



THE  
THIRD  
TARGET

A NOVEL

JOEL C.  
ROSENBERG

AUTHOR OF THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER *THE TWELFTH IMAM*

# PRAISE FOR JOEL C. ROSENBERG



“Whenever I see a new Joel Rosenberg book coming out, I know I need to clear time on my calendar. His penetrating knowledge of all things Mideastern, coupled with his intuitive knack for high-stakes intrigue, demand attention.”

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Former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency

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**STEVE FORBES**

Editor in Chief, *Forbes Magazine*The Third Target







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*The Third Target* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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# CAST OF CHARACTERS



## **JOURNALISTS**

J. B. Collins—foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*  
Allen MacDonald—foreign editor for the *New York Times*  
Omar Favez—Amman-based reporter for the *New York Times*  
Abdel Hamid—Beirut-based photographer for the *New York Times*  
Alex Brunnell—Jerusalem bureau chief for the *New York Times*  
A. B. Collins—former Cairo bureau chief for the Associated Press,  
and J. B.'s grandfather

## **AMERICANS**

Harrison Taylor—president of the United States  
Jack Vaughn—director of the Central Intelligence Agency  
Robert Khachigian—former director of the CIA  
Arthur Harris—special agent with the Federal Bureau of  
Investigation  
Matthew Collins—J. B.'s older brother

## **JORDANIANS**

King Abdullah II—the monarch of the Hashemite Kingdom  
of Jordan  
Prince Marwan Talal—uncle of the king of Jordan and a senior  
advisor  
Kamal Jeddeh—director of Jordanian intelligence (Mukhabarat)  
Ali Sa'id—chief of security for the Royal Court

## THE THIRD TARGET

### **TERRORISTS**

Abu Khalif—leader of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)

Jamal Ramzy—commander of ISIS rebel forces in Syria and cousin  
of Abu Khalif

Tariq Baqouba—deputy to Jamal Ramzy

Faisal Baqouba—ISIS terrorist and brother of Tariq

### **IRAQIS**

Hassan Karbouli—Iraqi minister of the interior

Ismail Tikriti—deputy director of Iraqi intelligence

### **ISRAELIS**

Daniel Lavi—Israeli prime minister

Ari Shalit—deputy director of the Mossad

Yael Katzir—Mossad agent

### **PALESTINIANS**

Salim Mansour—president of the Palestinian Authority

Youssef Kuttab—senior aide to President Mansour

TOP SECRET

PART  
TWO

*Present Day*



# 6



## INTERNATIONAL AIRSPACE, APPROACHING LEBANON

I had done a lot of crazy things in my life, but nothing as stupid as this.

As I stared out over the roiling waves and countless whitecaps of the Mediterranean below, I couldn't help but think about my grandfather. A. B. Collins was once the Beirut bureau chief for the Associated Press. Long before I was born, he flew this exact route as an American foreign correspondent in the war-torn Middle East. His career was legendary. As a young boy I dreamed of following in his footsteps. As a teenager, I read all his journals. In college I spent hours in the library reading his old dispatches on microfiche. Now here I was, a foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*, wondering if, given all the risks my grandfather had taken, he'd ever done anything quite this foolhardy.

There was still a way out, of course. I could still change my plans. But the truth was I didn't want to. I may never have interviewed a king or witnessed the assassination of a monarch. But I was just as committed to my craft, and I was going in, come what may. That's all there was to it. In six minutes, my Air France flight would touch

down in the Lebanese capital. In nineteen minutes, I'd link up with my colleagues. Together we'd drive ninety miles to the border of Syria. And if all went well, by nightfall we'd slip across the border unnoticed and eventually locate one of the world's most feared jihadi commanders.

Jack Vaughn, director of the Central Intelligence Agency, had personally warned me not to do this. So had the head of the Mossad and the chief of Jordanian intelligence, not to mention my mother. My editor, Allen MacDonald, had expressly forbidden me to go. Their rationale was as simple as it was compelling: Jamal Ramzy was a killer.

Born in Jordan. Raised in the Gulf. Went to Afghanistan. Joined the mujahideen. Killed more Russians than any other Arab fighter. Met bin Laden. Became his chief bodyguard. Was in the room when bin Laden created al Qaeda in 1988. Sent to fight in Somalia. Became a top aide to Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. Personally trained the 9/11 hijackers. Helped plan the bombings of two American embassies in Africa. Helped behead a *Wall Street Journal* reporter in Pakistan. Became a top aide to Ayman al-Zawahiri, the head of al Qaeda after bin Laden was killed, but had a severe falling-out with him over the future of the organization. Teamed up with his barbaric younger cousin Abu Khalif, the head of "al Qaeda in Iraq and the Levant," an ultra-violent breakaway faction of the mother ship. Sent to command a force of rebel fighters in Syria. Ordered to bring back Assad's head on a platter. Literally.

This was the guy I was trying to locate. I knew it was crazy. But I was going anyway.

To my knowledge, Jamal Ramzy had never been photographed or interviewed by a Western reporter. But after nearly a year of my constant e-mails to someone I believed to be Ramzy's lieutenant, he had finally said yes—to the interview, anyway, if not the photograph. If I was communicating with the right person, and if he was

being truthful—neither of which, at the moment, I was able to fully verify—the big questions were these: Why would Ramzy talk to anyone? Why now? And why me?

The answers, I believed, were simple: He wanted to be on the front page, top of the fold. He wanted to be the new face of the Radicals for all the world to see. And he knew full well that there was no bigger venue than the *New York Times*, the world's newspaper of record, for which I had been a foreign correspondent for nearly a decade.

As far as timing went, my operating theory was that it was not vanity that was persuading Ramzy to finally respond to my repeated overtures. After all, the Jordanian-born terrorist had lived in the shadows for decades. He had survived all this time by living off the grid, and I suspect he would have been content to remain there if possible rather than risk being obliterated without warning one day by a drone strike, like most of his comrades-in-arms. No, it was unlikely that vanity was driving Ramzy. Rather, I was fairly certain he had something to say at this moment, something he had never said before, and that he was planning on using me to say it.

For the past several weeks, I had been picking up rumors that Ramzy and his rebel forces had captured a cache of chemical weapons in Syria. The Assad regime had supposedly allowed international forces to destroy its remaining weapons of mass destruction, but it was widely believed that at least some stockpiles had been hidden. Now one well-placed American intelligence source told me his agency had picked up frantic radio traffic three weeks earlier between Syrian army forces loyal to Assad saying one of their WMD storage facilities not far from Aleppo had just been overrun. The Syrian forces were desperately calling for air strikes, but while the air support had come, it was too late. Quite separately, another source, this one in a foreign intelligence service, confided to me that a high-ranking Syrian general had just defected to either Turkey or Jordan (he wouldn't say which) and claimed some al Qaeda breakaway faction

had seized several tons of chemical weapons south of Aleppo within the last few weeks.

Was it true? I had no idea. All I knew for certain was that nothing of the sort had yet been reported in the Arab press or anywhere in the West. No one at the White House, State, or the Pentagon would confirm or deny my discreet inquiries. Part of this, I suspected, was to prevent the widespread panic that was sure to break out if it became known that one of the world's most dangerous terrorist organizations now had control of some of the world's most dangerous weapons.

Of course, I hadn't raised any of this in my e-mails to my source in Syria. I'd simply repeated my long-standing requests for an interview. But I was increasingly certain this was why Ramzy wanted to talk now, when he had never talked publicly before. He wanted the world to know what he had. He wanted the American people and their president to know. What's more, I had to believe he savored the irony of Ayman al-Zawahiri hearing through an American newspaper that one of his former advisors had hit the mother lode—that an al Qaeda offshoot finally had possession of the very weapons al Qaeda itself had been desperately seeking for nearly two decades.

I hoped I was right. Not that Ramzy had the WMD, mind you, but that he had a story—an important story—he wanted to communicate through me. It was, I suspected, my only hope of survival. After all, this was a man who cut people's throats for sport, Americans' most of all. Only if he really did want to use me to communicate a big story would my colleagues and I be safe.

It was no wonder no one I knew wanted me to head into Syria to track this man down and speak with him face to face. Even the colleagues I was about to meet were deeply uncomfortable. I certainly understood why. And I didn't blame them. What we were about to do wasn't normal. But I—and they—were part of "the tribe," part of an elite group, a small cadre of foreign correspondents whose lives were devoted to covering wars and rumors of war, revolutions, chaos,

and bloodshed of all kinds. It's what I'd gone to school for, nearly twenty years earlier. It's what I'd been doing for the *New York Daily News* and the Associated Press and the *Times* ever since. I loved it. I lived for it.

Some said it was an addiction. They said people like me were adrenaline junkies. Maybe I was. But that's not the way I thought of it. To me, risk was part of my job, and it was a job my colleagues told me I wasn't half-bad at. I had won an award for covering a Delta Force firefight in Kandahar, Afghanistan, with another *Times* reporter in 2001. And I had even won a Pulitzer for a series of articles I wrote in 2003 when I was embedded with the First Brigade of the U.S. Army's Third Infantry Division as they stormed Baghdad. The awards were gratifying. But I didn't do this to win awards. I did it because I loved it. I did it because I couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Most reporters couldn't wait to get out of Afghanistan or Iraq after the initial invasions and the establishment of the new governments. But I repeatedly requested longer tours. I loved getting to know our boys who suited up for battle every day. I loved interviewing the Iraqis our troops were training and taking into battle. I also loved having beers and trading gossip with the spooks from Langley and MI6 and every other intelligence agency on the planet who had come to play in the Big Game. Most of all, though, I found it absolutely fascinating to slip away from the Green Zone and get out in the hinterland and risk life and limb trying to hook up with one insurgent commander or another to get his story. *All* the news that's fit to print, right? I wasn't there to regurgitate whatever the flacks at State or the Pentagon tried to spoon-feed me. I was there to find the real stories.

So whatever lay ahead, I was absolutely determined to head into Syria. I was going after the story. Not a single person I had confided in approved of what I was doing. But I wanted to think that one would have. I wanted to believe my grandfather would have been

proud of me. At least he would have understood what I was doing and why.

A. B. Collins covered the Second World War for United Press International. Then he worked for the Associated Press all over the globe. To be perfectly honest, he was my idol. Maybe it was because of all the stories he used to tell me when I was growing up. That man could really spin a good yarn. I was in awe of the way he had seemed to have met everyone and seen everything. Then again, maybe I simply loved him because of all the ice cream Pop-Pop used to buy my older brother and me whenever he and Grammie Collins came to visit. Or maybe it was because my father had left us when I was only twelve, and I never saw him again—none of us did—and Pop-Pop was the only man I really had in my life growing up. It was he who took me fishing on Eagle Lake and hiking in Acadia National Park. It was he who taught me how to use his collection of rifles and took me on hunting trips all over Maine and even up in Canada. Whatever the reason, I loved the man with every fiber of my being, and for as long as I could remember, I wanted to do what he did, to be what he was. Now here I was, about to touch down in Beirut, a city he had worked in and lived in and loved dearly.

Maybe the olive didn't fall far from the tree.

Then again, my grandfather had lived a long and fruitful life and despite his many adventures had died in his bed, in his sleep, in his old age. At the moment, I had no presumption of meeting such a quiet and peaceful fate.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



When I started writing *The Third Target*, I had never heard of ISIS.

I knew I wanted to write a series about the threat Radical Islam poses not only to the U.S., Israel, and the West but also to our moderate Arab/Muslim allies in the Middle East and to Arab Christians in the region. I knew I wanted my main character to be a *New York Times* foreign correspondent who sees a grave new threat coming up over the horizon. I also knew I wanted to write about a serious and believable enemy. I just didn't know which one it should be.

To determine that, as I began to sketch my outline in early 2013 I posed two sets of "What if?" questions.

First: What if Radical Islamic extremists were able to seize control of a cache of chemical weapons in Syria that were overlooked or not reported to the U.N. disarmament teams? Which terrorist group would be in a position to do that? What would they do with such weapons of mass destruction once they grabbed hold of them? Who might they use such weapons against? And how might the powers in the region and the international community respond?

Second: What if Radical Islamic extremists chose to target the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan? What if they tried to seize control of her territory and people to establish a violent caliphate on the East Bank of the Jordan River? What would be the implications for the rest of the Middle East? What would be the implications for America, Israel, Europe, and the rest of the world? And again, which Radical group might be inclined to launch such an attack and be in a position to do so?

I knew going into this project that few Americans spend much time—if any—thinking about the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. But over the years I have come to regard Jordan as one of the most important Arab allies the West has in the epicenter.

Since ascending to the throne in 1999, Jordan's King Abdullah II has proven himself to be a moderate, peaceful, wise Reformer who has been a true friend of the United States, Great Britain, and NATO. He has also maintained the peace treaty with Israel and a healthy relationship with the Jewish State, a relationship that began with secret contacts between his father, the late King Hussein, and Israeli leaders as far back as the 1960s. The present king has been actively engaged in combatting the terrorist activity of Radicals via his military, police, and intelligence networks. He has also sought to combat the ideology of Radicals by building a global network of Islamic scholars and clerics who reject the takfiris, violent extremists, and heretics, and who are proactively trying to define Islam as a peaceful, tolerant religion. At the same time, he has worked hard to make Jordan a safe haven for both Muslims and Arab Christians fleeing from war and persecution in the region. What's more, it has become increasingly clear that a safe, secure, and moderate Jordan is the absolutely essential cornerstone of any serious future comprehensive peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians.

As I went down the list of Radical states and terrorist organizations in the region that might be able to gain control of WMD in Syria and might choose to attack Jordan, I conferred with a range of Middle East experts, current and former intelligence officials, and retired U.S. and Israeli diplomats and military leaders. I asked who they thought was the next big threat likely to rise in the region. Without exception, they all told me, "ISIS."

At the time, neither I nor my publisher, Tyndale House, had heard of this group. Yet the more I learned, the more convinced I became that in the following five years or so, ISIS could actually become

a global threat and a household name. Indeed, the ISIS threat has metastasized even faster. Now the whole world has heard of ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham), which is also known as ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), or simply the Islamic State.

Indeed, as I write this author's note, events are moving quickly. The president of the United States has declared ISIS a threat to our national security. Several Sunni Muslim Arab countries have joined a military and political coalition to "degrade and defeat" ISIS. All eyes are now on the epicenter, but it remains unclear just how successful the strategies employed against ISIS by the U.S. and our allies will be. I pray the events I have written about here never take place. I fear, however, that some world leaders may still underestimate the threat. If so, the consequences could be devastating. I hope that those who are able to act will do so before it is too late.

This book is obviously a work of fiction, but I tried to set the fictional events in as realistic a framework as possible. To that end, I included references to a number of real-life people and events. Journalist A. B. Collins is a figment of my imagination, but the assassination of King Abdullah I that he witnessed in Jerusalem in 1951 is a real, historical event. Abu Khalif is a fictional terrorist, but you may see some similarities to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the real-life head of ISIS. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the real-life leader of al-Qaeda, has not been assassinated by the U.S. government—yet—but the tension between his terrorist organization and ISIS is real.

Of course, the most obvious real-life character in the book is King Abdullah II, Jordan's current monarch. I considered fictionalizing him, as I did the leaders of the U.S., Israel, and the Palestinian Authority. After all, it is always sensitive to write about a current leader in dangerous times, and I certainly do not want to offend His Majesty or the Royal Court. But in the end I chose to include King Abdullah II as a character in this novel primarily because I thought it would not be as effective to write about the emerging threat to

Jordan without including him directly. People need to understand who this king is, and why he is uniquely important in Jordan's past, present, and future. I hope readers will come to appreciate just how dangerous the region and the world would be if this king is toppled or violently overthrown. To help in this process, several of the things the king says in chapter 50 of this book, for example, are actually direct quotes (or close adaptations) from King Abdullah's excellent 2011 book, *Our Last Best Chance: The Pursuit of Peace in a Time of Peril*. I highly recommend that nonfiction work if you are interested in a true insider's perspective on current events in the epicenter.

Other books I used for research include:

*Uneasy Lies the Head: The Autobiography of His Majesty King Hussein I of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*

*Fighting Terrorism: How Democracies Can Defeat Domestic and International Terrorists* by Benjamin Netanyahu

*Hussein and Abdullah: Inside the Jordanian Royal Family* by Randa Habib

*Lion of Jordan: The Life of King Hussein in War and Peace* by Avi Shlaim

*King's Counsel: A Memoir of War, Espionage, and Diplomacy in the Middle East* by Jack O'Connell

*Son of Hamas: A Gripping Account of Terror, Betrayal, Political Intrigue, and Unthinkable Choices* by Mosab Hassan Yousef

*Once an Arafat Man: The True Story of How a PLO Sniper Found a New Life* by Tass Saada

*The Second Arab Awakening and the Battle for Pluralism* by Marwan Muasher

*Kill Khalid: The Failed Mossad Assassination of Khalid  
Mishal and the Rise of Hamas* by Paul McGeough

*From Beirut to Jerusalem* by Thomas L. Friedman

*The Case for Democracy: The Power of Freedom to  
Overcome Tyranny and Terror* by Natan Sharansky and  
Ron Dermer

*The Fight for Jerusalem: Radical Islam, the West, and the  
Future of the Holy City* by Dore Gold

As part of the research process I undertook for this novel, I had the incredible opportunity to travel to Jordan in the spring of 2014 to meet with several senior officials. While I have traveled to Jordan numerous times over the years, this was a particularly special trip. I have a deep love and respect for the people of Jordan. This has only grown over time, but never more so than on that trip.

Special thanks to everyone who made time for me and shared with me their perspective as I did research for this book, both on that research trip and others. Not everyone I met and spoke with will agree with what I have written here. Nevertheless, I am enormously grateful for their insights, wisdom, and kindness, and I hope the book is richer for what I learned from them. Among those to whom I would like to express my deep gratitude are:

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His Royal Highness Prince Ghazi Bin Muhammad, senior  
advisor to His Majesty King Abdullah II

H.E. Nasser Judeh, Jordan's foreign minister

H.E. Hussein Hazza' Al-Majali, Jordan's interior minister

H.E. Nidal Qatamin, Jordan's minister of labor and tourism

H.E. Alia Bouran, Jordan's ambassador to the United States

James Woolsey, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency

Porter Goss, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency

Danny Yatom, former director of the Mossad

Hon. Dore Gold, former Israeli ambassador to the United Nations and president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

Yechiel Horev, former Israeli director of security of the Defense Establishment

Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy

I'm also deeply grateful for the aides, advisors, and colleagues of those mentioned above who were so generous with their time and insights. There are others who were enormously helpful that I am not able to mention publicly. To them, as well, I say thank you.

Writing and publishing a novel is a team effort, and I am so grateful for a number of people who have helped me on this project as with so many other books.

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My blessed parents, Leonard and Mary Rosenberg

My excellent November Communications team, June Meyers and Nancy Pierce

My four wonderful sons—Caleb, Jacob, Jonah, and Noah

My dear, sweet, and amazing wife, Lynn, who has blessed me every moment of every day since we first met in college at Syracuse University and has continued to bless me beyond belief through twenty-five fantastic years of marriage! What an adventure we have been on, Linnie—may it never end!

Most of all, I am grateful to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who loves so deeply the people of Israel, and Jordan, and Iraq, and Syria, and all the people of the epicenter, and for some unfathomable reason loves me and my family, too.