important and well-planned mission. Where would the terrorists strike next? What plans were unfolding, perhaps at this very hour?

"I don't know, I don't know," the woman would occasionally manage, in a soft mumble. She repeated the line slowly, as though drugged.

Abu Haytham pleaded with her. He threatened. He appealed to her conscience, to religion, to Allah. Hours passed—crucial hours, he feared.

"How brainwashed you are!" he shouted at one point. "Why do you protect the people who put you up to this?"

The woman would never offer a useful syllable, then or in the months to come, after she was convicted and sentenced to die. Yet, already, Abu Haytham knew who was behind the act. All the Mukhabarat's men knew, even before the culprit boasted of his responsibility in an audio recording made in his own voice. The signatures were all there: The coordinated blasts, all within ten minutes; the deployment of human bombers, each skillfully fitted with a device consisting of military-grade RDX explosive and enough loose metal to ensure maximum carnage. Most telling of all was the choice of targets—ordinary hotels where, on any given evening, Amman's middle class would pack a rented ballroom in their finest apparel to celebrate a union or mark a milestone. No intelligence operative or general was likely to pass through the lobby of the Radisson at 9:00 p.m. on a weekday night. But scores of Jordanians would be there, clinging to the rituals of normal life in a country bordering a war zone.

Such hallmarks, like the voice on the audio recording, unmistakably belonged to Zarqawi, a man the Mukhabarat knew exceptionally well. He was, at the time of the bombing, the head of a particularly vicious terrorist network called al-Qaeda in Iraq. But the Jordanians had known him back in the days when he was Ahmad the hoodlum, a high school dropout with a reputation as a heavy drinker and a brawler. They had watched him wander off to Afghanistan in the late 1980s to fight the communists, then return as a battle-hardened religious fanatic. After a first try at terrorism, he had vanished into one of Jordan's darkest prisons. This time he emerged as a battle-hardened religious fanatic who also happened to excel as a leader of men.

Abu Haytham had been among those who tried to alter Zarqawi's path after prison. He had been the last intelligence officer to meet with him in 1999, before Zarqawi was granted permission to leave the country for good, headed again to Afghanistan and a future that surely—so the Jordanians thought—offered nothing more than futility and a dusty grave.

Then, in the most improbable of events, America intervened. Few beyond the intelligence service had heard of Zarqawi when Washington made him a terrorist superstar, declaring to the world in 2003 that this obscure Jordanian was the link between Iraq's dictatorship and the plotters behind the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The claim was wrong, yet, weeks later, when U.S. troops invaded Iraq, the newly famous and well-

funded terrorist gained a battleground and a cause and soon thousands of followers. Over three tumultuous years, he intentionally pushed Iraq to the brink of sectarian war by unleashing wave after wave of savage attacks on Shiite civilians in their mosques, bazaars, and schools. He horrified millions with a new form of highly intimate terrorism: the beheading of individual hostages, captured on video and sent around the world, using the Internet's new power to broadcast directly into people's homes. Along the way, he lashed out violently at his native Jordan and helped transform America's lightning victory in Iraq into the costliest U.S. military campaign since Vietnam.

Yet his most significant accomplishment was not apparent until years later. Though some would cast his movement as an al-Qaeda offshoot, Zarqawi was no one's acolyte. His brand of jihadism was utterly, brutally original. Osama bin Laden had sought to liberate Muslim nations gradually from corrupting Western influences so they could someday unify as a single Islamic theocracy, or caliphate. Zarqawi, by contrast, insisted that he would create his caliphate immediately—right now. He would seek to usher in God's kingdom on Earth through acts of unthinkable savagery, believing, correctly, that theatrical displays of extreme violence would attract the most hardened jihadists to his cause and frighten everyone else into submission. His strategy shook the region as al-Qaeda never had.

But Zarqawi's excesses also deepened his adversaries' resolve. In the immediate aftermath of the hotel bombings, Abu Haytham and other Mukhabarat officers had a simple goal: to eliminate the man who had ordered them. And when they succeeded, in 2006, by providing the United States with intelligence that helped it track Zarqawi to his hideout, the terrorist and his organization appeared finished. Instead, his followers merely retreated, quietly gaining strength in Syria's lawless provinces until they burst into view in 2013, not as a terrorist group, but as an army.

This time, war-weary America would refuse to help until it was too late. There would be no serious effort to arm the moderate rebels who sought to deny ISIS its safe haven, and no air strikes to harry ISIS's leadership and supply lines. Twice in a decade, a jihadist wave had threatened to engulf the region. Twice, it seemed to the Jordanians, the American response had been to cut a fresh hole in the lifeboat.

Zarqawi's successors called themselves by different names before settling on ISIS—or simply the Islamic State. But they continued to refer to Zarqawi as the "mujahid sheikh," acknowledging the founder who had the audacity to believe he could redraw the maps of the Middle East. And, like Zarqawi, they believed their conquests would not end there.

In the prophetic passages of the Muslim holy texts known as the Hadith, Zarqawi saw his fate foretold. He and his men were the black-clad soldiers of whom the ancient scholars had written: "The black flags will come from the East, led by mighty men, with long hair and beards, their surnames taken from their home towns." These conquerors would not merely reclaim the ancient Muslim lands. They also would be the instigators of the final cataclysmic struggle ending in the destruction of the West's great armies, in northern Syria.

"The spark has been lit here in Iraq," Zarqawi preached, "and its heat will continue to intensify until it burns the Crusader armies in Dabiq."

The Mukhabarat's men had heard enough of such talk from Zarqawi back when he was their prisoner. Now the brazen claims were coming from his offspring. Thirty thousand strong, they were waiting just across the border, calling for their sister Sajida.

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The charade of a prisoner swap ended abruptly on February 3, 2015, the day after Jordan's king arrived in Washingon for the official visit. For Abdullah II, it was the latest in a series of exhausting journeys in which he repeated the same appeal for help. His tiny country was struggling with two burdens imposed from abroad: a human tide of refugees from Syria—some six hundred thousand so far—and the cost of participating in the allied Western-Arab military campaign against ISIS. The trip was not going particularly well. Members of Congress offered sympathy but not much more; White House officials recited the usual pledges to bolster Jordan's defenses and struggling economy, but the kind of assistance Abdullah most desperately needed was nowhere in the offing.

The king's disappointment had long since hardened into resentment. During previous visits, President Obama had declined Jordan's requests for laser-guided munitions and other advanced hardware that could take out ISIS's trucks and tanks. On this trip, there was no firm commitment even for a meeting between the two leaders.

Abdullah was in the Capitol, making a pitch to Senator John McCain, the Republican senator and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, when one of the king's aides interrupted him. The monarch stepped into the corridor and, on the small screen of a smartphone, watched ISIS deliver its final statement on the proposed prisoner swap. As video cameras rolled, masked jihadists marched the young Jordanian pilot into a small metal cage that had been doused with fuel. Then they lit a fire and filmed as the airman was burned alive.

By the time Abdullah returned to the meeting, McCain's aides had seen the video as well. The monarch kept his composure, but McCain could see he was badly shaken.

"Can we do anything more for you?" McCain asked.

"I'm not getting support from your side!" Abdullah finally said. "I'm still getting only gravity bombs, and we're not even getting resupplied with those. Meanwhile, we're flying two hundred percent more missions than all the other coalition members combined, apart from the United States."

The king continued with his scheduled meetings, but he had already made up his mind to return home. He was making arrangements when the White House phoned to offer fifteen minutes with the president. Abdullah accepted.

Inside the Oval Office, Obama offered condolences to the pilot's family and thanked the king for Jordan's contributions to the military campaign against ISIS. The administration was doing all it could to be supportive, the president assured the monarch.

"No, sir, you are not," Abdullah said, firmly. He rattled off a list of weapons and supplies he needed.

"I've got three days' worth of bombs left," he said, according to an official present during the exchange. "When I get home I'm going to war, and I'm going to use every bomb I've got until they're gone."

There was one other item of business to attend to before his return. From the airport, Abdullah called his aides in Amman to start the process of carrying out a pair of executions. On Jordan's death row, there were two inmates who had been convicted of committing murderous acts on orders from Zarqawi. One was an Iraqi man who had been a midlevel operative in Zarqawi's Iraqi insurgency. The other was Sajida al-Rishawi. Both should be put to death without further delay.

The king foresaw that Western governments would protest the executions as acts of vengeance, even though both inmates had been convicted and sentenced long ago as part of normal court proceedings. But he would not be deterred. As far as he was concerned, the appointment with the hangman had already been delayed too long, he told aides.

"I don’t want to hear a word from anyone," Abdullah said.

The king was still airborne at 2:00 a.m. Amman time, when the guards arrived to collect Sajida al-Rishawi from her cell. She had declined the customary final meal and ritual bath with which devout Muslims cleanse the physical body in preparation for the afterlife. She donned the red uniform worn exclusively by condemned prisoners on the day of execution, along with the usual hijab for covering her head and face.

She was escorted outside the prison to a waiting van with a military escort for the drive to Swaqa, Jordan’s largest prison, on a desert hill about sixty miles south of the capital. The vehicles arrived just before 4:00 a.m., as a full moon, visible through a light haze, was dipping toward the southwestern horizon.

Her last earthly view, before she was blindfolded, was of a small execution chamber with white walls and a row of tiny windows, and a few tired faces looking up from the witness gallery just below her. An imam prayed as a noose with a heavy metal clasp was secured, and a judge asked if Rishawi cared to convey any last wishes or a final will. She gave no reply.

She likewise made no audible sound as the gallows’ trap opened and she plunged hard into the darkness. It was 5:05 a.m., nearly ninety minutes before sunrise, when the prison doctor checked for a pulse.

"Zarqawi’s woman" was dead, her execution the closing scene in the worst act of terrorism in Jordan’s history. But Zarqawi’s children were pursuing the founder’s far grander ambitions: the end of Jordan and its king, the erasing of international boundaries, and the destruction of the modern states of the Middle East. Then, with black flags raised above Muslim capitals from the Levant to the Persian Gulf, they could begin the great apocalyptic showdown with the West.

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