In January 2004, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born leader of jihadist insurgents in Iraq, wrote a letter to Osama bin Laden. Dismissing Americans as "the most cowardly of creatures," who would leave the country soon enough, Zarqawi turned to the apparently "insurmountable obstacle," the Shiite majority in Iraq, "the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy, and the penetrating venom." With al Qaeda's official endorsement and financial support, Zarqawi promised a campaign that would destabilize Iraq, awaken Sunnis and annihilate Shiite apostates. To those who claimed that the Islamic nation was not ready for a bloody battle, Zarqawi had a ready reply: "This is exactly what we want."

Two years later, a 500-pound guided bomb, dropped by an American F-16 airplane, killed Zarqawi. By then, Joby Warrick reminds us, his terrorist network "had morphed into something more insidious and homegrown."

In "Black Flags," Warrick, a reporter for the Washington Post and the author of "The Triple Agent: The al-Qaeda Mole Who Infiltrated the CIA," draws on more than 200 interviews, many of them with diplomats and intelligence officers, to provide 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).

Although at times Warrick gives too much credence to the (inevitably) self-serving narratives supplied by his sources and too much credit to the prescience of Jordan's King Abdullah II, his account of the mistakes and missed opportunities that gave rise to ISIS seems all too tragically true. Zarqawi, he tells us, was released from jail in the general amnesty accompanying the ascendancy of Abdullah to the throne of Jordan.

In 2002 and 2003, the Bush administration decided against bombing Zarqawi's camp in northern Iraq because it might derail plans to depose Saddam Hussein. By focusing on Zarqawi in his speech at the United Nations, Secretary of State Colin Powell inadvertently spread his fame throughout the Arab world.

After the invasion of Iraq and President Bush's "mission accomplished" claim, Warrick indicates, administration officials refused to use the word "insurgency," let alone craft a strategy to combat suicide bombings or the breakdown in civil authority (caused, in no small measure, by decisions to dissolve the Iraqi army and ban Baath Party members from holding office). And, perhaps most controversially, Warrick suggests that by failing to arm the "moderate opposition" in Syria, an approach supported by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, President Obama undercut the only credible alternative to the Islamists.

"Like a seed stirred up by a vile wind," Warrick writes, Zarqawi "had landed at precisely the right time in a patch of soil that had been perfectly prepared to enable him to take root." He was able to light a match that set already existing tensions between Sunnis and Shiites more fully ablaze.

And by personally slitting the throat and beheading Nick Berg, a young American who went to Iraq to build radio towers, and then circulating a five-minute and thirty-seven-second video of the grisly deed around the world, Zarqawi set a standard for terrorism "in a brutal new age. ... It was an instant global hit," writes Warrick. In contrast to the soft-spoken bin Laden, often seated, always in hiding, Zarqawi, "the sheikh of the slaughterers," clad in black from his beard to his skullcap to his ninja pants and tunic, became a role model to young jihadists.

As he dismissed Islamic precepts, including the prohibition against killing innocent people, Zarqawi also began to speak about the restoration of the caliphate, not as a vision for the distant future, following the collapse of the secular regimes in the Middle East, but in the present tense. His successors, according to Warrick, are determined not only to establish Islamist governments in Iraq and Syria but also to cleanse the land of apostates "and pave the way for a final showdown between Muslims and non-believers."

Of course, Warrick does not know when or how it will all end. He concludes his book with howls of condemnation and rage from ordinary citizens in Wahhabi villages in Saudi Arabia and from Amman, the cosmopolitan capital of Jordan, over an ISIS video of Muath al-Kasasbeh, a captured Jordanian pilot, soaked with fuel and burned alive in an iron cage. And he ends it with King Abdullah's decision to send planes to bomb ISIS strongholds, following revelations that the terrorists demanded a prisoner exchange even though they had killed Kasasbeh.

Warrick acknowledges as well the ongoing allure of the Islamic State. Operating "in zones of chaos, where bad things happen," the Islamic State, he emphasises, remains attractive to young people who are
motivated less by theology than a desire to fight authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and the foreign nations who have propped them up for decades.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. E-mail: books@sfchronicle.com

Black Flags
The Rise of ISIS
By Joby Warrick
(Doubleday; 344 pages; $28.95)