

What Christians Endure Under Islamic Terror

When John, a Syrian Christian, chose to stay in Raqqa after the Islamic State took control of the city in 2014, he had no idea how he would survive. Thousands abandoned the city, believing it better to save their lives than live at the center of the Islamists' new "caliphate". John survived in Raqqa for 18 months before escaping in the middle of the night. He told World Watch Monitor about a life of frequent harassment, witnessing weekly executions, and the sadness of ordinary Syrians who welcomed Islamic State fighters at first, but grew to regret giving them their support.

John is in his early 20s. He can't say his real name, what he is studying, or in what type of business his parents were involved.

"Life in Raqqa carries on as usual in many ways. Shops and restaurants are open. There is food, electricity, and water. People are more fortunate than those living in a city like Aleppo."

"But you're constantly alert, never looking into someone's eyes when walking on the street; always aware of what to say and not to say."

Islamic State troops won the battle for Raqqa in January 2014. After a week of intense fighting with other radical groups, they took control and declared it the capital of their caliphate.

"Before [IS won the battle] we had a scary week. We stayed in our house because everyone on the streets was being shot at."

John watched from the side-lines as the streets filled with people shouting "Allahu Akbar" (Allah is the greatest).

"I didn't shout it—I am a Christian. But when an IS man saw me being silent, he stopped the car. I had to say '*Allahu Akbar*' too.

"Many in Raqqa welcomed IS, but they all now regret it. "Soon people discovered that things had radically changed. IS started executing those they suspected to be supporters of the president or of having fought with other rebel groups against IS.

In the same week that Islamic State declared Raqqa their capital, they destroyed the interior of three churches.

"They broke everything inside—the icons, the altar, everything. One church building is now a center for IS."

Nobody was forced to stay in the new caliphate, and many left. In some ways life returned to normal, John said, but it was soon clear that the city was under the control of IS. They changed the names of public buildings, "Islamic State" was printed on car number plates and the group banned the use of new bank notes printed by the Syrian government.

Soon after IS declared Raqqa their capital, Christians were told how they could live under IS rule.

"We could [convert and] become Muslims and live a normal life in Raqqa, we could leave, or we could stay and pay the *jizya* tax. The first year the tax was 54,000 Syrian pounds [about US\$300] per man—women and children are not 'taxed'—but last year the rate went up to 164,000 Syrian pounds per man."

The price of gold is used to calculate the *jizya*; in Islamic tradition it is 16 to 18 grams of gold per year per man.

John advised his parents to leave Raqqa, but they didn't want to abandon their home and business, and selling them was impossible. Even though many of the estimated 1,500 Christian families left, they stayed; at least it meant John could

continue his studies.

John soon witnessed how IS dealt with those who didn't obey their rules.

"I saw a lot of cruelty. Every Friday they executed people. I was there when they beheaded the first man in public. They couldn't behead him with the first cut. He suffered so much they finally shot him."

John described how sick he felt when IS beheaded hundreds of soldiers from Raqqa's Syrian Army base and then pinned their heads on the fence he passed daily on his way to work. He felt IS soldiers were monsters, who could attack at any moment and for any reason.

"When I talked with them, I had to know what to say. A wrong word could offend them. Seeing all these atrocities, they don't seem like people, they seem like monsters to me, especially after what they did to those soldiers. This traumatised me. It was too much.

"IS hung their crosses from their ears when they put their heads on the fence. What shocked me too was that I saw people taking selfies with the heads. I believe they do this to scare people, to show them what happens when you do something wrong."

Despite the horrors he witnessed, John stayed in Raqqa because he wanted to work and continue his studies, and paying the *jizya* gave him some freedom.

"Because we paid the tax and had the declaration [confirming the tax was paid] always with us, no one could harm us for being a Christian."

The protection was important because John had to deal with IS men every day.

"I met them at work, in the shops, even in the gym."

Only 50 Christian families left in Raqqa

It is remarkable how much John smiles when he talks about living in Raqqa.

“I got used to it. I think it has something to do with how we grew up as Christians; we’re strong people, this helped us to stay. And, yes, you can live as a Christian in the Islamic State. No one troubles you when you pay the tax.”

However, John knows of only 50 Christian families left there. The only priest left as soon as IS took over. There is no church remaining—Christians visit each other for fellowship.

“I didn’t see them mistreat Christians because of their faith. The only thing they did was to take the homes of Christians—and anyone else—who had left Raqqa, because their soldiers didn’t have enough houses to live in.

“We never imagined this could happen. Christians in Raqqa were respected. It was a normal Syrian city with no radical Islamic population. In my opinion, what IS is doing isn’t real Islam. I have lived with Muslims my whole life; we respected each other and lived peacefully together.”

Some IS fighters were former Christians

Despite their cruelty, John said IS fighters were normal people.

“I could talk with them normally. It was only sometimes when they discovered that I was a Christian that they changed. They were sometimes funny. Once in the gym I heard them telling jokes, albeit about all the heads they had cut off. At different times we had conversations about me being a Christian. They advised me to become a Muslim. Once I was really shocked after talking with two of them. They turned out to be Armenians. They told me that they grew up in Christian families, that both of them had converted from Christianity to

Islam. Their beards were not that long yet, they were quite new in IS. I later heard that one of them blew himself up as a suicide bomber.

“One day on a bus I met one of my old classmates. He was wearing IS clothes, had a long beard, and held a machine gun. He was convinced of the choice he had made, saying he wanted to fight for Islam and the Koran. Two weeks later he was killed in battle.

“I heard they send Syrian fighters to the frontlines; the foreigners have leadership positions. A week later the brother of this classmate also died fighting for IS. I know of one other friend of mine who joined IS. I don’t know what happened to him.”

‘Western’ haircut causes problems

There were moments when John was really afraid. An IS soldier once stopped him in the street and started shouting: “Why are you cutting your hair like this?” John showed him the paper declaring he was a Christian and that he had paid the tax, and the soldier left.

Another day, he was forced onto a bus because an IS soldier didn’t like the jeans he was wearing or his haircut.

“We drove to an underground space where there were hundreds of other men. We were all divided up –first the elderly men were separated from the younger ones, then they separated young men with skinny jeans from the others. Then they separated a group based on their haircuts. I was in that group.”

After the group had been reorganized, a Tunisian IS fighter made a passionate address to the men.

“He said: ‘You are the new generation of Islamic youth. You look like Westerners and it appears you like them and their style, but they don’t like you. People in the West hate you.

Westerners are always working to get you away from Islam.'

"The ones with the skinny jeans then had to sign a document promising not to wear them anymore. Then our hair was completely shaved off and we were told to not sport this Western hairstyle anymore. I tried to explain that I was a Christian, but they didn't pay attention to that."

The changes in Raqqa were more radical for the women. All women, Muslim or not, have to cover themselves completely when they leave the house.

"It was hard for my mother and sister. They had to buy these clothes, which, of course, we didn't have at home," John said.

IS forbade advertising images that showed women not fully covered. Shampoo bottles, for example, which had images of women printed on them, had to be out of sight or removed completely. Regular checks were made.

"I remember a funny incident. A shopkeeper had a red balloon in the shape of a heart in his window. IS came in, screaming that this was a sin. The shopkeeper said it was just a balloon. The IS man insisted that this was sin because the shape could also be seen as a woman's breasts. The shopkeeper had to pop the balloon."

John learned how to respond to IS.

"One day an IS man heard my name mentioned and immediately understood that I was a Christian. I saw the expression on his face change. 'Are you an unbeliever?' he asked me. I replied: 'Don't you know this verse from the Koran that anyone who believes in God, in angels, in the books and in his prophets, in good and bad and in eternal life, is a believer?' He was shocked that I knew this verse from the Koran and he walked away."

Fleeing Raqqa in the middle of the night

It was because John couldn't continue his studies in Raqqa that he eventually left the city. As far as he knows, there are no other young Christians left.

"Of course it feels better. I might not have water and electricity every day as I did in Raqqa, but I feel safer; inside I have peace. In Raqqa there was this constant fear and alertness. Where I am living now, I don't have to be afraid of the people I meet in the streets."

John and a few others fled the city in secrecy.

"People could leave the city if it was justified. They could leave for medical treatment that wasn't available in Raqqa. I even heard of Christians who were allowed to go to another city to celebrate Christmas and New Year. I didn't have a reason, so I had to leave illegally."

He left Raqqa on a small bus with 15 others.

"I was so afraid that we would be stopped at an IS checkpoint. But that didn't happen. We took small roads, avoiding all the known checkpoints.

"After four hours, we arrived at a Syrian Army checkpoint. They welcomed us and then asked why we were so pale. We really had been very anxious. They checked our IDs, and gave us yoghurt. It was delicious."

John remains in contact with people who stayed in Raqqa. It isn't easy, but "there are ways", he said.

Asked about the attraction of joining Islamic State, John said he thinks many IS fighters were attracted by the high salaries paid at the beginning.

"I heard of 1,200 US dollars for a foreign fighter. If they had one or more wives, they would get 100 dollars per wife and 50 dollars per child. I saw them in shops with a lot of money, too much to spend.

"I think they are cheated. They really believe that what they do is right. They feel happy every time they kill someone. You can see this by how they go about executing people—every week finding a new way, even crucifying them. Thank God no Christians were executed for just being a Christian, but because they fought against the IS army."

Living under the Islamic State for 18 months didn't help John to understand why they needed to establish themselves in a new territory.

"They were already living in an Islamic country; in Syria the majority are Sunnis. They had their land but if they wanted to live under strict Islam they could have moved to Saudi Arabia."

John said he is willing to serve in the Syrian Army after finishing his studies.

"I don't want to run away. We have the right to take back our land. This is my country, not theirs. I am willing to fight for that."