

The Ruins of Raqqa

Around three months have passed since the Syrian Democratic Forces launched a military operation to wrest back control of Raqqa from Islamic State. These forces are backed directly by the US-led international coalition, and they have so far succeeded in reclaiming half the city. But this counter-attack has resulted in the deaths of more than 1,300 civilians and the destruction of 70% of the city.

Those of us in Raqqa who have survived the assault are facing a struggle to stay alive against a complete absence of all the basic components of life. Electricity and water have been cut off since the second week of the military operation, and the city is completely isolated. Besieged residents have no idea what is happening even in adjacent neighborhoods, let alone the rest of the world – they just hear the sound of shelling and gun battles.

Nobody can leave their street because of the mines and IED explosives that have been placed around the edges of neighborhoods – and because of the Isis snipers who target anyone moving from one district to another.

Residents relay information by yelling across the street to each other, sharing news of airstrikes and families who have been killed. Even walking the streets is difficult because of the constant shelling. Civilians have opened passages in the walls to move from house to house. They have to get water from old wells in the besieged neighborhoods – wells that were closed back in the day but are now sorely needed.

Normal life in the city has stopped. Nobody goes out to work, and the nature of my own work has changed. I used to walk the streets and take pictures and videos, or distribute pamphlets against Isis. But today I am a prisoner of the street I live in, confined to sending news of the dead, the shelling, and the outcome of battles.

When the airstrikes stop, one person from each family goes out to look for food in the homes that have been bombed and whose owners have been killed. Most of the time they don't find food but bring back news of the dead, along with some items that can be put to use like candles, pieces of wood or medicines.

The grass and weeds that grow on the side of the road constitute the nutrition of half of those besieged in the city. People make soup out of these weeds and put dried-up bread in to it so it is easier to eat. The soup tastes extremely bitter and children initially refuse to even try it, but it's the only food some of them have. They feel nauseated the first time they taste it and then they get used to it.

People use old clothes, furniture and nylon bags to light fires for cooking. There is very limited oil in the city and families use it to fuel electricity generators for at least some lighting. The fuel I had has almost run out, so I have gone out to parked cars that were damaged in the fighting to take their batteries – if they are still working – to power the device I use to access the internet. I feel guilty for stealing batteries and I wish I could get the chance to speak to the owners to ask their forgiveness.

I also feel guilty because I do not share electricity with my neighbors: I am trying to ration my use of fuel and batteries until the end of the battle, and I cannot reveal what I do to those around me. I have no other choice.

Some families gather in the evenings in one of their homes, and every family brings the food that they have to share, even if it is just grass soup: often that is the only meal they eat that day. These gatherings of families aren't just a way of sharing food; they also save fuel and candles and offer an opportunity to enjoy some time together, forgetting what is happening outside, particularly



for the children whose families are trying to shield them from the war.

Children will usually sit around a person who tells them stories about how near the end of the war is, that they will be able to go back to their schools and see their friends again, and there will be food in the city once more.

Whenever anybody brings a new item to these gatherings, people ask where they got it from. The answer is usually from a home of one of the families killed in the fighting. Everyone feels guilty about that. I once told them about a TV drama I had watched called *The Blacklist*, and a quote from it that said, if you live inside a society built on criminality you must think and act like a criminal. One man asked had we become criminals. After a few moments of silence, a younger man said we were like Robin Hood, not like criminals, and that got a laugh. Another man said he hoped a plane would bomb an Isis house because then we wouldn't feel guilty stealing everything in it.

Diplomats plan for the fall of Isis, as Kurdish and Arab fighters continue to push forward into the terror group's Syrian stronghold

But these gatherings are also a reason for the high number of civilian deaths in the coalition airstrikes. You might have up to 50 people in a single house, mostly women and children, and the coalition don't investigate their targets properly. It's rare to actually find Isis fighters in the neighborhoods still under its control, because they either hide inside homes or spread out in the frontline districts with the Syrian Democratic Forces. Their tactic is to force people living near the frontline to move to neighborhoods that are further away, to prevent them from escaping if they lose control of the area.

The other day a car belonging to Isis disposed of four corpses in one of the city's streets with a sign that said: "They were killed because they tried to escape." I once asked a man with four children why his family stayed in Raqqa and didn't try to run away, and he said that his children had a better chance of surviving by not fleeing. The road out to escape is mined and in the line of sight of snipers. How far could his children run?

I made a promise once to Naji al Jarf and Ibrahim Abdul Qadir, two journalist colleagues, that one day Isis would be gone and that, on that day, I would stand in the city square and distribute sweets. Both journalists are dead, killed by Isis, but I will stay to try to tell the stories of the 5,000 families still surviving in the city, for whom escaping is not an option.

Tim Ramadan
the pseudonym of a Syrian journalist
based in Raqqa

We are
Born like this
Into this
Into these carefully mad wars
Into the sight of broken factory
windows of emptiness
Into bars where people no longer
speak to each other
Into fist fights that end as shootings
and knifings
Born into this
Into hospitals which are so expensive
that it's cheaper to die
Into lawyers who charge so much it's
cheaper to plead guilty
Into a country where the jails are full
and the madhouses closed
Into a place where the masses elevate
fools into rich heroes

~ Charles Bukowski

Private Prison Demands More Prisoners

The nation's second-largest private prison corporation is holding New Mexico politicians hostage by threatening to close unless the state or federal authorities find 300 more prisoners to be warehoused there.

"The company that has operated a private prison in Estancia for nearly three decades has announced it will close the Torrance County Detention Facility and lay off more than 200 employees unless it can find 300 state or federal inmates to fill empty beds within the next 60 days," the Santa Fe New Mexican newspaper reported.

County officials issued a statement citing the threatened closure and emphasized that every virtually every politician in the region, from county officials to state officials to congressmen, were scurrying to save jobs—as opposed to shutting a privatized prison by an operator that has been sued many times for sexual harassment, sexual assault, deaths, use of force, physical assaults, medical care, injuries and civil rights violations.

CoreCivic — formerly known as Corrections Corporation of America Have been in operation there for 27 years .

Most of the 700-bed facility's prisoners were federal inmates. Company officials in local meetings said federal sentencing reforms has led to a shrinking prisoner population.

The company told the county it has been holding fewer federal detainees for Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

CoreCivic owns approximately 58% of all privately owned prison beds in the United States, manage nearly 41% of all privately managed prison beds in the United States, and are currently the second largest private owner and provider of community corrections services in the nation.

The elected officials who have been asked to find more prisoners include New Mexico Democrats, U.S. Sen. Tom Udall and Rep. Michelle Lujan-Grisham. The county said the town of Estancia would annually lose \$700,000 in commerce and the county would lose \$300,000 in tax revenues if the prison closed in late September.

Steven Rosenfeld