

# City of Ghosts (2017)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 23 min.

Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 7; Language 7; Sex/Nudity 5.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*I have seen the wicked oppressing, and towering like a cedar of Lebanon.*

*Psalms 37:35*

Director Matthew Heineman's documentary is about the work of "Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently" (RBSS), an anti-ISIS group centered in the Syrian city of Raqqa. Until ISIS took it over, the city on the Euphrates River had been a center for refugees fleeing Syrian Bashar Al Assad's tyranny during the Arab Spring of 2012.

Calling themselves citizen journalists, the RBSS members use their cell phone cameras to capture the horrors perpetrated by the terrorists and disseminate the images to the outside world via social media and news outlets. They hope to counter the lies contained in the slick videos ISIS is sending out to recruit young Muslims in other countries.

RBSS is divided into two groups. Some are able to stay in their home town and do the actual filming and send it to their comrades. Their number has dwindled because even the suspicion that a person does not support ISIS is enough to cause arrest and death. The second group consists of those who have fled to Turkey and Germany where they receive and transmit the material to the wider world. Both groups live nomadic lives out of the necessity of keeping ahead of the jihadists out to

kill them. One of their charismatic leaders, Naji Jerf, is murdered during the course of the film.

The film is full of dramatic stories, such as that of Hamoud and his brother Hassan who have learned that ISIS, unable to catch them, has gone after members of their family still in Raqqa, even though they are not directly involved in RBSS. The two brothers have to endure the unendurable—watching a video of the execution of their father. They are visibly moved, but the barbaric act only hardens their resolve to keep on exposing the lies of ISIS.

There are many images of executions, so viewers should beware. Those murders become more poignant when we see them in the company of the brave citizen journalists, who sometimes, as in the case of the brothers, know the victims. The men (and occasional woman) are shown bedraggled and tired, nerves on edge, often smoking one cigarette after another. Yet they keep on because of the importance of their mission.

This film will both further inform us of what is transpiring in Syria (and in parts of Turkey and Germany), but also speak to those who ignorantly claim that Muslims are not doing enough to counteract the jihadist terrorists. Here is a brave group of men who have given more of themselves than anyone anywhere to expose the horror known as ISIS. (With the possible exception of the string of journalists murdered in Russia.)

“In my opinion, a camera is more powerful than a weapon,” one of them says. The movie proves this, and also should serve as Defense Exhibit #1 in the current War on Journalism waged by certain powers that be in our government out to destroy the credibility of the Fifth Estate. We really do need journalist as a bulwark for liberty. The story of the citizen journalists is well-told in this important documentary. One of them comments wryly, “I’m just hoping to die of natural causes.” Let’s hope they all do.

*This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the September issue of Visual Parables.*