

Syria: A Sick Joke on April Fool's Day

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In government-held areas, people think one thing and do another.

It was seven in the morning on April 1, 2015 – time to get up for work. I was still at my job in a Syrian state bank in Latakia, which continued to function although it offered only a skeleton service. I lacked the courage to quit, even though I had received many job offers abroad. Maybe, to put it simply and sentimentally, it was because I didn't want to leave my country.

As bank employees, we were supposed to be at our desks by 8:30, ready for our clients. And what clients some of them were – at first sight you'd think they belonged to a state security agency or the army. As they came into the bank in military dress, these customers spoke in an authoritative tone that suggested they occupied important defence posts, and were the kind of armed men you see everywhere in the city's streets.

They were not carrying Kalashnikov rifles, and gave the impression that they were just ordinary civilians who had put on uniforms as a form of intimidation or to declare their support for the valiant, heroic army.

"I am the martyr so-and-so's brother," a typical customer would begin. As if the death of a brother gave them the right to jump the long queue of waiting people. Some poor civilian who had been there a whole hour would voluntarily give up his place on hearing these magic words.

I met their requests in complete silence, thinking to myself, "So you think your brother's the only one who died at the front?"

Many of them were coming to collect a dead brother's pension, or "blood money", as bank staff called it. Arguments would break out between siblings or parents if the amount was short, or if other family members showed up with papers granting them power of attorney. Customers who felt wronged would take out their anger on us, although we had no choice but to release funds when presented with official papers that were stamped and certified.

These people forgot everything just to get 200,000 pounds (1,000 US dollars), barely enough to cover the needs of a family of five for a few months. They even forgot their martyred brother, whose death as an army soldier was worth such a small amount of money.

Our institutions were full of photos of our "Eternal Leader", the late Hafez al-Assad, and beside him the "Leader of Hope", his son Bashar. Whenever we passed one, we would silently curse them.

Let's not forget how we flocked to elect the leader of whatever hope was left to us in the election of June 3, 2014, thus helping him destroy what was left of the country. We competed with one another to express our love and devotion for a leader we really hated.

That was when I came to truly understand the contradiction that is now an integral part of life for those of us living in government-controlled areas.

On this particular April 1, the hours plodded by, filled with incessant phone calls to smooth the progress of this or that person's affairs, and letters written to fast-track somebody's case, and as usual the endless stream of uniformed clients with those magic words about martyrdom which we all knew by heart.

As soon as three o'clock came, I rushed to leave, but my colleague stopped me and said, "We can't go. We have extra work to do today."

I thought it was an April Fool's joke, and an unnecessary one given the sheer amount of hypocrisy and lies we had to navigate on a daily basis.

As it turned out, this extra work had nothing to do with processing official documents, or facilitating something for a client. Instead, we were herded together to board a bus to the local blood bank. There, we were forced to donate some of what ran through our veins in order to feed the slaughterhouses that pass for hospitals and serve no one except members of our valiant army.

This army was in difficulty, especially since rebel forces had captured the city of Idlib just days before, on March 28. Many government soldiers had been killed and injured in the battle, so a lot of blood was needed to try to save whoever could be saved.

Yes, I was forced to donate blood to those who were killing my brothers on the other side.

A girl from a youth volunteer group, wearing a military uniform adapted to her feminine form, gave me a number. My slight build meant they had to be satisfied with very little of my blood, after which I was able to leave and wait for a bus to take me home. It was packed, but we were all used to crowding into small spaces, given the vast numbers of displaced people who had been absorbed into our city.

In the bus, things were much the same as at work. The driver and half the passengers were in military uniform and the radio was blasting out deafening songs idolising our leader, all about how we were prepared to defend him with our very souls.

The bus stopped in the middle of the street to let some armed men in military police gear get on. They paid nothing for the ride, as public transport is free for them.

The overcrowding meant that the butts and barrels of their guns poked us here and there. We bore this in silence since there was nothing to be done about it. Any act of protest could endanger your life.

Eventually, we arrived at my stop. All of a sudden, a car sped by with windows tinted so dark it was impossible to see who was inside, with pictures of the Syrian eagle and the Leader of Hope on its hood.

The car nearly collided with the bus before skidding off course. It ended up on the pavement, narrowly missing an elderly lady whose face blanched in horror.

The driver emerged to launch insults and curses at the bus driver, passers-by and the elderly lady, and no one dared to tell him he was in the wrong. Not content with that, he warned our driver that any damage to the car would result in a prison sentence for every single passenger on the bus as well as the driver himself.

We were only saved from this fate by the intervention of a military policeman, one of those whose gun barrel had been poking and prodding me on the bus.

He introduced himself to the car driver and persuaded him that what had happened had been a terrible mistake. The car driver admitted he was in the wrong. So we narrowly missed punishment for a crime none of us had played a part in.

What an April's Fool Day that was.

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