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## The Everyday Horrors of the Islamic State Relentless Terror

By Uwe Buse and Katrin Kuntz

7/1/2015

**Eighty lashes of the whip for alcohol. Amputation for theft. Crucifixion for robbery. These are only a few of the draconian punishments employed by the Islamic State, according to documents and the testimony of witnesses obtained by SPIEGEL.**

In late June, images made their way around the world of four men as they were locked in a car and killed with a rocket-propelled grenade. They showed seven men, chained together with explosive necklaces, as they were blown up. And they provided evidence that five men had been locked in a metal cage and lowered into the water to drown. As we learned last week, 16 men in total were murdered in these brutal ways. We know this because the executioners with the group calling itself "Islamic State" wanted to film their victims as they were dying.

The films, carefully staged and distributed using all modern channels, seem to be coming directly from hell. The men who see themselves as the new caliphs are performing an unparalleled dance of death, complete with the kinds of horrors once depicted by painter Hieronymus Bosch -- only these killers and executioners are anything but fiction. In Syria and along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Iraq today, where human civilization once began, it is not some nightmarish fictional characters at work, but real players in contemporary history with a megalomaniacal agenda. And instead of covering up their murders, they are doing the opposite -- inviting the rest

of the world to look on, proud of a brutality that knows no bounds and is both part of their military strategy and an instrument of oppression.

The Islamic State is both fact and fiction at the same time. It has clearly created a propaganda bubble, but it also represents a new social order in places where it has come into power. The "caliphate" was proclaimed about a year ago, and the older group ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) has become IS, often referred to as *Da'ish* in the Arab world. But all of these names refer to the same thing: a militant movement with its origins partly in the Iraqi prison camps run by the Americans, which grew into al-Qaida in Iraq and now, as IS, is claiming territory for a new state, territory captured by former top figures in the regime of dictator Saddam Hussein.

In truth, the Islamic State is nothing but a claim. On closer inspection, it is merely an irregular occupation regime without a cohesive country to call its own. IS controls cities, such as Raqqa, Ramadi and Mosul, and it has infiltrated and now controls villages in Syria and Iraq. But there is also a paucity of verifiable facts.

Any reporter who dared to enter Raqqa to investigate the situation there would be in the kind of mortal danger that no reputable news organization can justify. Those who go there anyway, like former German lawmaker and author Jürgen Todenhöfer -- whose new book "Inside IS - 10 Days in the 'Islamic State'" is currently at the top of the SPIEGEL non-fiction bestseller list -- are at the mercy of their hosts and are only permitted to ask subservient questions. But there are other paths into the sinister realm, access through back doors and the underground. For example, not all telecommunications lines have been disconnected yet, and it is sometimes still possible to communicate by phone, Skype or text message.

### **Courageous Efforts**

Most importantly, there are groups of committed people who have made a point of documenting all IS activities, both virtual and tangible. There is opposition in the occupied areas, and there are courageous individuals who are determined, despite danger to life and limb, to keep the hope of a different life alive and, in the meantime, to use sound, images and text to record everyday life under IS. It is because of these people that SPIEGEL is able to provide the insights into daily life under IS that are described in this article.

We were able to establish contact with people in Mosul and Raqqa -- in other words, people living inside the Islamic State. We remained in contact with them on a regular basis. Some kept diaries for us, and we compared their statements with the accounts of people who have managed to escape the terror zone, with video material and with documents.

This article is based on conversations with IS militants captured and taken prisoner by Kurdish troops. We also listened to the accounts of Yazidi women in various refugee camps in Kurdish territory who had been kidnapped and enslaved by IS militants. We were able to speak with political activists with the campaign Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, who are risking their lives by publishing material from Raqqa and nearby villages.

We pursued this project in the knowledge that all information about IS is subject to considerable skepticism. When it came to documents that allegedly originated with IS itself, SPIEGEL consulted with experts from the London-based Quilliam Foundation and the Middle East Forum in Philadelphia to evaluate their quality and authenticity. Quite a few documents were eliminated as fakes.

The question of how to handle the copious number of documents that IS produces to justify its actions is a difficult one. As is common in dictatorships, IS, like some meticulous bookkeeper, also appears to be sorting and documenting the various missions of its Islamist killers. In some cases, the acts of terror are carefully organized and presented in the form of graphics that could just as easily be part of the annual report of a sophisticated mail-order company. Clearly facts and propaganda are being mixed together here, and yet these IS records are also documents of contemporary history worth analyzing. Some of them are reminiscent of a dark satire, and yet they are no longer a laughing matter.

### **Surviving in Mosul, Iraq**

*When the Islamic State arrived in Mosul, many thought they would bring order to the Iraqi city. Instead, every aspect of life has become suffocated in the flood of prohibitions. The regime celebrates its power with draconian punishments and stages public executions with the sword like some everyday banality.*

It is difficult for Ibrahim Aziz (whose name, like those of the Yazidis and the citizen journalist from Raqqa described in the following sections, has been changed) to frame this one sentence. Today, in the 12th month since IS seized power here with its black terror, it sounds so absurd, naïve and ambiguous. This is the sentence: "My wife and I, we welcomed the arrival of the Islamic State in Mosul."

Aziz is a middle-aged technician, a family guy and a man of numbers, with only a moderate interest in politics. He has spent most of his life in Mosul, where he grew up during the Saddam Hussein dictatorship. But then he was reluctantly forced to learn to live with anarchy during the 12 years that have passed since the international coalition arrived. He had to come to terms with the everyday crime that spread across Iraq as the country disintegrated, with the muggings, blackmail and abductions, and the seemingly random murders in the streets of his city, which the police treated with indifference and severely tested Aziz's faith.

The perpetual chaos, and the fear that a stray bullet or the whim of a heavily armed criminal could change his or his wife's life forever demoralized Aziz over the years and transformed the murderous hordes of the Islamic State in June of last year into the lesser evil. Aziz ultimately welcomed them into his city.

He and his wife had followed what had happened in Syria, and how the troops of Islamic State had behaved in the western part of the Nineveh Governorate as they advanced on Mosul, but they were so desperate that they ignored the barbarism and were determined to see only the supposedly positive aspects of IS: the new order they brought with them, and the peace and quiet they had sorely missed. Do you understand? Aziz asks. He says that he hopes this is a yearning

that the Germans are not entirely unfamiliar with -- the Germans, who once cheered and welcomed Hitler and his genocidal regime.

## **New Fear**

Today, after a year of living under the rules of Islamist tyrants, these hopes seem deeply grotesque to Aziz and his wife. Although chaos no longer prevails in the streets of the city, it has not been replaced by confidence but by a new fear. This time the fear is omnipresent, even during brief, insignificant encounters, on the street, in a café or while shopping.

"I constantly wonder who I can say what to, who I can trust and how much," Aziz writes. He asks himself questions like: Who is an informer? Who is trying to get in with the new rulers? Who believes he can settle old scores by offering his services as an informer, and passing on information about actions and opinions that are suddenly heretical and therefore subject to punishment? Things that were part of everyday life until recently are now on a long, absurd list of prohibitions set up by the Islamic State.

Smoking is prohibited. Drinking alcohol is prohibited. Wearing hair gel is prohibited. Portraits on T-shirts and other articles of clothing are prohibited, whether they are of the Prophet Mohammed, Kurt Cobain or Donald Duck. Men are not allowed to be clean-shaven, while women are required to wear the niqab, the black face veil that covers everything but the eyes. Now secular music is also prohibited.

Being in favor of democracy and free elections is prohibited. Treating Shiites as orthodox Muslims and Yazidis as human beings is prohibited. The fewer Shiites and Yazidis that exist, the better it is for the world of the Islamic State. The same applies to Christians and Jews, who must either convert or pay protection money. Anyone who refuses to comply is killed. It is a civic duty to advocate multiple genocide in the new Islamic State, which aims to be a country of Sunni Muslims.

Aziz is forced to live in this impossible world, and he is still trying to get his bearings. Each day, he wonders how to behave to avoid ending up in a prison cell or before a Sharia court. What do you do, for example, when you walk around a corner and enter one of the city's squares, where you encounter an executioner who is about to behead a kneeling victim? How are you supposed to react as a witness to a public execution?

Is it safe to simply leave? Or do you have to stay? Is it enough to stay, or do you have to watch? And is it enough to watch, or will you eventually be forced to chime in with the cheers of the executioner and his helpers? When you see the victim's head lying on the street, must you praise God and his greatness, even if every fiber in your own body is screaming with horror at what you are seeing?

## **Public Executions**

Apparently public executions take place daily in the Islamic State. They are primarily a demonstration of power and a deterrent. It would be logical to announce such executions, as a

way of advertising the Islamic State, perhaps on the local radio station in Mosul, which normally airs nothing but tedious religious sermons and Islamist propaganda. But this doesn't happen.

Executions in Mosul happen suddenly on public squares, in parks and in the streets. The routine manner in which they are performed is calculated, an expression of the contempt the Islamic State has for political enemies and religious sinners. In fact, executions conducted by IS are not meant to be a spectacle but rather a daily performance, something entirely banal, like a car accident during morning rush hour.

Often the executioner, his helpers and the victim arrive in an ordinary pickup truck. The vehicle stops, the perpetrators get out, and sometimes one of them is carrying a microphone connected to the stereo system or a loudspeaker mounted on the truck bed. The executioner is holding a sword.

The helpers drag the victim into the desired position and force him to his knees. The chin is pushed toward the chest so that the neck is exposed. The verdict is read quickly and the executioner raises his sword.

How do you cope with situations like this? Ibrahim Aziz has made a pragmatic decision. He tries to avoid the large squares in his city, so as to at least steer clear of these impositions. But there are plenty of others that he and the residents of Mosul cannot avoid quite as easily.

Wounded IS militants are given preferential treatment in hospitals, where reliable Islamists have been placed in charge. The same holds true of government offices, where loyalty to the new rulers is more important than competency.

### **Morality Police**

In some cases, the Islamists have increased salaries to keep experts in their jobs, at the city's waterworks, for example, and yet the drinking water supply has not improved. There is only running water two or three days a week, there are constant power outages, gasoline is scarce and expensive, and basic food prices have increased significantly.

At the city's university, all departments that supposedly contradict Sharia were dissolved, including philosophy, art, music, law and political science. Many construction projects have come to a standstill because no one is being paid anymore. The city no longer has a mobile phone network. Anyone looking for reception has to drive to the city's outskirts and hope for the best. For now, at least, it is still possible to access the Internet.

Members of the Hisbah morality police patrol the streets, driving their vehicles through neighborhoods to monitor whether shops are closed during prayer times, men are bearded, women are modestly dressed, and whether they are accompanied by a male relative or their husband. Like the armed militants at the city's countless checkpoints, they are constantly checking mobile phones and digging through Facebook entries and text messages.

Anyone wishing to leave the city, even temporarily for a week or two, perhaps for a hospital stay or to attend a family celebration in Erbil or Baghdad, must give his house or his car, provided it is sufficiently valuable, as a deposit, or he must furnish the name of someone else who can do it for him.

### **Desire for Legitimation**

Alleged or actual violations of the new rules of behavior lead to a fine at best, for which a receipt is always issued. In the worst case, those who have been warned are hauled before a judge, who imposes the punishment he believes is required under Sharia: a caning, the whip or the sword.

This reign of terror is one of the columns supporting the power of the Islamic State. There is a second column, one that isn't as crude and is in fact carefully carved, essentially the new rulers' house regulations. The new "caliphate," the godly state, also aims to be social and just in a very unique way. It's a state based on rules meant to be understandable for anyone.

The desire for legitimation constantly leads to new documents, regulations and decrees, which leave the government offices and ministries on letterhead topped with the black flag of IS. Civilians and militants alike are exposed to a veritable flood of these documents. The Islamists' regulatory mania is in no way inferior to their bloodlust.

A submission to the presidential committee of the Islamic State reads: "The recording and dissemination of scenes, or the publication of videos, in which IS soldiers behead or slaughter their enemies, in or outside of battle, in all official and unofficial channels or on private websites is prohibited. Except with the permission of the presidential committee. Those who do not comply will be brought to justice. Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds."

### **Rules for the Treatment of Slaves**

A document was found on a Twitter account that apparently regulates pressing questions on the treatment of female Yazidi sex slaves. The document was compiled by the Fatwa department of the Islamic State, the office that investigates controversial religious questions and declares enemies to be outlaws. It was published last fall by the IS's publishing house, the Al-Himma Library.

The document consists of 27 questions and answers that address the proper religious treatment of sex slaves.

Question four reads: Is it permitted to have sex with a female prisoner who is an infidel? The answer reads: It is permissible to have sex with this type of prisoner.

Question five: Are you permitted to have sex with her as soon as you own her? Answer: It is permitted if she is still a virgin. If this is not the case, her uterus must be cleaned first.

Question eight: If two men buy a prisoner together, can they both have sex with her? Answer: No. Only the man who completely owns the prisoner may have sex with her. One of the men must transfer his ownership share to the other.

Question 10: What happens if the prisoner's owner dies? Answer: She is distributed with the rest of his property.

Question 13: Is it permitted to have sex with a slave before she enters puberty? Answer: It is permitted if she is capable of doing so. If not, she may be used without intercourse.

A letter dated July 17, 2014 is addressed to the remaining Christians in Mosul. The letter is an ultimatum, giving the Christians two days to leave the city. After that, the document reads, "only the sword will stand between them and us."

### **Draconian Rule**

A document from Aleppo Province in Syria lists crimes and the corresponding punishments that will apply in the future. Blasphemy: death. Blaspheming against the Prophet Mohammed: death, even if the offender repents. Blaspheming against Islam: death. Homosexuality: Death, for both men. Stealing: amputation of one hand. Drinking alcohol: 80 lashes. Slander: 80 lashes. Spying in the service of infidels: death. Renunciation of Islam: death. Robbery: If robbery and murder are committed, death by crucifixion. If only robbery is committed, amputation of the right hand and the left foot.

On Jan. 8, 2015, a decree was signed that defines the conditions for the fighters of competing Islamist groups like the al-Nusra Front who are willing to repent: The individual must confess that he has fallen away from the true faith, submit to religious education, relinquish all information, hand over all weapons and, following military training, return to the front.

An ordinance dated Dec. 14, 2014 bans the use of devices made by computer manufacturer Apple. The ban is directed at fighters and applies to mobile phones and tablets, and is deemed necessary "for security reasons." Militants are also instructed to deactivate the GPS function on devices from other manufacturers. Technicians in the individual districts who can do this are listed.

School education was also restructured. "Questions are not allowed on polytheism, democracy, the principles of nationalism and racism, usury and interest, pseudo-historic events and boundaries between countries, which contradict Sharia. This directive is binding. Anyone who violates it will be brought to justice."

The new rule for garbage collection reads: "Garbage must be placed onto the street after evening prayers in a barrel, bucket or large, black plastic bag. The costs of garbage collection are 2,000 dinar a month per household, and 5,000 dinar per business. Delinquent payers will be brought to justice. In addition, livestock may not be kept within city limits. If this does occur, the livestock will be confiscated."



## **A Droning Litany of Killings**

The most extraordinary documents are probably the terrorist statements of account, which are published annually to convince fans, fighters and financiers of the Islamic State's fervor and effectiveness.

These reports, inventories of terror, primarily describe the civil war against the Shiites. The latest, a 410-page report, is organized by province and lists murders, attacks and assassinations in chronological order.

For readers with little time on their hands, the report begins with a full-page graphic that celebrates IS's deeds in the last 12 months: 615 attacks with car bombs, of which 78 were carried out by suicide attackers. One-hundred-sixty attacks with explosive belts. Fourteen attacks with motorcycle bombs. Some 4,465 other bomb attacks. Three-hundred-thirty-six incidents in which buildings were stormed. Some 1,083 murders with small arms or thrusting weapons. Six-hundred-seven artillery attacks. A full 1,015 attacks with explosive charges or through arson. It lists 30 attacks on checkpoints as well as 1,047 sniper operations. And, finally, control of eight cities through the murder of leading opposition politicians.

The details are provided in the ensuing pages. For the Nineveh Governorate, of which Mosul is the capital, the report includes 13 pages of murders and attacks for the weeks between May 11 and June 9, 2013. It is a droning litany of killings.

Detonation of explosives in a Shiite army car in the Rabia region. Detonation in front of the house of a criminal working for the Shiite army in the Arabi/Mosul neighborhood. Detonation of explosives in a Hummer military vehicle in the Tahrir/Mosul neighborhood. Detonation of explosives against a convoy of Shiite foot soldiers. Detonation of explosives in the car of a disloyal guard unit. Murder of a criminal officer working for the Shiite police with firearms. Attack with various weapons on the headquarters of the Shiite police in the village of Sheikh Hamad.

Detonation, murder, detonation.

Attacks and murders, proudly proclaimed, sometimes a dozen on a single day. At the end of the 30th day of a single month, the report documents exactly 300 attacks, with many more victims.

This is the world of the Islamic State, the world in which Ibrahim Aziz and about 10 million other men, women and children now live.

Months ago, Aziz sent his wife and children to Erbil in Kurdish territory. He remained in Mosul to watch the house and the family car. He has no money, his savings are almost gone, and he has sold all the furniture in the house.

His only option now is to wait for what he expects will happen one day: the battle for Mosul.

## **The Slaves of Sinjar**



*IS believes that the Yazidis have no right to exist. Their women are abducted and abused by the bearded members of the self-proclaimed master race. There is already plenty of material for future war crimes trials.*

The women are young and old, and they sit in tents, refugee camps and on blankets. They sit on the bare floor in half-finished new buildings. When the front got closer and closer at the end of last year, they found accommodation with friends and relatives or, for lack of alternatives, they became squatters, taking up residence in abandoned buildings together with their parents and children.

The women, who number in the hundreds, are not related to each other. They come from different backgrounds, but one experience unites them all: They were hostages of the Islamic State. They were all abducted because they are Yazidis. They were debased and treated as merchandise that can be bought and sold, traded and abused at a whim.

Many of them looked on as their fathers, husbands and brothers were murdered when their settlements were attacked, and many have no idea what happened to their sisters and mothers after they were separated from them. Perhaps they are dead, perhaps they were sold to the Syrian part of the Islamic State, or perhaps they are not far away, merely on the other side of a front that is only a two-hour drive away.

Many of the women are unwilling to talk about what happened to them, understandably so. But a few are prepared to speak, because they believe their silence would constitute yet another victory for their tormentors.

One of these women, Havin Ali, is in her early 20s, with dark eyes and a steady voice. She now lives as a refugee in a half-finished house on the outskirts of Dohuk. Its owners have fled. Steel reinforcement mats jut from concrete walls, there is no electricity or running water, and there are no windows. They use plastic tarps to protect against the heat of the day.

Havin, who is now sitting with her family, spent more than three weeks in the "caliphate." One night, she managed to escape through a broken window in the house of the man who had bought her.

The village where Havin grew up is on the edge of the Sinjar Mountains. The IS militants, clad in black, captured the village late last year, after a short battle between unevenly matched forces, with the men from the village defending themselves against a superior adversary with their simple rifles. When the killing had ended, Havin and her sisters were dragged from the house and pushed onto a bus that already contained many women and girls. The destination was a sports club in Mosul, located near the Baghdad Hotel.

The Islamic State was using it as an interim storage facility for the new women, the new merchandise. Havin stayed there with her sister for seven days and nights, in a large building with hundreds of other women. The air was poor, as was the food, but the uncertainty was even worse. No one told them why they were there or what would happen to them. Few people spoke with them. They were treated like livestock.

## **Slave Market**

At the end of the first week, they were loaded onto buses again and taken to a spacious wedding banquet hall called the "Galaxy," also in Mosul. IS had repurposed it into a slave market. In the two-story building, Havin once again found herself among hundreds of women who were being closely guarded by IS militants.

"The very young girls were always sold quickly," Havin recalls. Militants pulled them out of the crowd, seemingly at random, and dragged them into another room. Some men settled for one woman while other bought several. Two men bought 80 women and girls at once and loaded them into two busses they had brought along. There was a rumor that they were headed for the Syrian section of the Islamic State, to yet another slave market or a brothel.

When the rumor began to spread, says Havin, one girl committed suicide with a shard of glass. She believes that only one woman managed to escape this prison. She told the guards that she was pregnant, and she was examined by female doctors, who confirmed that she was. Then she was taken, but no one knew where.

On her fourth day in the "Galaxy," it was Havin's turn. A guard grabbed Havin and took her into an adjoining room, where she was placed on display. Men looked at her, some with amusement and some lustfully. A bearded, middle-aged man bought her, but Havin was never told what the purchase price was. The man had intended her as a present for one of his sons, and she was to be married to him. Havin says that the man who bought her treated her decently, apparently to avoid damaging the gift for his son.

In her owner's household, Havin was ordered to help out in the kitchen, with cooking and in the courtyard. She worked alongside other women who were part of the family but were dismissive and spoke with her as little as possible. Havin was the only one who was made to walk barefoot outside the house, to prevent her from running away. The ground outside the house was covered in brambles and coarse gravel.

Havin managed to flee after about three weeks, before the wedding preparations were complete and before she was made to convert to Islam. One night, while everyone was sleeping, she squeezed through a broken window and ran northward, still barefoot. She ran and hobbled through the night for hours until, exhausted, she encountered an army patrol. It was a Yazidi unit.

Now she is sitting in this house, in this room. But both her sister and her younger brother are still missing. The family survives on relief supplies that are distributed in a nearby refugee camp. When asked what she wants for the future, she replies, "The return of my sister and brother. And the opportunity for revenge."

## **Documenters of the Slaughter**

*A group of determined resistance fighters are risking their lives to film and photograph IS atrocities in Raqqa. The rebels' worst enemies are female agents, because all veiled women look the same.*

The first video, filmed with a mobile phone camera, depicts a large screen in Raqqa, on an evening in February. On the screen, larger-than-life, lurching and burning to death, is Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kasasbeh. The mobile phone video shows the outlines of a cheering crowd in front of the screen.

The second video, 41 seconds long, depicts a woman dressed in black. She is kneeling on the street, at an intersection, with her hands tied behind her back, surrounded by armed men. A few passersby are standing in the background, and an armed man is walking in a circle, looking bored.

There are two men standing directly behind the woman: her judge and her executioner. The judge praises Allah and declares that the death of this woman, who has deceived her husband, is God's will. When the judge is finished speaking, the executioner raises his pistol and shouts "Allahu akbar!" In the next second, the woman is shot in the head.

There are additional videos that depict other executions, along with ordinary street scenes from Raqqa and the surrounding towns. All of this is forbidden and punishable by death. The videos were recorded with mobile phones because they are easily concealed in the sleeve of a jacket or elsewhere. Sometimes a smartphone was also placed in a box with a small hole in it, which seemed to have been carelessly left on the street.

The video quality is mediocre. Sometimes the lens is covered with material or the tip of a finger, and the films certainly cannot compete with those made by al-Furqan Media, the PR wing of the Islamic State. This is not surprising, as they were not produced by someone working calmly and then professionally edited. Instead, they were filmed hectically and under cover by courageous people who were risking their lives and call themselves citizen journalists. They deserve to be mentioned in the same breath as the Scholls, the famous siblings and college students in Munich who were executed during World War II for their resistance against Hitler and the Nazis. They have made it their mission to break the media monopoly of a dictatorial regime, whatever the cost.

The videos, photos and reports are posted on a website with the title "Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently." The site has been online for about a year and is operated by a dozen young men, mostly students. They are risking their lives given that the Islamic State has the sole copyright on execution videos, and violations are punished with the sword.

One of the website's founders, who uses the pseudonym Abu Mohammed, was in southern Turkey in March. He had fled from Raqqa because he feared he would be identified by Islamic State hackers. "They sent us emails under false names, offered to work for us as volunteers and supposedly wanted to provide videos for our site," he says. The emails were contaminated with Trojan viruses designed to collect information about the activists' whereabouts. "Hackers from Canada who are working with us discovered the viruses during routine scans," says Abu Mohammed.

### **'Enemy of God'**

Mohammed, who is in his late 20s, is a former student who had aspirations to become an engineer. Now he's a resistance fighter in exile, allegedly on the Islamic State's most wanted list in Raqqa, and he can claim that his organization was officially condemned as an "enemy of God" in three Friday sermons in Raqqa mosques.

Abu Mohammed began his political work more than a year ago, as an outraged, angry amateur. A self-taught man, he had a lot to learn in the past 14 months. At first, he and his friends posted their videos and images on Facebook and Twitter, after they had been saved on the memory chips of their mobile phones. This saved time, but it also increased the risk to an unreasonable level, as they soon learned.

One of their fellow activists, Motaz Billah, was captured only a month after the campaign began. During a search at a checkpoint, militants found incriminating material on Billah's mobile phone. Three days after the arrest, the message that he had been publicly executed -- shot to death -- appeared on his Facebook account. His murderers posted the images on the Internet in late April.

Since the tragedy, Abu Mohammed and his activists have become more cautious and their lives more complicated. They move around the city restlessly, changing their accommodations every few days. They have also changed the way they work. The fact that Islamic State has publicly condemned them has brought them new helpers, and they can now rely on a network of sympathizers who take photographs and record videos. They have never met in person, and the helpers have no idea who the key members of the organization are. The group operates very similarly to criminal hacker gangs. They only know each other through pseudonyms, and they meet online in a closed forum that is only accessible and known to invited members.

In the last 12 months, these precautions have allowed them to evade the hackers and hunters of Islamic State, who are constantly combing through buildings where they believe activists are staying.

Despite the new strategy, the risk of being caught while filming is only one of a number of risks that are difficult to control. The files are usually uploaded at Internet cafés, which the Islamic State has under surveillance, both through informants and cameras. As a result, the activists can only upload their files in places where they trust the café owners or are able to find loopholes in the surveillance network.

According to Abu Mohammed, the al-Khansa Brigades are even more problematic. The all-female units are part of the morality police, and because their members wear the Niqab, like all women in the Islamic State, they can operate essentially incognito, so that one of them could be standing undetected next to one of Abu Mohammed's friends while he is filming. "This is really a big problem for us," he says.

The meeting with Abu Mohammed was supposed to take place in Gaziantep, a Turkish city near the Syrian border, but on the previous evening he sent a text message stating he wanted to meet in a different city. He had received warnings from moderate Sunnis that Islamic State killers were searching for him in Gaziantep.

After the meeting, Abu Mohammed disappeared into the alleyways of the old city. He said he would spend at least one night at a friend's house. He sounded relaxed. Like his mortal enemies, he has faith in God, and he says that whatever happens, it is in the hands of Allah.