

*“There are some young westerners who go to fight ISIS in Syria; maybe they are crazy, naïve, or simply have nothing to lose. What is certain, or so they tell us, is that their war is not over”*



# OUR WAR

a DOCUMENTARY FILM by

**Benedetta Argentieri, Bruno Chiaravalloti e Claudio Jampaglia**

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## Synopsis

A US Marine veteran, an Italian anticapitalist activist, and a Swedish bodyguard. At first these three characters might have nothing in common, though they share a decision to fight in the same war. In fact they all joined as volunteers in the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Rojava, a region under Kurdish control in northern Syria.

Karim, Joshua and Rafael are foreign fighters, they left their families and their lives to go on the ground and fight the so-called Islamic State (ISIS).

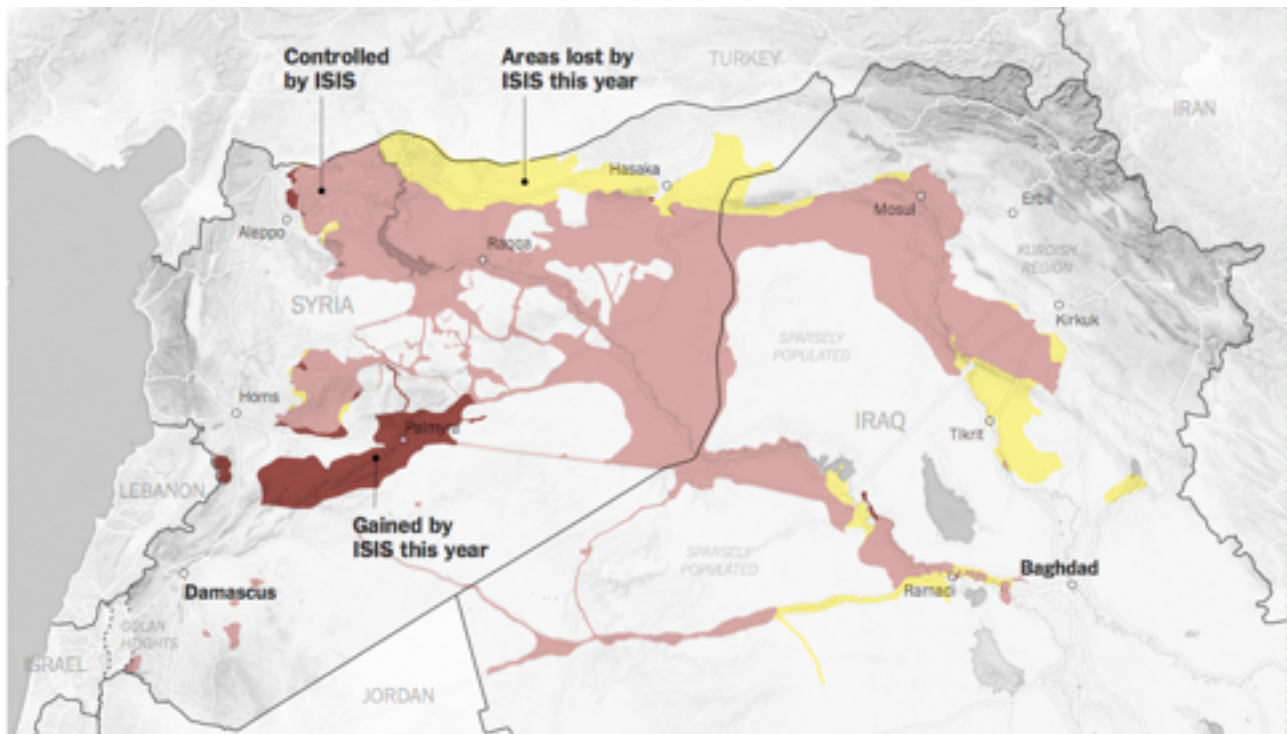
The documentary has original footage from the battlefield, which blends in with their daily life in USA, Italy, Sweden. The three characters talk about their comrades and friends who died on the battlefield and how they will continue to support the Kurdish struggle. In volunteering to fight in a war that is so distant from their daily life the question is, what are they fighting for?

This documentary is about a social phenomena which sees young westerners taking matters into their own hands, volunteering to fight ISIS, rather than joining the military and waiting for their governments to act. Their motivations may differ, but in a world influenced by social media and instantaneous communications, the lines between their world and the ruthless war in the Middle East became inextricably blurred.

## Background

Since 2013 more than 30,000 fighters - according to the *New York Times* - have joined ISIS from outside Syria. They arrived from the Middle East, Asia and Europe, bolstering the mythology surrounding the self-declared caliphate which also expanded into Iraq. Raqqa is the de-facto capital in Syria. The city was seized in 2013 with the help of Al-Nusra, another Sunni terrorist group.

On the eastern front the Iraqi Army is fighting ISIS with the support of Shia militias and Iranian *pasdaran*. Assad's Syrian army, backed by Russian air power and the Shia Lebanese militia Hezbollah, is pushing from the south, while in the north there are several Kurdish forces; the Peshmerga are protecting the border of the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq while the YPG protects Rojava. The area is self-governed with democratic and communitarian principles, including the protection of ethnic minorities and gender equality in prominent roles, in both civilian institutions and military ranks.



Gains and losses shown occurred between Jan. 5 and Dec. 14 of 2015. | The New York Times | Source: IHS Conflict Monitor

The YPG is an offspring of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party, listed as a terrorist organization by the United States, NATO, and other western states. In 1984 the organization started an armed struggle against Turkey for political and cultural rights. They also asked for an independent state. In 2013 a ceasefire was negotiated, though in 2015 it was once again broken, and Ankara started a new bombing campaign against the PKK and sieged the Kurdish areas in Turkey.

The Kurds have been used as pawns since WWI, often sacrificed to the interests of other powers. However, the region's volatility might reverse this trend. Five years into the Syrian civil war, over 25 years of instability in Iraq and the raise of ISIS, there seems to be a clear sign that regional powers such as Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, will no longer be able to maintain their status quo although they seem equally reluctant to admit it. Whether or not the Kurdish dream of building a democratic, independent, secular and multi ethnic Rojava will ever come true remains to be seen.

## The foreign fighters

The term foreign fighters is mainly used to describe the tens of thousands of people who have joined ISIS. Nonetheless, on the opposite side with the Kurds, there are a few hundred men and women who fight without a paycheck or the expectation of reaching paradise. They can be described as adventurers, people looking for a reason to live, or simply individuals who have nothing left to lose. Either way, they are Westerners who, in spite of all the risks, have decided to fight ISIS. To do so, they chose to put their lives at stake in a war that seemed so far away, but the latests wave of terrorist attacks brought it to our doorstep. Because of how remote the conflict is from their daily lives, question arise to what their motivations may be.

The chaos in Syria has confused Western governments as they grapple with how to deal with the war. Diplomacy in the region stutters and the media has had a hard time grasping the situation. We still don't know if we are looking at the beginning of a WWII, the birth of a new Islamo-Fascist state or the final showdown between Shia and Sunni.

The majority of foreign fighters in the YPG have very clear ideas on how to defeat ISIS. They think the West should fully support the Kurdish-Arab militia on the ground and support the birth of a democratic region in Syria as alternative to monarchies, tyrannies, and authoritarian governments.

It shouldn't surprise us that many have joined the Kurds. We met dozens of them on the ground in both Syria and Iraq. Some admitted without hesitation they were seeking revenge against ISIS and didn't know anything about the Kurds before joining. Others explained they were just looking for a war to join, or they decided to fight because they were fascinated by the PKK ideology and guerrilla style.

Not all of them integrated into the Kurdish militia, mainly for cultural differences. In a non-conventional army many small comforts are missing. More difficult is the constant lack of ammunition and food. Some foreigners join for just a month and do not go back. Several were discreetly expelled for using drugs, not respecting female guerrillas, lying about their military background, or putting recklessly endangering the lives of their comrades.

The YPG is seriously considering not admitting any more foreign volunteers, but the reality is that westerners are a phenomenal propaganda machine for the Kurdish struggle and the newborn Rojava community as it signals that they are a part of a global struggle.





## The Main Characters

**Karim** is 27 years old and considers himself a communist. His mother is Moroccan and his father was Italian. He concentrated on classical studies during high school. He is a chess aficionado and he loves boxing. He spent several years as an activist in an Italian left-wing social center and in the anti-racist movement. Everything changed when he decided to participate in a



humanitarian aid convoy to help civilians who escaped the Syrian Civil War. He arrived at the Turkish-Syrian border where he delivered aid in the refugee camps in Suruc, Turkey. While in Suruc, he realized he wanted to do more than just helping civilians so he decided to cross the border into Kobane, Syria. In January 2015 he joined the YPG while ISIS had the city under siege. In a few days he found himself on the frontline and for four months he participated in the YPG advance, the offensive pushing all the way to the Euphrates River. He was first deployed in an assault team and then as a sniper. In his four months in Syria he used his own camera to document the conflict and collected three hours of footage that he gave us for this documentary. He went back to Italy for a few months, then he returned to Syria to fight. In 2016 he published for Rizzoli, "Il Combattente" ("The Fighter") an autobiography of his experience in Rojava.

**Joshua** was born in 1985 in North Carolina, United States. After high school he went to college to study sociology but quickly realized it was not for him. He joined the Marines. While in service he did three tours to Iraq and Afghanistan.



After leaving the Marines, he worked a series of odd jobs. He also participated in "Naked and Afraid" a reality show aired by the

Discovery Channel. He never really got used to civilian life.

In June 2014 ISIS invaded Mosul, Iraq, where he fought just few years back while in the military. He wanted to go back to fight. In November 2014 he flew to Iraq and then joined the YPG in Syria. He was one of the first foreign fighters to volunteer with the Kurds. He was in Syria for nine months: he ran an armory, built bombs, drove tanks and defended villages on the frontline. He left Syria for love, and went to Iraqi Kurdistan. There he didn't have much luck and got back to the United States with no money and a YPG flag in his pocket.

**Rafael** was born and raised in Sweden by Iraqi Kurdish parents. In his youth he was hotheaded. He dropped out of school to follow his passion for music and signed up for vocational school. During that same period he got engaged and had a child. Today he works as a bodyguard. He protects witness who are pending trial dates as well as domestic abuse victims. He likes his life in Sweden.



After watching an ISIS propaganda video in which children were killed, he decided to go to Syria and fight the jihadists. It was November 2014. He was amongst the first westerners in Kobane. He went back and forth from Syria several times, and he also became commander of a tabur – a combat unit – mostly composed of foreign fighters.

During his fifth trip to Syria he was arrested in Iraqi Kurdistan. He was in prison for three weeks, where he claims he never received charges for any crimes. Through his experience with the YPG he learned about his own origins and people. Nonetheless his home is in Sweden and he plans to continue living in Stockholm. In 2016 he published with Fischer & Co: “My life at stake”, an autobiography of his experience in Rojava.



## Director's Notes

Everything in this movie has a multiple layers: the protagonists, materials, the context, even the authors themselves, as well as the human and historical questions that the film raises. Some of these questions are as ancient as war itself but most of us never have to ask ourselves: what is worth risking your life for? Is it ever legitimate to kill a human being?

This is a film about the war in Syria and in Iraq which threatens our peace and our security at home. After the recent wave of terrorist attacks around the world in the name of the Islamic state, it seems clear that this war will also change our future.

The main characters are three young men who decided to fight ISIS. We tried to bond with them, talking to them for hours, going to their homes, meeting their families and friends. We really wanted to grasp the motivations behind their choice and they showed us their daily life in their home towns.



We started working on this project when Karim gave us three hours of footage he shot during his first tour in Rojava. This was a real surprise because his video gave us so many different ideas and raised many questions amongst ourselves. We met Karim multiple times to interview him and then he asked us to accompany him to the airport as he returned to fight in Syria a second time.

We went on a trip with Joshua. We met him in North Carolina where he participated in a air-soft game, then we drove all the way to New York. We stopped in Washington DC where he wanted to go in front of the White House to show his YPG flag. In New York he met another foreign fighter that he knew from Syria and we followed him while he was dressing up to be interviewed by Fox News.

The last volunteer fighter we met was Rafael. We saw him months before in a YouTube video while he was clearing a village in Syria with other foreigners. In Stockholm he brought us into his life. We saw him wearing a bulletproof vest just minutes before he started his shift as a bodyguard. He talked to us about his faith and the reason why he wears a Christian cross around his neck. He played music and he admitted how he is still struggling between his Swedish and Kurdish identities.

From the beginning we decided to get to know them and let our characters tell us about their war experiences, their wishes to return to fight or not, and their troubled dreams. We tried to push them as much as possible when talking about their decision to volunteer to fight in a war. Each of them surprised us, making connections, pushing us into un-planned situations and leading us to change our language and focus.

What we experienced with them is part of the movie: sand, ice, real and fake bullets, things hidden at home and the memory of fallen comrades.

The life of these three men changed drastically after fighting ISIS. While working on the documentary, we always kept this in mind. This thought pushed us to question ourselves and what we wanted to tell in the film. We tried to show what it means to fight somewhere else, to face death and to kill. Then to return home to “this part of the world.”

## **Authors & Directors**

### **Benedetta Argentieri**

Is an independent journalist based in New York City. Since August 2014 she has been covering the Iraqi and Syrian war, with several trips on the ground. Her work has appeared in several international publications, including Reuters, Vice News, Quartz, and Corriere della Sera. In 2013 she co-produced “Capulcu-Voices from Gezi”, a documentary about the revolt that occurred in Gezi Park in Istanbul, Turkey, which won several awards including the Amnesty International award. In 2014 she also obtained an MA in Journalism, with a concentration in politics from Columbia University in New York. Before moving to the United States, Benedetta worked as a staff writer at Corriere della Sera, the Italian leading newspaper, for which she is still a regular contributor. Over a decade ago, she started her career at Mediaset, a private television in Italy.

### **Bruno Chiaravalloti**

Is a visual anthropologist and filmmaker, since 2000 he has participated in the organization of cinema festivals and has brought to light numerous documentaries for NGOs in Africa and elsewhere. “Dr. Mick e la Foresta” was presented at the Festival della Montagna di Trento in 2007, at the Festival del Cinema Africano of Milan and at the Cinema Ambiente of Turin. In 2008 he won the production prize of Filmmaker Festival in Milan with his documentary “Una questione Privata”. In 2011 he won the Fai prize at the Milano Film Festival with “Rinnovata la chiamò”, a documentary dedicated to a primary school. Since 2012 for *Prospekt* agency he created web documentaries, promotional videos, and video installations as “Milano Under 30” (2012, *Corriere della Sera*), *Obamerica* (2012, *Corriere della Sera*), “25 Aprile” (2015, *Corriere della Sera*). In 2012 he created six video installations for the MUSE (Museum of Science) of Trento. In 2013 he collaborated with the artist Marinella Senatore on “Piccolo Caos” project. In 2013, together with a university research group, he filmed and produced the web documentary “Au Centre de Tunis”. In 2015 with Claudio Jampaglia he created the video installation “A/R” permanently exhibited at the MUDEC (Museum of Cultures) in Milan. Today he’s a freelance.

### **Claudio Jampaglia**

Journalist, author and producer. He has worked as a reporter and editor for multiple national publications and as an author of programs and as a journalist with various national and local radio stations. He is also the author of various books published by Feltrinelli and Ponte alle Grazie. He has collaborated with Italian and International TV programs, such as RAI and the Canadian Broadcasting Company. Since 2010 he has been working with the *Prospekt* agency as an author and producer of reportage, video, web series and web documentaries for media, institutions and companies.



## Producers



### Lorenzo Gangarossa

Lorenzo Gangarossa is currently covering the role of Head of International Productions and Producer for Wildside supervising all the activities on Feature Films and the International productions of the company. He has been working in the film/TV industry for more than 10 years for companies like BBC FILMS, TARTAN and with producers like Simon Channing Williams (THE COSTANT GARDENER), Andrea Calderwood (THE LAST KING OF SCOTLAND) before coming back to Italy to set up the Cinema and Tv Dept of Indiana Production where he produced and supervised production on more than 17 films including ITALY IN A DAY by Oscar Winning Director Gabriele Salvatores and executive produced by Ridley Scott, SPAIN IN A DAY by Isabelle Coixet, AN ITALIAN NAME by Francesca Archibugi, the Italian entries for the Academy Awards THE FIRST BEAUTIFUL THING and HUMAN CAPITAL by Paolo Virzì.

### Associated Producer



It is a production company, based in Milan, active for more than fifteen years in the video post-production for TV and cinema with an international dimension in Documentary and Cinema Festivals and distribution.

### In collaboration with





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## Web

The website of the film: [www.ourwar.net](http://www.ourwar.net)

## Data Sheet

**Title:** “Our War”

**Genre:** doc-film

**Format:** Colour Full HD e MiniDV

**Length:** 69 min.

**Language:** English, Italian, Kurdish, Arabic

**Subtitles:** English or Italian

**Directors:** Benedetta Argentieri, Bruno Chiaravalloti, Claudio Jampaglia

**Screenplay:** Benedetta Argentieri, Claudio Jampaglia

**Photography:** Bruno Chiaravalloti

**Footage in Syria:** Karim Franceschi

**Protagonists:** Joshua Bell, Karim Franceschi, Rafael Kardari

**Editing:** Bruno Chiaravalloti and Chiara Vullo

**Original Soundtrack:** Vittorio Cosma

**Original Song “Our War”:** Vittorio Cosma and Eugenio Finardi

**Producers:** PossibileFilm, Lorenzo Gangarossa and Rai Cinema.

**Co-producer:** Start

**In collaboration with:** Bravagente Sound Agency, Ala Bianca Edizioni, Music Production

**Shooting:** September 2015, Italy and Syria;  
December 2015 USA;  
January 2016 Sweden

**Edited:** February-June 2016

**Release:** August 2016