



IN THIS ISSUE

RAQQA IN RUINS: Former ISIS Capital Reclaimed

Duration: 18:36

Raqqa was once a thriving city in Syria; until 2014, when the jihadist group ISIS declared it as its self-proclaimed capital. In 2017, the battle for Raqqa began with Russian and Syrian bombers providing air strikes and the U.S. led Syrian Democratic Forces on the ground. The battle took many months, but eventually ISIS was driven out. The city is 80 percent destroyed and booby traps remain everywhere. Within days of liberation, CBC's senior correspondent Adrienne Arseneault and cameraman Jean-François Bisson travelled to Raqqa to see what remains.

***Please note:** This program contains disturbing images and subject matter. Viewer discretion is advised.*

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CBC NEWS and Curio.ca

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Video Review

Before Viewing

Review the timeline on [page 8](#) showing key dates in the conflict in and around the military struggle for control of Raqqa.



Working with a partner, complete a K-W-L chart for this topic:

- In the first column of the chart, write down what you and your partner believe that you **KNOW** about this topic.
- In a second column, list some of the ideas and events related to this topic that you **WANT** to know more about.
- Leave a final column blank until after you have viewed the video.

Viewing

1. How did ISIS use the stadium in Raqqa?
2. Why are some of the doors in the stadium still closed and off-limits?
3. What is Tramadol and how was it used?
4. What does Ismail want to do with the sentencing documents he finds? Why does CBC journalist Adrienne Arseneault encourage him to save the documents?
5. What evidence is there that ISIS fighters may still be hiding out in Raqqa?
6. How old is the ISIS bride who calls herself Umm Ibrahim? What important details about her experience does she describe?
7. How does Umm Ibrahim describe ISIS and what does she hope her story will help people understand?
8. Why are authorities uncertain about what to do with the ISIS brides?
9. How does 70-year-old Measar Haj Ahmad feel about the presence of the ISIS brides?
10. What has Measar Haj Ahmad had to do to care for her grandchildren?
11. How does the former wedding singer, Kaddour Al-Marouf, describe what ISIS did to Raqqa?
12. What are some ways that the people living in the IDP camp "preserve dignity"?

An important note for teachers:

The classroom must promote a safe place for students to discuss sensitive issues. Students' experiences of conflict and war will vary greatly. Prepare students for the topics that will be discussed. Allow for individual reflective time in addition to small group activities where students can safely process their thoughts and emotions.



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After Viewing

1. Return to the K-W-L chart you began before viewing the video. Working with your partner, complete the final column: what did you **LEARN** from the video? Was there any information in the video that surprised you or your partner? Prepare to share your ideas with the class. Create a list of questions that are still unanswered. Consider using this list as a basis for further research.
2. A central theme in this video report is the very uncertain future of the city and the people of Raqqa.
 - o Working with a small group of your peers, brainstorm a list of concerns that must be addressed in the coming months and years. Be sure to take into account the impact of the years of ISIS control of the city and people, as well as the final military battles and air strikes.
 - o Share your group ideas with the class to compile a list.
 - o Which concern do you feel is a top priority? Which concern(s) do you think will present the greatest challenges? Be prepared to explain and share your reasoning.
3. Ismail, the guide for the team of journalists, is understandably struggling with his emotions and, perhaps, his mental health. Which do you think is the more difficult challenge to overcome, the physical or the psychological damage caused by war? Explain your reasoning.



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THE STORY

Minds On – Raqqa in Pictures



Working with a partner, consider the image or images that your teacher has made available (see the links below). Use your framing “tool” to focus in on a particular aspect of each image you explore. For each of the following prompts, share your observations and ideas with your partner:

- Frame the part of the image that first caught your eye
- Frame the part of the picture that tells the viewer what the image is about
- Frame a part of the image that shows a problem, tension or dilemma

As a class, compile a list of those observations. Keep this list as a foundation for your consideration of the story.

Teacher Note:

The framing “tool” refers to two “L”-shaped pieces of cardstock that can be arranged into an adjustable frame. You can access more explanation of this “Crop It” teaching strategy at Facing History Educator Resources: www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/crop-it

Here are two links that provide a good selection of photographs of Raqqa during and after the battle: www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2017/oct/21/the-fall-of-raqqa-syria-isis-in-pictures
www.nytimes.com/2017/10/17/world/middleeast/raqqa-islamic-state.html?smid=tw-nytimesworld&smtyp=cur

– OR –

You can also perform a google search of “the Battle of Raqqa” or “the Battle of Al-Raqqah” to find more images.

Warning: some images depict scenes of extreme violence.

The battle is over

Twisted bicycles and burnt-out car frames jut out into streets thinned by piles of rubble. Tufted couches with gold-threaded upholstery lean out of what used to be a living room, a home. The walls of the home have fallen away, bombed out of existence. The sight evokes a tender sense of vulnerability; a place where a family gathered is now so empty and exposed. And over everything, a thick grey dust has settled — the residue of exploded earth and glass and plaster.

The end of a battle is, in many ways, only the beginning. Nowhere is this truer than in the city of Raqqa.

The battle lasted for weeks but the citizens of Raqqa had already endured more than three years of deprivation and fear under ISIS rule of the city they claimed as capital of their caliphate. The ground assault and, most significantly, the air strikes that “liberated” the city marked the final physical destruction of Raqqa, but this is only the most obvious aspect of the damage and trauma that must be overcome. The road forward is long, complex, and uncertain.



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A **caliphate** is an Islamic state that is ruled by a caliph. A caliph is a political and religious leader who holds absolute power and authority and is a successor (caliph) to the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Most Muslims do not consider ISIS claims to a caliphate to hold any credence.

Source: Chandler, Adam. (June 30, 2014). What is an Islamic Caliph and Why Did ISIS Make One? The Atlantic. Retrieved from: www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/what-is-an-islamic-caliphate-and-why-did-isis-make-one/373693/

History of the conflict

In 2007, after al-Qaeda was all but defeated in Iraq by a US-lead campaign, the organization retreated to the deserts of eastern Iraq. In compounds and villages removed from international scrutiny, al-Qaeda regrouped, transformed into ISIS and emerged in 2011 to take advantage of the upheaval caused by the civil war in Syria.

Syria's civil war was born out of a clash between pro-democracy stirrings and the swift and violent response of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. The disarray brought on by rebel factions fighting for freedom from the authoritarian and often brutal rule of Asaad created an opportunity for ISIS to assert its influence in the region. Rebel groups may have shared a vision of a more democratic future, but religious and political differences between these groups were exploited by both Asaad and ISIS. Russia supported Asaad. For some time, the US backed the rebel factions until ISIS became the dominant player in the conflict and the task of eradicating the terrorist organization became more important than supporting fledgling democratic urges. Even as the international community condemned him for the use of chemical weapons against his own

population, Asaad called on Russia and the US to join forces with him to confront and eradicate ISIS.

On June 29, 2014, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, spokesperson for ISIS, declared Raqqa to be the official capital of the caliphate. During the ISIS occupation of Raqqa, citizens lived in a constant state of fear. Public beheadings were commonplace, as were people being beaten, drowned and stoned to death for religious and political crimes. Despite the brutality of ISIS rule, many Syrians flocked to Raqqa to escape the dangers of the civil war. The Syrian people were surrounded by violence, trapped by a vortex of competing religious, political, and economic interests entirely out of the control of the average citizen.

Raqqa in ruin

Although reports vary, researchers from the Syrian Network for Human Rights estimate the total civilian death toll in Raqqa at over 1 800. Most of these civilian deaths — over 1 000 — are attributed to coalition force airstrikes. ISIS, who regularly used civilians as human shields (often forcing them into the line of fire to ensure their





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deaths!) was responsible for over 300 fatalities. The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) reportedly caused almost 200 civilian deaths. In addition to the loss of life, those who did manage to flee the city before the final assault have little to return to. By some estimates, 80 per cent of the city has been decimated and has become utterly uninhabitable.

The civil war in Syria continues and there is no clear state control over the country's economy. Iran, Turkey, Russia, and the US all hold significant and opposing political and economic interest in Syria. This will make it difficult and unlikely that there will be an organized effort to rebuild the parts of the country that have endured the blunt force of internationally supported military campaigns. Raqqa remains under the protection of U.S. supported (and Kurdish-dominated) SDF forces and it is unclear how much money and effort will be committed to the reconstruction of Raqqa. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reports that since the end of direct military action in Raqqa in November 2017, their doctors have treated 271 serious blast injuries. Over 60 of these injuries have resulted in death.

People are returning to a landscape that is riddled with the remnants of war: unexploded bombs, ammunition and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). A lack of de-mining equipment and expertise leaves the population vulnerable to ongoing echoes of the war.

Echoing violence

Even more difficult to track is the psychological damage that has been done. There can be a thirst for vengeance:

- A lovelorn pharmacist stalks the rubble of what used to be his neighbourhood, his

place of business, as he thinks of those he will kill to avenge the torture and degradation he endured at the hands of ISIS fighters.

- Atiny, fierce, elderly woman gathers her adopted grandchildren around her as she declares that the ISIS brides encamped nearby should "be burned."

There are moments of laughter and acts of generosity and kindness, but it is difficult to conceive of a way past the trauma. And while every citizen will no doubt bear the mark of these years and the continuing civil war, the children on both sides of this conflict are especially vulnerable. It is estimated that more than 5 000 women — so-called brides of ISIS fighters — either dead or on the run, have given birth to multiple children. These women and children are now either stateless or outcast. As a flyer distributed to ISIS families makes clear: "Your sons of ISIS have mistreated and harmed the good and peaceful people of this town. You must leave, you have no place here and our patience has worn thin. Do not be in the way of our bullets that are meant for your disgraced sons. You have nothing but shame and disgrace; our martyrs eternity and glory."

At present, everyone, including these families, is trapped. There is nowhere else to go.

The situation in Raqqa and most of Syria remains tense. The social and political reality changes daily. Access the website "Syria Deeply" for current and up-to-date information: www.newsdeeply.com/syria. You may want to explore a particular issue that is covered on the Syria Deeply site and report back to the class?



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To Consider

1. How has the intervention of outside countries (U.S., Russia, Turkey, etc.) shaped the situation in Raqqa?
2. Was it necessary to destroy Raqqa in order to liberate it? Explain your reasoning.
3. Why do you think that the guide Ismail did not see the value in keeping the documents he found? What will be achieved if ISIS can be tried for war crimes in an international court?

Going Deeper

The Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) have an important and complicated history. The roots of the SDF lie in Kurdish political organizing in Turkey. An ethnic minority in Turkey, the Kurdish community has faced discrimination and systemic oppression. In the 1970s Abdullah Öcalan, then a student at a Turkish university, founded the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). The PKK was based on socialist ideas with the political goal of establishing an independent Kurdish state. The PKK were involved in some peaceful agitation for change, but some elements of the group also targeted Turkish security and murdered Turkish civilians and people identified as enemies of the Kurds. The government of Turkey considers the PKK a terrorist group and, because Turkey is a member of NATO, it expects that other NATO countries — such as the U.S. — will back them in their opposition to the PKK and their attempts to eradicate the group.

Kurds populate a region that crosses over a number of borders — Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria. When the civil war in Syria broke out, The

Democratic Union Party (PYD) and the People's Protection Units (YPG) — both Syrian arms of the Kurdish resistance — had two goals. The first was to join forces resisting Bashar al-Assad's regime, the second was to use the moment of political and military unrest to progress in their goal of carving out an independent Kurdish state on the border between Syria and Turkey. When ISIS began to assert itself in the region, PYG stood out as an important ally in the fight against ISIS. The YPG stands in stark contrast to ISIS by promoting democracy, religious pluralism, and gender equality; YPG actively recruits female fighters. Most importantly, YPG was one of the few ground forces that were consistently successful in clashes with ISIS.

U.S. airstrikes in the fight against ISIS in Syria are based out of airfields located in Turkey. The YPG's connection to the PKK means that Turkey considers them a direct terrorist threat. It follows that Turkey would take issue with U.S. recognition of and cooperation with YPG. Under recommendation from U.S. military officials in the region, the YPG changed the name of their organization to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Changing their "brand" made it easier for the U.S. to continue supporting the group despite the continuing concerns of Turkey. While the SDF remains a force dominated by Kurds, there are Arab fighters within the organization — though most of the leaders are Kurdish.

Summary question

Why was it important for the U.S. to encourage YPG to rebrand itself under the SDF name?



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A TIMELINE OF ISIS ACTIVITY IN SYRIA

8 April 2013	The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) is proclaimed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi
January 2014	ISIL takes the city of Raqqa, northern Syria
9 June 2014	ISIL takes Mosul, Iraq's second city
29 June 2014	ISIL is rebranded as ISIS and announces a "caliphate" across the territories it has seized. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is declared "leader for Muslims everywhere"
3 August 2014	ISIS captures Sinjar in Iraq, an event known as the "Sinjar massacre"
19 August 2014	A video emerges showing the captured US journalist James Foley with the British-born Mohammed Emwazi (nicknamed "Jihadi John"). Foley is beheaded
5 September 2014	U.S. President Barack Obama promises to build an international coalition against ISIS
13 November 2015	Iraqi Kurds recapture the northern Sinjar region
9 July 2017	Iraqi forces announce the liberation of Mosul
20 September 2017	The U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) enter the final stages of their campaign to capture Raqqa from ISIS
17 October 2017	Battle for Raqqa ends with the SDF taking full control of the city

Adapted from: Sommerville, Q. (October 13, 2017). Six days in Raqqa: Inside the brutal battle to defeat Islamic State in its last major stronghold. New Statesman.

Activity

Use the timeline and write a brief history of ISIS activities in Syria.

Length: 10-20 sentences



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ACTIVITY #1: First Person

Read the first person account by Sarmad Al Jilane of his life and political resistance in Raqqa:

www.newsdeeply.com/syria/articles/2017/10/20/diary-how-i-feel-the-pain-of-beautiful-raqqa

Working with a partner, create a timeline of the events in Sarmad's life. After you complete the timeline, consider the following questions and prepare to share you and your partner's responses with the class.

Are you surprised by any of the decisions Sarmad made along the way? Do you think that you would be willing to risk your life in the way that Sarmad has? Explain your reasoning.

Is there anything in Sarmad's telling of the events that surprises you or seems to contradict some of the more official reports? What role do first person accounts play in our understanding of world events?

To wrap up your discussion, create a choral response to Sarmad's article by selecting one line from the text that you feel is especially important or evokes an important emotion. It is okay for more than one person to choose the same line. After everyone has selected a line, read each line out loud and in turn. After everyone has read their line, share your response to the choral reading. Do you notice any patterns in what people chose to share and the ideas and images from the article that stood out to the group? Do these patterns communicate anything significant about how we understand the conflict in Raqqa?

ACTIVITY #2: "The End and the Beginning"

Read the poem "The End and the Beginning," by Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska:

www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52955/the-end-and-the-beginning

Working independently or with a partner, storyboard the poem. For each stanza, sketch a visual representation of the ideas and images that Szymborska is relating to the reader. For each sketch, create a one-word title. You do not need to use colour for your sketches but if you do, make sure that the colours you use support meaning and are not merely decorative. Post your storyboard in a class "gallery." As you explore the work of your peers consider the following questions:

1. What is Szymborska communicating about people's response to war? Do you agree with her? Explain your reasoning.
2. How is the situation Szymborska describes similar to the situation in Raqqa? In what ways is it different?

Share your ideas with your classmates.



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