

‘City of Ghosts’ Puts Citizen Faces on Syrian Crisis

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Syria has become a distant place, disconnected from the wider world through civil war and extreme sociopolitical instability, including the takeover of some regions by ISIS (the Islamic State). “City of Ghosts” looks at Raqqa, a Syrian city with the iron boot of ISIS on their necks, and the citizens who risk their lives to tell that story to the world.

The director and storyteller is Matthew Heineman, whose “Cartel Land” was nominated for the Best Documentary Oscar in 2016. He relies on the profiles of the “Citizen Journalists” from Raqqa to expose the situation – men with extreme loyalty to their fellow citizens – who continue to find the stories and leak the atrocities of ISIS to a world that must know, to bring about any change. The documentary is eye-opening, especially if your knowledge of the situation is at the bigger picture level. We’ve heard of the instability, the refugees and “Syria” in the background of our lives, but “City of Ghosts” understands it at a human level. The wolf is at the door, and it is traveling farther and coming closer.

In 2011, protests against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad began, with activists demanding transparency and democratic reforms (the al-Assad family had been ruling the country since 1971). These protests escalated into armed insurrection, and factions broke off into a civil war, both for/against the al-Assad regime and against each other. One of the rebel groups is ISIS (the Islamic State), and they began to get a foothold into certain regions.



Citizen Journalists Oversees Raqqa, Syria, in 'City of Ghosts'

Photo credit: IFC Films

As portrayed in the film, the City of Ghosts is Raqqa, a pawn in the ongoing fighting between ISIS and opposition rebels. ISIS is a totalitarian governing and social force, and the killing of any suspected opposition is random, rapid and voluminous. Enter the citizen journalist... "City of Ghosts" profiles the men who risk their lives within and outside the city, to inform the world through their organization "Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently." (RBSS).

Again, with our day-to-day lives, and the distraction of a circus-like atmosphere in our own government, it's easy to turn a blind eye to the rest of the world. The Syrian civil war has now lasted for six years, and 6 million refugees (which is a crisis of its own). "City of Ghosts" lifts the curtain onto the Raqqa circumstance, which at a street level is simply – as they have characterized – a slaughter. The film makes the old saw, "the pen is mightier than the sword" more crucial than ever, and the efforts of RBSS is exposing more and more.

The story is told through the citizen journalists themselves, who eventually had to escape their homeland, but still maintain the information flow from agents inside the city. The names of the profiled are Aziz, Hamound, Hussam and Mohamed, all in their 20's and early 30's, all with the haunted sadness of much older men. They poignantly monitor laptop computers, hoping for another bit of information – sometimes tragically personal – usually transported through zip drives that somehow get outside the city (ISIS has cut off internet access). Through their efforts, other media have used their information, and the RBSS continues to defeat their enemy by revealing their atrocities to the world.



The Haunted Lives of RBSS in ‘City of Ghosts’

Photo credit: IFC Films

“Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently” emphasizes the word “silently” in the organization’s title, because when the infighting becomes about the complex web of pro and anti al-Assad factions – the Free Syrian Army, the Army of the Mujahedeen, the Sham Corps (Sunnis) – the world cannot seem to muster interest for the the remoteness, peoples and intricacies of the conflict. But ISIS is now asserting itself towards the western world, in a series of attacks in France and England. What RBBS is expressing is that the wolf that has swallowed Raqqa, may soon be knocking down all doors.

The philosophies of religion, governments, belief systems and wealth are clashing at a monumental scale at this point in the 21st Century. Too many people are willing to die or kill for the “honor” of those philosophies. Whether it is a god or the almighty dollar, when we’re all dead it all simply won’t exist any more. Without a strategy, exposure or push back, the “City of Ghosts” might someday be the whole f**king world.

“City of Ghosts” continued its limited release in Chicago on on July 21st. See local listings for theaters and show times, and for more screening information, [click here](#). [19] Directed by Matthew Heineman. Rated “R”



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