

Zarqawi: the New Face of al-Qaeda

by Jean-Charles Brisard, Polity, 2005, 283 pp.

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The external facts of Zarqawi's life are easily told. The man born Ahmad Fadil Nazzal Al-Khalayleh was born in Zarqa on the edge of Amman, Jordan on 20 October 1966 (not, incidentally, 1968, as it states on the back cover of this book). A sometime petty criminal, known as 'the green man' because of his extensive tattoos, he left Jordan for Afghanistan in 1989, too late to fight the Soviets. After four years of training as a jihadist and imbibing the precepts of Salafist ideology, Zarqawi returned to Jordan in 1993. In 1996 he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for conspiring, as a member of the terror group Bayt Al-Imam, to overthrow the Jordanian monarchy and re-establish the caliphate. But in 1999 he was released in the royal amnesty following the death of King Hussein, enabling him to embark on travels to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Syria where he organised terror and violent struggle throughout the Middle East and Europe, culminating in a four-year killing spree in Iraq which ended with his death following American military action in June 2006.

This work offers a detailed biographical account of Zarqawi's life and career as a terrorist, based on original research, together with details of his connections with Islamist terror groups that have operated under the umbrella of al-Qaeda. The appendices comprise a useful chronology as well as facsimiles, with translations, of key exhibits including correspondence and legal documents. The chronology ends in autumn 2004: the book was originally published in France at the beginning of 2005 and in the UK later in the same year.

The author, Swiss-based Jean Charles Brisard, is described on the back cover as 'a leading international expert on terrorism and the financing of terrorism.' His previous book on terror financing, *The Forbidden Truth* (2001), and a 2002 report on terror financing which was submitted to the UN, got him into hot water. Libel proceedings were brought in the UK and Switzerland by Saudi businessman Khalid bin Mahfouz and his son. In October 2006, Brisard and his co-author settled this case with an unqualified apology and damages. The background to the allegations is, incidentally, covered in chapter 10 of *Terror Inc*, Loretta Napoleoni's work on terror financing.

Writers such as Walter Laqueur have cautioned against naive monocausal analyses of the causes of terrorism which leave out the diverse circumstances, aims and methods of the various individuals and groups who have conventionally been classified as terrorists. I prefer to locate terrorism as a correlate of the modern activist style of politics which embodies, or at least presents, fervent and dynamic ideological commitment, emphasises ends rather than means, and possesses a shrewd grasp of public relations and promotional techniques. This approach situates terrorism historically as a product of the dark side of the Enlightenment while leaving ample room to take account of the individual circumstances and personalities of the exponents of terror, whether they are heads of state or merely leaders of small activist groups. It is certain that a recitation of social conditions in particular states or territories is not enough to predict or explain, let alone justify, acts of terror. That said, the economist Paul Collier, while at the World Bank, was able to model the worldwide incidence of civil war (in which human-rights-violating actions cognate with terrorism are liable to occur) by focusing on economic opportunity rather than on grievances of an ideological type (religion, ethnic or class-related) to which terrorists conventionally appeal.

In the first part of the book, Brisard offers a detailed narrative of Zarqawi's rise to prominence. He 'grew up opposite the municipal graveyard' which 'aroused in him a real fascination with death' (p. 11). His tattoos indicated a 'need to distinguish himself from the narrow world of Zarqa' (p. 13). He then adopted a radical politicised version of Islam 'with the same fervour that he had until just recently brought to fighting and drinking' (p. 15). An Amman imam recalls how 'Zarqawi ... quickly submitted to the most basic religious requirements' (p. 16) in order to prepare for the holy war against the Soviets in Afghanistan. Brisard presents Zarqawi as a man in search of an identity, influenced after his arrival in Afghanistan by those who could help him in this process of orientation: ideologues of Salafism, hardened fighters and warlords, and associates of Osama Bin Laden.

Zarqawi's brother-in-law Saleh Al-Hami explains why Zarqawi got into trouble with the authorities on his return to Jordan: 'waging jihad had become like oxygen for these men [former fighters in Afghanistan] and it was difficult to forgo it' (p. 32). The Hashemite regime he viewed, naturally, as corrupt and in the pockets of the Americans. He became a respected ringleader while in prison in Jordan: 'Suwaqah [Prison] was a formidable breeding ground in which the most divergent Islamist causes were thrown together. The various movements represented there resembled gangs offering their members protection and survival insurance' (p. 47). But Zarqawi

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was no far-sighted ideologue plotting the long-term downfall of Western liberal democracy, like Osama Bin Laden. His thuggery and unpredictability worried the Jordanian intelligence services. King Abdullah later admitted that Zarqawi's early release from prison in 1999 was 'perhaps a mistake [though] no-one could have suspected at the time what would become of him' (p. 59). Much of the remainder of the book is a *roman policier* setting out the evidence for Zarqawi's involvement in various terrorist schemes other than his main activity as the leader of a notable terror group in Iraq.

Zarqawi and his motivation ultimately remain mysterious in Brisard's factual account. There were many young men in his situation, so why did he in particular become the notorious beheader of infidels, apostates and collaborators? We need the insights of writers such as Olivier Roy – who observes that many of the young Jihadis whom he met could in other circumstances easily have been Marxists – to understand how the idealism, energy and frustration of young people in Islamic societies can be directed and constrained by what are ultimately philosophical contradictions between the demands of religion and of politics.

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