

# Intelligence in Public Media

## **The Targeter: My Life in the CIA, Hunting Terrorists, and Challenging the White House**

Nada Bakos with David Coburn (Little, Brown, & Company, 2019) 354, endnotes, no index

### **Reviewed by David T. Berg, Ph.D.**

The targeting officer career track has been in existence for less than 20 years at CIA. Growing in prominence due to popular media and some well-publicized successes, the precociousness of this field tends to be less visible in the popular imagination than other CIA positions. It is with this context that Bakos documents her contributions as an analyst and targeting officer inside the CIA Counterterrorism Center's Iraq Unit. Sketching a memoir of her time at CIA from 2000 to 2007, she weaves her personal story with that of her primary antagonist, the now-deceased Al-Qa'ida-in-Iraq (AQI) leader Ahmad Fadil al-Nazal al-Khalayleh, also known as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Bakos' narrative of her CIA career roughly parallels Zarqawi's evolution from common street thug to the most wanted terrorist leader in Iraq. While the story chronicling the rise of Zarqawi is well documented in recent literature such as Joby Warrick's *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, Graeme Wood's *Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State*, and Jean-Charles Brisard and Damien Martinez's *Zarqawi: The New Face of al-Qaeda*, Bakos' work provides unique insights to the origin story for targeting officers at CIA.<sup>[1]</sup>

A casual reader unfamiliar with CIA targeting officer history may be confused by the title of Bakos' memoir. In fact, the first 200 pages of this book focus on her time as an analyst before her transition to becoming a special skills officer-targeting (SSO-T), the first official targeting position in CIA's Directorate of Operations. The transition from analyst to targeting officer is an important detail for this book because a strong analytical foundation is essential for any good CIA targeting officer. It is the targeting officer's responsibility to sift through large amounts of data, identify patterns that will fix a person in time and space, and make informed judgments about the best way to leverage that information to achieve an outcome favorable to US national security interests.

Bakos notes that analysts formed the first cadre of targeting officers at CIA because they already possessed functional expertise on topics to help the agency expand its role in combating terrorism. (22) Frustrated by what she describes as "backward looking policymaker questions" during her time as an analyst, Bakos leveraged her analytic tradecraft and expertise on Zarqawi to work as a pioneer in a discipline that continues to demonstrate both tactical success and strategic impact. (23)

Bakos provides important historical context on the role targeting officers have played conducting detainee debriefings, particularly during the early months of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) at the Camp Cropper Theater Internment Facility in Baghdad, Iraq. While detailing her frustrations debriefing senior advisers and intelligence officers from Saddam Husayn's regime as she fruitlessly searched for a relationship with central Al-Qa'ida leadership,

Bakos shows the reader a side of the detainee debriefing process that is not often associated with CIA counterterrorism efforts in the media. In her debriefing vignettes, Bakos tells the reader of the importance compassion, empathy, and cultural understanding—through expert knowledge—have on this process. Bakos notes that the “direct approach,” in which one simply asks questions without any force or coercion, is usually the most effective way to obtain information from a detainee. (145)

While some may question the premise of this assertion, it is important to note that the German *Luftwaffe* master interrogator Hanns Joachim Scharff reached the same conclusions more than 60 years before Bakos, when, during WWII, he successfully mapped out the entire 8th and 9th US Army Air Force’s strategic plans and order of battle using these exact same techniques.<sup>[2]</sup>

Detainee debriefings add important context and details that are essential for understanding an enemy’s plans, intentions, capabilities, and network in successful targeting operations. Having empathy and compassion for a seasoned opponent is a soft skill and a valuable commodity among targeting officers.

Bakos also details some the early counterterrorism partnerships between US military Special Operations Forces (SOF) and CIA officers performing targeting duties. Bakos accurately describes the thrill of leveraging targeting tradecraft proactively to drive missions with US SOF that would resonate with current targeting officers. She writes:

*It was the first time I’d had a hand in the front end of the targeting process, identifying people I had specifically wanted to debrief as opposed to spending my days in the plywood shack interviewing whomever someone else happened to pick up. From the comfort of my desk back at the terminal, the process was revelatory, the independence and immediacy of it almost addictive. I’d never imagine intelligence could turn into action so fast. (135)*

Despite the thrill of being in the center of the action during this phase of the war, Bakos makes clear her ambivalence about US counterterrorism strategy and her role driving operations with the SOF community. She documents a tension between CIA and SOF that mirrors her time and experiences in Iraq but does not necessarily reflect the state of these close relationships today. This tension will naturally be present between these organization due to separate mission focus, authorities, bureaucratic culture, individual personalities, and policymaker interest. Since working-level targeting officers on counterterrorism accounts often serve as important bridges between SOF and the Intelligence Community, it became important for these officers to forge and maintain relationships with their military counterparts, while recognizing that changes in degrees of cooperation are normal as conditions evolve. Targeting officers must do their part to build effective teams in these complex and dynamic environments.

Unlike fictionalized portrayals of targeting officers in movies and television programs such as *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Homeland*, or *Jack Ryan*, Bakos to her credit acknowledges that a single individual is rarely the sole driver of success during targeting operations. Indeed, the author points out that targeting is inherently a team sport, especially for a counterterrorism manhunt like the one conducted against Zarqawi. Targeting officers almost never operate on their own, regardless of their rank, subject matter expertise, or experience level. The hunt for Zarqawi involved the hard work, dedication, and a drive to stem a rising tide of violence in 2006 that was shared across CIA, US military, other colleagues from the Intelligence Community, and our foreign liaison partners. Bakos writes:

*Many tenacious women and men led targeting operations for significant Al-Qa’ida figures, including [now-deceased Al-Qa’ida amir Usama] Bin Ladin. My team’s efforts directly preceded the climatic action in that movie [Zero Dark Thirty], just as our work built upon the groundbreaking*

Targeting officers are wise to remember that, while they may play a central role in finding critical leads and driving mission, success or failure often relies on how well they can work with others. Bakos' narrative strikes a careful balance between providing a unique voice to her personal experiences working Iraq counterterrorism issues and sharing credit for the successes of her team.

Readers hoping to glean the essence of the "magic" targeting officers can produce in hunting down leads will come away from this book disappointed. Bakos reveals few, if any, tradecraft details on how targeting officers perform their mission, almost certainly because these techniques continue to be used today. What Bakos does provide is her deeply personal journey of the frenetic, unrelenting, and traumatic nature of counterterrorism work during the early war period in Iraq and the personal qualities that helped her endure. Readers will take from this memoir that the period of Bakos' CIA service was a major inflection point not only in her life, but also in CIA and US foreign policy. This book stands as a testament to the courage and strength of the officers who founded the targeting officer discipline.

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## Footnotes

[1] Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (Anchor, 2015); Graeme Wood, *The Way of the Strangers: Encounters with the Islamic State* (Random House, 2017); Jean-Charles Brisard and Damien Martinez, *Zarqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaeda* (Polity Press, 2005).

[2] Raymond F. Tolliver, *The Interrogator: The Story of Hanns Joachim Scharff Master Interrogator of the Luftwaffe* (Schiffer Publishing, LTD., 1997).

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