

## ***Intelligence in Public Media***

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### ***The Spymaster of Baghdad: A True Story of Bravery, Family, and Patriotism in the Battle Against ISIS***

Margaret Coker (HarperCollins, 2021) 309, bibliography, photos, index.

#### ***Reviewed by Graham Alexander***

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Investigative reporter Margaret Coker spent the years from 2003 through 2019 reporting from Iraq. In 2018 she was the *New York Times* bureau chief. The experience obviously provided her an excellent vantage point for observing many cataclysmic events that have shaped the country over that period, including the 2003 US invasion, the ensuing civil war, US withdrawal and, finally, the rise and fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). These events form the backdrop of her book, *The Spymaster of Baghdad*, which details the lives of four key protagonists motivated by personal and ideological forces to immerse themselves within the world of secrets and terrorism. The book is a briskly paced and usually entertaining read, but it might have more impact had Coker drawn on deeper research and had a firmer grasp of the intelligence profession.

Coker frames her narrative through the eyes of Abu Ali al-Basri, the leader of a cell within Iraqi intelligence known as al-Suqor, or the Falcons. Al-Basri ascended to the position in 2006 after his longtime colleague and newly minted Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki tasked him to establish a viable counterterrorism unit outside the purview of the ineffective, sectarian leader of Iraq's National Intelligence Service (INIS), Mohammed al-Shahwani. Al-Basri gradually demonstrates his mettle, first by apprehending the mastermind of the 2003 Canal Hotel bombing in Baghdad, Ali al-Zawi, and then by capturing a top al-Qa'ida leader in Iraq, Munaf al-Rawi. Al-Basri's narrative runs concurrently with the stories of two ambitious Shia brothers, Harith and Munaf al-Sudani, and an embittered Sunni chemistry student, Abrar al-Kubaisi. Both brothers escape their lower-class upbringing in Baghdad's Sadr City neighborhood to become members of the Falcons. Harith eventually volunteers for a successful mission to penetrate ISIS, with Munaf as his handling officer, while al-Kubaisi radicalizes on message boards before deciding to abandon her family for work with ISIS. She later returns to Baghdad prepared to poison water supplies with ricin.

Coker's experience as a newspaper reporter becomes obvious as the book unfolds. In fact, it reads like an extended exposé that makes scarce use of the voluminous sources Coker claims to have used and wears its occasionally hagiographic biases on its sleeve. Coker wrote, for example, that she interviewed Prime Ministers Haider al-Abadi, al-Maliki, and Ayad Allawi and that she conducted more than 90 hours of meetings with the Falcons, to say nothing of examining the 30,000 pages of declassified documents in the US Army War College's official history of the Iraq War. This impressive array of sources makes few appearances in the tale told in the book, however. Discussions of larger events in Iraq such as the bombings in 2006 and 2007 of the al-Askari Shrine in Samarra or ISIS's lightning campaign against Mosul in 2014 are mentioned only as brief scene setters before the plot segues again into the personal lives of its protagonists. There are no new insights or interpretations of these events.

Elsewhere, key elements of Coker's book seem to rest on unverified, single-source claims. For example, her description of al-Maliki's meetings with al-Basri bend strongly toward the latter's emotions, suggesting that the author never discussed them with al-Maliki. Coker writes, "He [al-Maliki] was desperate for splashy, positive news, like successful counterterrorism operations" and that this was the reason he commanded al-Basri to find and capture any major al-Qa'ida terrorist ahead of the January 2010 elections. The passage describes al-Basri as "incredulous" and states that "what al-Maliki didn't care to understand was the time and diligence to assemble good intelligence." (103) Separately, she details how al-Kubaisi began to become radicalized after the death of her sister in 2007 in an incident on the highway leading to Ramadi. Coker admits "it's unclear what exactly happened" but appears to accept a one-sided claim from the al-Kubaisi family that US forces were responsible because they had shut down the highway and then, as "some say," they opened fire at a checkpoint prompting a massive and deadly pileup. (84–85)

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Similarly, there is great reliance in the book on retelling experiences shared only between Harith and Munaf, where a clear motive exists for the participants to recount events in the most positive light possible. Coker generally accepts these claims uncritically. She mentions but rationalizes less savory elements of Harith's character such as his dismissal from school for failing grades, his distant relationship with his wife and children, and highly questionable operational decisions made during his time as a penetration of ISIS.

The book offers tantalizing details of al-Suquor's operations, but the author would have benefited immensely by vetting her text through experienced intelligence personnel and amplifying key operational details, none of which would have sacrificed narrative flow. Her lack of familiarity with the basic tenets of intelligence work is obvious, for example, when she characterizes al-Rawi's capture as a successful counterintelligence operation, when it was really a law-enforcement-like capture, using various strands of collection. Al-Basri is obviously a key source for the book and an individual with decades of experience in intelligence work, but Coker focuses almost

exclusively on his emotions at various points when additional discussion of his tradecraft, analytical practices, and personnel management would have proven illuminating. Frustratingly, Coker skips almost entirely over important events detailing Harith's training, his success in penetrating ISIS, and al-Suquor's apparent success in persuading ISIS to accept Harith's bona fides. This omission does not appear to be one based on any specific sensitivity: there are numerous details on Harith's ISIS contacts, their locations, his operational objectives, and al-Suquor's communication methods. Coker's penchant for highlighting the most savory aspects of a Hollywood-caliber spy story simply keeps her from surfacing information that might have inserted a needed sheen of authenticity.

*The Spymaster of Baghdad* is a relatively short story supplemented by various historical and personal atmospherics that will entertain those interested in Iraq and its long-simmering conflicts. Coker's writing style is punchy but, ultimately, the book pursues its protagonists and their narratives at the expense of more informative, groundbreaking details of the intelligence landscape in Iraq during the last two decades.



The reviewer: Graham Alexander is the pen name of a Directorate of Operations officer currently assigned to the Lessons Learned Program of the Center for the Study of Intelligence.