

Forget the war, have an ice cream in Idlib

IDLIB, SYRIA: In Syria, a country at war with itself, there is a secret that is kept by members of a single family and can only be passed on from one generation to the next.

This secret is held in a little dried-out town just outside the city of Idlib, which is home to one of the country's worst houses of horrors: the Idlib Central provincial prison.

The secret? The family recipe for the best home-made ice cream in the whole northern province.

In Mills, a small town outside Idlib and nestled between a single row of bare concrete shops - typical of most of rural Syria - Abed Aragman Akra, 70, has been running his beautifully decorated ice cream shop for the past 31 years.

His shop serves ice cream of all flavours to people willing to risk the war for some sweet escapism.

Akra and his sons, 31-year-old step-brothers Zaher and Wael, run the Dolls ice cream shop, which would proudly stand up between any shop in trendy Greenside or Parkhurst in Johannesburg or the V&A Waterfront in Cape Town.

"Before the revolution, people came from Alepo [100km away] and Damascus [380km] to buy ice cream," says Zaher. "We served 1,000 people a day."

Now they sell about 100 cups of ice cream at 50 Syrian Points (about R5) each, and business is still good enough.

Idlib - which is controlled by the Syrian Army - has helped to ensure that Mills never comes under attack. It also has not been occupied by President Bashar al-Assad's army.

The flat-screen TV set mounted against the wall of the shop shows heavy fighting in Idlib and Jisr alShughur, about 20km away.

In Idlib prison, where 5,000 prisoners were kept, the evidence of a brutal regime is still visible. On the floor of the gallows room, where two nooses still hang, the clothes of the last prisoners killed there lie scattered about.

Almost 80% of the prisoners were political prisoners, and when the prison was liberated in January, 13 of them were found dead.

"They [prison guards] immediately killed you if you said: 'There is no God but Allah'," Zaher says.

Source: The Times via I-Net Bridge

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