



## City of Ghosts Discussion Guide

Director: Matthew Heineman

Year: 2017

Time: 92 min

### You might know this director from:

Cartel Land (2015)

Escape Fire: The Fight to Rescue American Healthcare (2012)

Our Time (2009)

## FILM SUMMARY

As Syria crumbled in the hands of its dictator Bashar al-Assad into all-out civil war in 2011, the terrorist group now known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS for short) began to gather supporters across the Middle East. Employing extreme violence and sophisticated propaganda as a means of garnering support while striking fear into the hearts of its enemies, the group finally made an international name for itself in 2014 when it managed to take control of Mosul in Iraq, and Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa in Syria. Around that same time, a group of incredibly brave civilian journalists banded together to form “Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently,” an online news outlet that covertly documents the ongoing atrocities committed by ISIS and disperses the information not only to the rest of the world, but also to its fellow Syrian citizens. An urgent tale of courage in the fight for basic human rights, CITY OF GHOSTS tells their story.

Consisting of mostly anonymous activists, Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently is publicly fronted by a quartet of young men: Aziz, Mohamad, Hamoud, and Hussam. While fellow members of the organization, as well as friends and family members, have been brutally executed for their association with the group, they valiantly remain committed to their cause to bring about positive change in their home country through the use of words and images. Knowing that the truth can discredit even the most pristinely produced propaganda, they continue to risk their lives to share stories from terrorism’s ground zero.

Matthew Heineman’s film stands as a testament to the critical nature of free speech and the leveling of power as technology allows for individual voices to cut through the indoctrinated noise of religious extremism and blind hate. A crucial view of our current moment, CITY OF GHOSTS is a flicker of hope in our darkest hour.

## FILM THEMES

Knowing the power of free press, the citizen journalists of Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently fight terrorism on their home turf using the written word and the photographic image, sharing the truth with their fellow citizens of Raqqa and the world at large.

### CITIZEN JOURNALISTS

With the rise of the internet, the power and impact of any single individual's voice can have on the world has expanded incalculably, and with it, fascist governments and terrorist groups the world over have increasingly lost their grips on the power to control information. The unfathomably brave citizen journalists of Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently utilize this digital freedom to leak the truth of the atrocities taking place in Raqqa at the hands of ISIS. Despite threats to their lives and the lives of their loved ones, they continue reporting, knowing that their work is making a difference in the world.

### HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

When one bears witness to the kind of barbaric atrocities taking place in Syria in areas occupied by ISIS, it's hard to imagine why families choose to stay, but home is a terribly hard thing to abandon. People choose to stay for all kinds of reasons. Many people have lived their entire lives in these towns or villages and can't imagine leaving. Most people live amongst their families and would never leave them behind. Others have received threats against family members if they managed to escape and can't risk putting them in even more danger.

### TERROR REIGNS VIA PUBLIC RELATIONS

In the past, terrorist groups promoted their ideologies and publicized executions and other horrific deeds using crude, no budget videos uploaded to the internet for all to see. In recent years, ISIS has realized the power of the moving image and has invested a lot of time and money in the propagandistic productions they now regularly release. The *Los Angeles Times* [calls it](#) an "increasingly sophisticated cinema of terror... slickly produced narratives of multiple camera angles, eerie tension and polished editing that suggest the filmmakers are versed in Hollywood aesthetics." Videos like these are used not only to send tendrils of fear out into the world, but to entice those on the brink to join ISIS in its campaign of violence and religious extremism.

### KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

People under the oppression of terrorist groups and fascist regimes generally feel powerless to incite change, but as Sir Francis Bacon so presciently wrote back in 1597: *ipsa scientia potestas est* (knowledge itself is power). By documenting the happenings on the ground in Syria and sharing the truth with their community, the citizen journalists of Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently are disseminating power to the people, shifting the balance of authority away from propaganda-producing terrorists and into the hands of families, their neighbors, and the youth that will carry on the future of their culture.

**“Our work shows that we can fight arms with words, and in the end, that is the only way to defeat them, and ISIS knows it...It is afraid most of one idea: Liberty.”**

Abdalaziz Alhamza

**“In my opinion, a camera is more powerful than a weapon. And that is why whoever holds the camera is stronger.”**

Hamoud al-Mousa



## FILM FACTS:

- CITY OF GHOSTS had its world premiere at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival where it won the Candescent Award, which honors a powerful social issue film that has been supported during production by the Sundance Institute's Documentary Film Program.
- Matthew Heineman's film went on to screen at prestigious international festivals like CPH:DOX, where it won the Politiken's Audience Award; Sheffield International Documentary Festival, where it was honored with the Grand Jury Prize; and the Jerusalem Film Festival, where it collected the In Spirit for Freedom Award.
- [Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently](#) is a citizen journalist group that formed in 2014 to report news on the Syrian war and human rights abuses by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Their goal is to raise awareness about violence committed against Syrian civilians by going undercover, providing photo and video evidence, as well as social media reporting.
- CITY OF GHOSTS focuses on three founding Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently members—Abdalaziz Alhamza, Hamoud al-Mousa, Hussam Eesa—and a fourth, a former high school teacher turned reporter named Mohamed who joined the group shortly after its formation.
- When Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently began there were 17 founding members, each of whom lived their entire lives in Raqqa. Since its inception, many have been killed by ISIL, including key members Al-Moutaz Bellah Ibrahim, Ahmad Mohammed al-Mousa, Naji Jerf, and Ibrahim Abdul Qadir. The latter two were murdered in Turkey, far outside of ISIS territory.
- At the same time that Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently started to be noticed by the international media, the media also began to notice the increasingly sophisticated propaganda productions that ISIS was releasing into the world. Major outlets like [Vice](#), the [Los Angeles Times](#), [The Guardian](#), and [Slate](#) all filed major reports on the terrorist group's surprising media savvy in 2014 and 2015.
- In October 2017, director Matthew Heineman began shooting his first fiction film, a war drama titled [A PRIVATE WAR](#). The film's official synopsis states, "American war correspondent, Marie Colvin, reports from conflicts including Kosovo, Chechnya, East Timor and the Middle East."

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Donate** to the citizen journalist group [Raqqa is Being Slaughtered Silently](#) who risk their lives to report to the world.
2. **Protect** your right to free speech. Groups like the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) fight to maintain your first amendment right to a free media that "functions as a watchdog that can investigate and report on government wrongdoing."
3. **Join** the [Battle for Net Neutrality](#). Net neutrality is the principle that Internet providers should not control what we see and do online.
4. **Share** your own stories. Take to social media, start a blog, or contribute to your own local media outlets. This is [citizen journalism](#) in action!

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**