

Syria: A Run-In With Islamic State

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Student's lawbooks nearly get him into big trouble at militant checkpoint near Raqqa.

Before his bus left the city of al-Hasakah for Raqqa on last July, Mohammed asked his sister to hide his student ID card. He was worried it could get him in trouble and that he would be arrested or flogged by Islamic State (IS) militants.

His ID showed he was studying law, a discipline forbidden by IS. Under the strict rules imposed by IS, law schools are considered institutions of "kufr" (unbelief) and "shirk" (polytheism). Students of law are thus at high risk.

IS has controlled the city of Raqqa in northern Syria and most of the roads leading to it since January 2014. Since then, Mohammed (not his real name) has constantly had to make up intricate stories and excuses to protect himself.

The bus set off and reached the first IS checkpoint on schedule. A militant wearing a mask and military gear got on. Speaking in a Raqqa dialect, he asked the young male passengers on the bus for their military service papers and university IDs.

When the militant got to him, Mohammed explained that he was not a student and was just accompanying his sister as her "mahram". Under IS's Sharia rules, women are not allowed to travel without a male "mahram" – their husbands or close blood relatives.

The IS militant finished his inspection of identity papers and got off the bus. Mohammed kept watching him through the window.

The man then went to the luggage hold and pulled out Mohammed's bag. Opening it, he found a set of university notes.

"Deny the whole thing. Say they're not yours," Mohammed's sister whispered to him.

She remained in her seat so as not to anger other IS members who were standing nearby. Mohammed summoned up all his courage and got off the bus.

"Whose lecture notes are these?" the militant asked.

"Not mine," Mohammed replied.

"Then whose are they?"

"A friend of mine gave them to me."

Luckily for Mohammed, the name "Hani" was written all over the notes. The militant went down the bus again and shouted out the name. No one answered because Mohammed had invented the name to protect himself.

"You must come with us," the man said.

"I can't leave my sister alone without a mahram," Mohammed replied.

"It isn't up to you – you will come with us," the militant insisted.

"I understand that, but it isn't up to me to let my sister travel alone, either."

Mohammed's response seemed to satisfy the militant.

"We'll let you go now, but we'll confiscate the lectures," he said. "Tell your friend Hani to come and pick them up from this checkpoint."

"God willing," replied Mohammed.

He let out a sigh of relief. His fear of what might happen to him subsided, and he collected himself and got back on the bus.

"The most important thing is you're back safe," another passenger said. "The notes don't matter."

It had been a fateful moment. His whole life had hung on this one man, and on whether he believed his story. This militant was in a position to decide whether he was guilty or innocent of charges that no one could guess at. Under IS rule, it is never clear what accusations are founded on.

Mohammed was left feeling hatred and disgust for these people, and wishing that he could leave the country and all its miseries behind.

Haya Mohammed is the pseudonym of a student from Raqqa currently in Aleppo.

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