

The Last Days of ISIS' Capital: Airstrikes if You Stay, Land Mines if You Flee

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

A Times reporter travels to Raqqa, the wounded heart of the Islamic State, and finds residents trapped by airstrikes, artillery fire and land mines.

FULL TEXT

RAQQA, Syria —Every few minutes, a deafening boom. Then a whistle of artillery. Occasionally, the clatter of a pickup truck, piled with soldiers, advancing to the front line.

This was the neighborhood, on the western edge of Raqqa, the Islamic State's de facto capital, where I met Hassan Hashem Ramadan on a scorching Thursday in late August.

He had been detained and flogged three times while the Islamic State ruled his city: Either his beard was too short or his pants weren't short enough. When he tried to escape across the Euphrates River, he was marched at gunpoint into the city center. Finally, on a Tuesday morning in August, his brother was hit by shrapnel from forces fighting the Islamic State.

Mr. Ramadan carried him in his arms, first to the hospital, then to the grave. Then he fled.

"Last few days," he said, "I was just taking the wounded to the hospital or burying the dead. That's all I was doing."

He was one of dozens of people who described to me life in the waning days of the capital of the caliphate, the symbolic heart of the territory the Islamic State sought to turn into its brutal version of God's rule on earth.

American military forces and their allies have all but encircled the city, reclaiming, they say, more than half of it. The Islamic State, also known as ISIS, is retreating, but not without a tenacious fight, trapping civilians in their last few enclaves.

Fewer than 25,000 civilians remain in what had been a city of 300,000. Those who fled described a death vise of airstrikes, artillery fire and land mines that litter every exit route. Also thirst: there's not much water left to drink inside the city, they said.

I found them during a six-day trip from the Kurdish area of Iraq into northeastern Syria. They were living in fear and uncertainty, either along the dusty bombed-out roads leading out of the city center, or in a transit camp two-and-a-half hours north, or lying in hospital beds further north, their bodies broken.

A doctor, a seamstress, children, their lives were frozen in a state of awful suspension. They couldn't say where they would go next, or under whose rule they would live.

In a western Raqqa neighborhood where ISIS had recently been routed, Fawza Hamedi lay on a mattress on the floor of her sister's house, wincing in pain. She had tried to get out of Raqqa weeks ago. But a woman ahead of her stepped on a mine and died instantly. Shrapnel punctured Ms. Hamedi's back and legs, an ISIS sniper shot at her, and then ISIS fighters dragged her away to a makeshift jail. Land mine victims are hastily buried there, she said. The smell is still in her nose.

Two women appeared in the house to tell their stories. One said ISIS had beheaded her husband for helping a Christian family escape. Another showed me her swollen hand. An ISIS man had cracked her wrist with the back of his gun, breaking her bones. Her crime was to be seen in the market without full face cover.

Outside, a young man said his father had been beheaded for plotting to join an anti-ISIS militia. He knew the man who did it. “Why don’t you kill him?” a neighbor prodded.

“Let him leave the city and I will,” he said. “I will slaughter him.”

The neighborhood was largely deserted. A primary school had been converted into a military base by the main United States allies fighting ISIS, the Kurdish and Arab militias known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, or S.D.F.

At midday, temperatures soared past 104 degrees Fahrenheit. You could hear the roar of a fighter jet circling over the city center, followed by a thud, then a plume of white smoke rising and spreading into a cloudless blue sky.

The American airstrikes pose a new danger to civilians, killing an estimated 800 people since the United States-led coalition began its assault on the city in June, according to the Syrian Observatory, an independent group, and more than 150 in August alone, according to the United Nations.

Those who manage to get out often have a haunted, crazed look in their eyes. Memories taunt them, both good and bad.

Khawla al-Khallaf, a seamstress, lived near Naim Square, where families used to stroll at sundown and the loudspeakers played the songs of the Lebanese crooner Fairuz.

Now she can only think of the heads displayed on stakes there. Among the beheaded was one of her husband’s relatives, an imam at a city mosque who had defied the Islamic State’s edicts.

“It’s no longer called Naim Square,” she said. “It’s called Hell Square.”

For a year, she and her family moved from one town to another.

“I wish we had died in 2010 instead of being humiliated like this,” she said.

She looked out at the broken road that ran alongside an empty tent assigned to her family, just beyond city limits. A funeral procession for a fallen Kurdish fighter hurtled down the road.

As evening fell, a convoy of armored personnel carriers advanced to the front line, carrying American troops. The Trump administration has not said how many troops are deployed in Syria, but you see them across northern Syria, from the banks of the Tigris River in the far eastern corner, along the border with Turkey, and down into Raqqa.

To live in a war zone is to calibrate your behavior according to the rules of the armed men who rule the patch you live in. You have to mind what color head scarf you can wear, or how long your pants are.

For the men who come out of Islamic State territory and into the transit camp in the S.D.F.-controlled town of Ayn Issa, a two-and-a-half hour drive north of Raqqa city, one of the first orders of business is to file into a tin-roofed barber shop.

The Abdallah cousins, tall, broad shouldered men with scruffy beards that hide their necks, settle into a chair, one after the other. They had fled Deir al-Zour, a city further down the Euphrates River, where the Syrian army claimed to have broken an ISIS blockade this week.

The men said they left their wives and children behind because it was impossible for the family to walk all night.

“I was crying,” said Mahmood Abdallah, 38, a truck driver. “My wife was crying.”

He kept only his mustache. His beard fell on the floor.

His cousin, Khallaf, got rid of it all. He said he hadn’t shaved in six months, obeying Islamic State edicts.

“On the outside I was doing what they asked,” Khallaf said.

It was impossible to know who among the men at the barber shop, if any, had been drawn to the Islamic State. The S.D.F. spokesman, Mostapha Bali, said his troops had detained many Islamic State members trying to blend in among the displaced civilians.

A young man named Ali, who wanted to keep a pencil line of a beard along his jawbone, still bristled at the ISIS rules.

“Even your face is not yours,” he said. “They want to control it.”

Many of the wounded who escape Raqqa end up at the hospital in Tal Abyad, a two-hour drive further north, where the Islamic State once detained its prisoners in a cage at the main traffic circle.

Doctors Without Borders, the aid group that treats the wounded here, has warned that many wounded may be trapped inside the city, unable to pass through the gantlet. By the time they arrive, the aid group says, their wounds are infected, and limbs harder to save.

Some of them find a familiar face in Dr. Muhammad Ahmed Saleh, former director of the government hospital in Raqqa. He worked for more than a year there under Islamic State rule.

“Their Kalashnikovs were always over our heads,” he said. Like so many Raqqawis, he had chaos written on his face: gray flyaway hair, a day’s stubble, frenzied eyes.

“Anytime you could be beheaded,” he said. “I tried to discuss things with them. They don’t believe anything other than what they believe, even if it’s facts.”

At the hospital entrance sat a young woman on a stretcher, her shattered leg held together by a metal brace. She had been inside a tent on the banks of the Euphrates during an aerial bombardment.

In nearly every recovery room, there were children. They are often the first to discover homemade bombs, in toys, teapots, under a carpet.

A 6-year-old girl, Judy, sat upright in bed, her back and abdomen chewed by shrapnel from a land mine; her three brothers had died.

A 4-year-old girl, Ahed, lay with her head on her mother’s lap. They were walking out of Raqqa at dawn the day before when they heard a loud blast. The girl fractured her right leg. Her father had died days before in an airstrike.

Another mother walked from bed to bed. Five of her daughters had been wounded in the same blast.

Doctors huddled around another bed, delivering news to a man waking up from surgery. They told him that his wife had died as they tried to escape Raqqa, and that they had to amputate both his legs.

His 5-year-old daughter lay in the next bed, sleeping. Her left leg too was shattered. The good news, the doctors said: they had managed to save it.

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