

Intelligence in Public Media

Red Line: The Unraveling of Syria and America's Race to Destroy the Most Dangerous Arsenal in the World

Joby Warrick (Doubleday, 2021) 346 pages, illustrations, maps, notes, index, list of principal characters.

Reviewed by David A. Welker

Joby Warrick provides a highly readable, troubling account of Syrian President Assad's use of chemical warfare (CW) against his own people and the US response. Focusing chiefly on the ebb and flow these major events, Warrick unfortunately but understandably offers readers only a general glimpse into the important role played by the US Intelligence Community.

Warrick begins in a series of flashbacks explaining how Assad obtained chemical weapons and why he may have chosen to use them as he did. Most significantly for intelligence officers, the prologue begins in 1988 with a CIA asset whom Warrick calls "the chemist" or "Ayman," the US-educated scientist heading Syria's expanding CW program. Highlighting the asset's contribution by describing passing CIA a sample of his program's latest nerve agent, this foundational account ends with the asset's arrest during a corruption investigation and panicked confession of spying for the United States, resulting in his execution in 2001. Following the "how," Warrick moves on to the "why" of Assad's CW use: presumed retaliation for the bombing of a Syrian Ministry of Defense building on May 10, 2012, by domestic oppositionists emboldened in part by the domestic chaos unleashed during the 2011 Arab Spring political uprisings.

From there, *Red Line* launches into the first of its three sections: a series of CW strikes by Assad's regime against cities harboring opposition forces. Warrick's prose and writing is strongest here, a page-turning, heart-wrenching account of these attacks in which innocent civilians are painfully targeted and killed. Although sometimes hard to read, Warrick clearly wants readers to confront the reality of these weapons, what they do to the human body, because understanding the horrific way they kill is key to readers understanding what motivates US and international organizations (IO) officials, chiefly the UN and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), to act as they do.

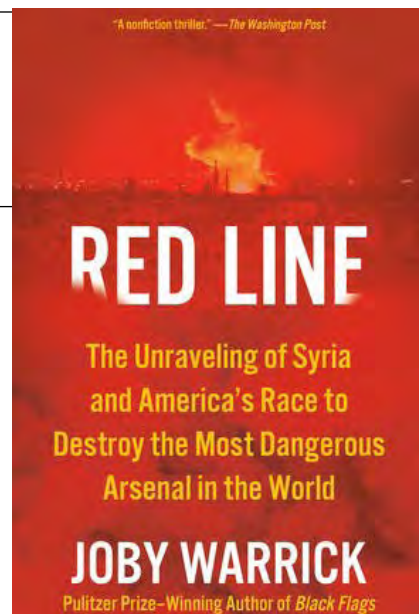
Warrick does a nice job tackling these issues in the next section, describing in comprehensible detail how

these US and IO officials and organizations rise to face this challenge, using not military force but rather diplomacy and technology to confront Syria's CW use and eliminate these dangerous weapons of war in 2014. Pivoting from the Obama

White House, to the United Nations, to the OPCW's Netherlands headquarters, to two different CW use investigation teams on the ground in Syria, Warrick adroitly recounts the leadership and diplomatic story that led to Syria willingly giving up the most threatening of its CW arsenal. Warrick's accounts of the on-the-ground teams' harrowing experiences similarly is page-turning stuff, benefiting from having interviewed the actual participants.

Paralleling this is the technology story, moving from Defense Department laboratories in Edgewood, Maryland, to the converted cargo ship *Cape Ray* in port and at sea, to partly cooperative Syrian officials preparing their stockpile for destruction. Through skillful narrative writing, Warrick brings this complex and potentially confusing material to life, keeping the reader mostly engaged alongside the more easily told and understood diplomatic account. Still, some portions of this section drag a bit and readers will sympathize with the *Cape Ray* crew's anticipation while waiting at sea for approval to "get on with it."

The book's final section turns to the easily overlooked subtitle element—"the unraveling of Syria"—recounting the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and its efforts to develop chemical weapons. If the previous two sections seemed a bit triumphantly positive to readers, a story of good overcoming evil, this concluding section undoes all



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that, particularly the author's slow-motion demonstration that these developments largely negated the well-meaning US and IO efforts recounted to this point. Warrick further describes Iran's malign, selfish motives that enabled and exploited this chaos and Russia's similarly self-serving turn from partner in eliminating Assad's CW stocks to becoming the means of Assad's 2017 sarin strike that proved the US and IOs had been fooled in 2014.

In the end, in Warrick's account no one emerges in a positive light from the systemic failure that is Syria in the early 21st century: not two US administrations, not the international community, not other powerful nations or nominal regional US allies, and certainly not Syria's self-serving, failed leaders. In fact, if Assad and ISIS are

the villains of Warrick's depressing account, then unfocused, distracted, well-meaning Western leaders are their unwitting enablers. The only "heroes" in *Red Line* are the common folks trying to survive and confront Assad's CW terror, whether victims in Syria, activists alerting the world, or civil servants doing their best to stop future chemical attacks.

Red Line is an engaging, terrifying story of what happens when leaders so little value human life that they are willing to indiscriminately kill innocents and enemies alike as if they were insects. It is an episode every intelligence officer should study, and Warrick's book is a good first stop on that journey.



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