

# ISIS enforces strict religious law in Raqqa

Author: Al-Hayat (Pan Arab)

Posted March 21, 2014

The color black covers the place. This color prevents you from ignoring that the Syrian city of Raqqa (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/02/syria-isis-raqqa-quasi-government-opposition.html>) is straining under the iron grip of fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). They worked to turn the city into a “black province” after capturing it from fighters belonging to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Ahrar al-Sham Islamic Movement.

The road from the city of Deir al-Zour, “the state of goodness,” as ISIS fighters call it, to Raqqa province is not easy because you have to drive on a dirt road to avoid the area of the clashes between ISIS fighters and fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2012/12/syria-opposition-fails-with-jabhat-al-nusra-terrorist-label.html>) and the FSA. Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, with FSA support, are seeking to advance toward Raqqa in an attempt to evict ISIS.

Before entering Raqqa, you have to pass through many checkpoints. The numerous questions they ask depend on the checkpoint and its supervisor. Before reaching a checkpoint, the car driver asks the women in the car to don the veil and put on full “Islamic” attire, where the woman gets covered in black except for the eyes. Otherwise, both she and the driver may get punished, as has happened to many.

The first checkpoint we passed through is called “Dignity Checkpoint.” ISIS fighters only searched the men as the fighters looked for violation of ISIS laws. They checked personal data and inspected the passengers’ as they looked for Jabhat al-Nusra or FSA fighters, who are immediately arrested, as is anyone they suspect of belonging to a Syrian faction or an activist in the Syrian revolution.

## A city in black

Raqqa is very different from what it used to be. Raqqa used to enjoy freedom after the withdrawal of Assad’s forces. Many displaced people from other cities have moved to Raqqa. Yet Raqqa changed after ISIS took control. Most ISIS fighters in Deir al-Zour moved to Raqqa, which is now a black province in every sense of the word.

Many of the city’s features have been painted black, to match the color of the ISIS banner. Women wear black from head to toe. And you can’t ignore how many foreign fighters there are. They are called the *muhajirin* [immigrants] and come mostly from Chechnya (

monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/chechen-jihad-syria-boston-bombing.html). They are in Raqqa with their families and can be recognized because they are taller than the locals and look different.

## **Immigrants to Raqqa**

The immigrant fighters have a long story. *Al-Hayat* secretly met a number of civilians in Raqqa. They each told their stories, or what they witnessed, with the immigrants. They all said that the population won't remain silent for long. The pressure on the civilians will lead to an explosion, according to "Mohammad," 24. He and his family fled Deir al-Zour. He said, "[The following story] summarizes what the immigrants think about the people of the city and the region. One day, when I was at an internet cafe filled with Tunisian fighters, [I overheard one fighter say] to his friend via Skype to come do jihad in Syria, especially in Raqqa, where food is abundant and where there are many empty homes, and where the women are pretty, and 'the men are cowards.'"

Chechen immigrants have their own story. Many of them came to Syria with the intensification of fighting, and most joined Jabhat al-Nusra or ISIS. In the words of more than one person we met, Chechen immigrants have special privileges over others because they came with all their family members. And that can be noticed as you walk Raqqa's streets.

Rim, a Raqqa local, told us, "Chechen immigrants are living a luxurious life. You always see them in the city's restaurants and they buy food in large quantities. Their children keep buying chocolate, especially foreign chocolate, such as Mars or Snickers, which cost 100 or more Syrian pounds. The Chechens also have the latest technology in mobile phones, computers, computer tablets and many others."

## **Defecting from ISIS equals death**

The immigrant's life isn't always easy. His jihad in Syria could also be a curse. Recently, many immigrants were executed in the field, according to Raqqa locals. Not a week goes by without someone being executed. There have been as many as five executions per week. The charges against them range from disbelief in God to leaving the "group" [ISIS]. But according to the locals, executions are for those who defected from ISIS after they saw how it truly functions.

## **Patrols to enforce Islamic attire**

"They leap over the walls so as not [to] give us a chance to correct matters," said "Sarah" to *Al-Hayat* about what's happening in her high school, where ISIS conducts foot or car patrols to check that women are wearing Islamic attire. ISIS fighters jump over the walls of the schools to surprise the girls and to catch those not complying. Sarah added, "The patrol consists of two teams, the first consists of men who jump over the school's wall, and the second consists of women who enter through the main door. They are mostly the wives of immigrant fighters and they enter the school armed with machine guns and beat up students

breaking [ISIS] laws. In many cases, the students are arrested along with the teachers and the school director as punishment for violating ISIS laws. They are released hours later after being humiliated by the patrol elements.”

### **Men also get punished**

Men are not better off than the women under the rule of the black state. Men are harassed in different ways. The man is the first and last one responsible for the actions of the women of his family. Men are often punished as a result of the behavior of a girl within the family, such as lack of commitment to Islamic dress. Men are often given several lashes in the public squares for violating some Islamic law. Anyone who smokes or sells cigarettes is given a punishment ranging from having his store closed to being given several lashes.

We entered Raqqa at prayer time. ISIS has forced everyone to pray, and all shops have to close at prayer time and all men must go to mosque, or a group of shop owners can put a prayer mat and perform their prayers in congregation.

“Khaled,” 40, told *Al-Hayat*, “Many men don’t actually pray but pretend to be doing so in front of ISIS patrols that roam the city. ... Many worshipers pray without ablution to avoid harm. Many shop owners lock themselves in their shops by lowering the iron doors till prayer time ends. However, ISIS patrols found out, so ISIS now goes to the shops and sometimes pulls their owners out and forces them to perform prayer.”

“Mohammad,” a Raqqa resident and a friend of Khaled, said, “One mosque preacher who is of Tunisian origin said during a Friday sermon that the reason the people are being forced to pray is so that they get admitted to paradise. Then a worshiper said that some are praying while doing a lot of things forbidden by God. The Tunisian imam answered: We will take you to paradise, even if we have to drag you in chains on the way there.”

Many throughout Syria have become aware of ISIS’s religious strictness. ISIS conducts tests on those stopped at checkpoints. They ask them questions about how many *rak’aas* [kneels] are performed for each prayer time and the way one is supposed to pray. At first we doubted that, but then we saw it ourselves in Azaz in the Aleppo countryside. In Azaz, an ISIS fighter asked the driver the number of *rak’aas* for each prayer. The driver answered wrongly, so the Chechen ISIS fighter asked the driver to get out of the car, took him to a nearby field, explained to him how to pray properly, and didn’t let the driver go till after praying four full *rak’aas*.

Read More: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/isis-enforces-islamic-law-raqqa-syria.html>



©2014 Al-Monitor. All rights reserved.