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*Syria: Over 100 Houses and
Shops Seized by HTS in Rural
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HTS has also confiscated several public facilities, including Qastoun Dam and the al-Sharia Town's Power Plant

Introduction:

Having controlled the full range of rural Hama in early January 2019, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham/HTS¹ was fast to seize and confiscate several public facilities and privately-owned properties, in addition to which it imposed royalties/taxes on the majority of the area's residents, according to the testimonies obtained by Syrians for Truth and Justice/STJ.

In February 2019, HTS has confiscated no less than 60 houses and shops, as well as agricultural lands in the town of Kafr Nabudah, on the pretext that the owners of these properties are based in area's held by the Syrian regular forces. Also, HTS imposed royalties/taxes on the civilians who stayed in the town, about 2500 families, obliging them to pay a sum of 1500 Syrian Pounds for each monthly consumed electricity ampere, given that power is obtained from the regular forces-control areas and for free.

In mid-January 2019, HTS confiscated 42 residential apartments, affiliated with the governmental General Organization for Housing in the al-Ziyarah District, western rural Hama. It is worth mentioning that in 2014 the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya/Ahrar al-Sham took hold of these apartments; however, with HTS coming into power in the district, command over them turned to the latter armed group, which notified the displaced persons residing in these housing units of the necessity to pay a monthly rent of 4000 Syrian Pounds, warning all that failure at paying will lead to the evaders' eviction.

Stopping not at this limit, HTS declared that the Qastoun Dam, 2700 dunums, is at the disposal of its affiliated Office of Economic Affairs, giving the agricultural lands, encompassed by the dam's area, in rental to farmers for varying rents, while the dam is considered one of the key water resources, which farmers use as their primary means to irrigate their lands.

In the Qalaat al-Madiq District, HTS enforced royalties/taxes on the residents, committing them to paying 2000 Syrian Pounds for each monthly consumed ampere of electricity, in addition to another 1000 Syrian Pounds which it coerced them to pay in return for drinking water, not to mention that it imposed control over the al-Sharia Town's Power Plant, Qalaat al-Madiq District, while allowing the Syrian government-affiliated employees in and out of the plant as to run its affairs.

At the onset of 2019, the Turkistan Islamic Party continued the acts of robbery and pillage with which it aimed at the Zayzun Power Plant, al-Ghab Plain, under the supervision of HTS this time, after the latter won control over the full range of rural Hama. Militants of the Party, in cooperation with HTS-affiliated militants, dismantled the plant's cooling tower, the steel columns and panels as to sell them, knowing that the Turkistan Islamic Party has conducted a

¹ On January 28, 2017, several jihadist factions in Syria's north announced integration under "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham/HTS". The factions that dissolved themselves and joined together under the new name were (Jabhat Fatah al-Sham-previously known as al-Nusra Front- Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Liwa al-Haqq, Ansar al-Din Front, al-Sunna Army). Nonetheless and due to the confrontations that broke out between the Ahrar al-Sham Movement and HTS on July 15, 2017, the Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement announced its separation from HTS on July 20, 2017.

large-scale robbery of the plant, targeting numerous of its supplies and contents in the past years.

HTS, according to STJ's field researcher, had attained full control over rural Hama in January 9, 2019, following clashes with the National Front for Liberation/NFL, which broke out as a result of the latter's intention to expand, as it set up military posts and founded local councils in the Muhambal District, rural Idlib, especially in the village of Jdaria, which HTS considered a violation against its military and civil areas, most importantly the Muhambal District, where it holds the reins of power.

In the aftermath of the clashes, HTS managed to gain complete control of rural Hama's areas, which are out of the Syrian Government's control, including service and public facilities, buildings and projects owned by the Syrian Government before 2011. These confrontations also helped HTS take over the all areas in Idlib Province militarily.

It was not only the armed opposition group-held areas in Hama Province that bore witness to large-scale confiscations, robberies and pillages, for several public facilities and properties, as well as privately-owned ones in HTS-held Idlib Province were a target to similar violations in early 2019, on top of which were the General Grain Foundation in Idlib City, the mill in Ma'arrat Misrin and the grain bins in Raa.²

1. Opposition and Extremist Armed Groups Take Turns in Seizing about 60 Houses and Shops in Rural Hama:

In February 2019, HTS seized 60 houses and shops in the town of Kafr Nabudah, northwestern rural Hama, the ownership of which belongs to civilians that fled the area several years ago, triggered by the shelling conducted by the Syrian regular forces. HTS confiscated these privately-owned properties on the claim that their owners are based in Syrian regular force-held areas, according to the testimony of a relative of a civilian, whose house was lately seized. The relative narrated the following to STJ:

"My relative was displaced to the Syrian regular force-held areas several years ago, escaping the bombing the town was subjected to. In 2018, an armed group, affiliated with Ahrar al-Sham, seized my relative's house, along with other houses and shops. They have also deposited the families of their militants in these houses. The shops, however, were confiscated by an associated court, which leased out these shops under commercial contracts to persons who have close ties with the armed group. When HTS took over the town, particularly in early February 2019, it confiscated all the houses and the shops once seized by the Ahrar al-Sham, in addition to the building of the Free Police. HTS also summoned the people who rented the houses

² "Idlib: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Seizes Public and Private Properties." STJ, March 19, 2019. Last visited: November 17, 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/1224/>.

and the shops from the Ahrara al-Sham-affiliated court and then renewed these contracts, becoming the second party to the lease process in return for money.”

A Kafr Nabudah-based activist reported to STJ that HTS did not only confiscate about 60 of the town’s houses and shops, but it also imposed royalties/taxes on its remaining residents on February 15, 2019. The people were forced to pay a monthly 1500 Syrian Pounds for each electricity ampere they consume, knowing that electricity is obtained from the Syrian regular force-controlled areas/Muhradah District, which is usually provided free of charge.

In early April 2019, the number of families in the Kafr Nabudah Town was estimated at 2000 families, reported STJ’s female field researcher, adding that there are additional 500 displaced families, who sought refuge in the area coming from northern and northwestern rural Hama.

The HTS acts of confiscation in the Kafr Nabudah Town were not limited to houses and shops, as it also seized several agricultural lands, on the pretext of their owners living in areas controlled by the Syrian regular forces. A relative of one of the civilians whose land was taken over said the following:

“My paternal uncle’s family was coerced into leaving Kafr Nabudah Town, driven out by the bombing. Ahrar al-Sham, being in control of the town back then, confiscated the agricultural lands. My uncle owned a 45-dunum-land, cultivated with olive, and another 17 dunums which were not planted with any crop. An armed group of the Ahrar al-Sham seized his lands and other ones, leasing them out to another person, in return for about 300,000 Syrian Pounds. Nonetheless, when HTS controlled Kafr Nabudah, it summoned the people who rented the agricultural lands and renewed the contracts also in return for money.”



A photo of an agricultural land that HTS has lately seized in the town of Kafr Nabudah. Photo credit: STJ.

2. Seizing 24 Apartments in al-Ziyarah District, Rural Hama:

The al-Ziyarah District, for its part, had its fair share of the violations committed by HTS, which traced its way into the area in mid-January 2019. Administratively speaking, the district consists of 23 villages and towns, most notably the towns of al-Ziyarah, Qastoun and Zayzun, in addition to villages such as, Duqmaq and Kulaidan, which incubate several public facilities and properties, as well as privately-owned ones. Of these real estates, the key ones are 42 apartments in Zayzun Town, the Zayzun Power Plant and agricultural lands in the surrounding of the Qastoun Dam. In 2014, the Ahrar al-Sham took control over these facilities, which HTS held the reins of upon entering the al-Ziyarah District.

On the top of the properties confiscated by HTS were houses belonging to the Zayzun Town General Organization for Housing, where government employees used to reside before their displacement in 2014. In January 18, 2019, the displaced persons, living in the 42 seized houses, were notified by the HTS of the necessity to attend a meeting with Tariq Nasser Abu Mjahid, the official of the HTS-affiliated Office of Economic Affairs in the area. Abu Mujahed informed the residents that they are obliged to pay a rent of 4000 Syrian Pounds per month, warning them that evaders will be liable to eviction.

Ahmad Mansour, a displaced man living in one of the Zayzun Town General Organization for Housing's apartments, told STJ that he sought refuge in Zayzun Town in 2014, abandoning his village, Tal Wasat in rural Hama, due to destruction and the incessant shelling with which the Syrian regular forces targeted the village back then. He added:

"On January 18, 2019, I was summoned, accompanied by other heads of families, settled in the Housing Organization's apartments, to a meeting held by HTS, during which we were demanded to pay rents —4000 Syrian Pounds. By word of mouth, we were also notified that if we fail to pay, we will be forcibly expelled from these houses. The problem is that we are coerced into staying there, for I have no other shelter after my original house was destroyed. I am in this situation with the rest of the displaced who have made houses of the Housing Organization's apartments, which are 42 in number."

The HTS, the former Director of the Zayzun Local Council informed STJ, has seized the houses of the governmental General Organization for Housing without referring to the town's local council. On the contrary, it ordered the local council to collect the rents/royalties and hand them over to the Office of Economic Affairs located in the town of Muhambal, west of Idlib.



A photo of the houses confiscated by HTS in the al-Ziyarah District, rural Hama. Taken in: February 2019. Photo credit: STJ.

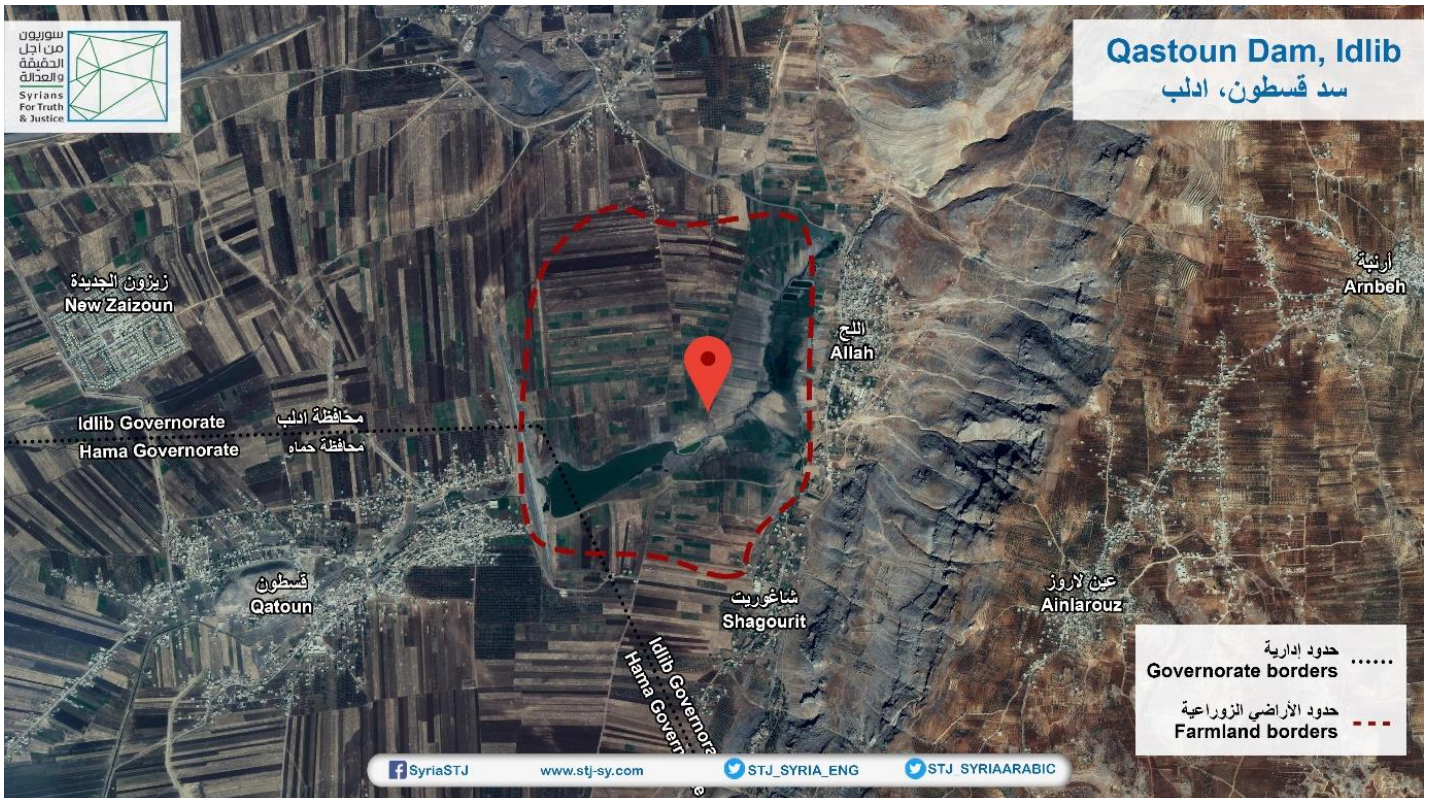
3. Agricultural Lands Confiscated in Qastoun Dam Area, Rural Hama:

Following its control of the al-Ziyarah District, western rural Hama, in early 2019, HTS placed the Qastoun Dam, 2700 dunums, at the disposal of its Office of Economic Affairs, which is also responsible for leasing out the agricultural lands surrounding the dam to farmers in return for varied rents. The Qastoun Dam, located to the north of al-Ghab Plain, rural Hama, is the major water source that farmers use as their preliminary means to irrigate their lands.

When the Qastoun Dam's water levels began to go down in 2014, being denied its allocations of the al-Assi River's water, many farmers returned to cultivating the lands they owned within the Dam's body, prior to their purchase by the Syrian Government which turned them into a storage place for irrigation water. On this note, Abdulmajeed al-Hanoush, a farmer from Qastoun Town, told STJ the following:

“On February 2, 2019, the HTS-affiliated Office of Economic Affairs notified the majority of the farmers who cultivated agricultural lands in the surrounding of the Qastoun Dam of the necessity to pay rents for the lands where they worked;

otherwise, they will be forced to abandon them. Each dunum is rented for 11,000 Syrian Pounds, which all the farmers chose to pay, as not to lose the crops they cultivated before the mentioned decision. HTS' Office of Economic Affairs in al-Ziyarah District is being run by Ali Hamdan, nicknamed Abu Omar, and Tariq Nassar, known as Aby Mujahid. The two persons are the Salvation Government's representatives in the area, working on collecting taxes and royalties imposed on its residents."



A satellite image showing the location of the Qastoun Dam, rural Hama, and the area where agricultural lands have been confiscated.

According to STJ's field researcher, about 500 dunums of agricultural lands, west of Zayzun Town and the ownership of which belongs to Christian Syrian Citizens, were also confiscated in early February 2019 by HTS and the Turkistan Islamic Party. The representative of the Party's Financial Office, called Zaid, and the delegate of HTS' Office of Economic Affairs, Tariq Nassar, have leased out the Christians' agricultural lands for 12,000 Syrian Pounds per dunum, dividing the money equally between the two armed groups.

4. HTS Imposes Royalties/Taxes on Qalaat al-Madiq District's Residents:

The HTS violations were not limited to the al-Ziyarah District, for it also targeted the Qalaat al- Madiq District. Once in control of the latter, which includes several towns — al-Amqiyah, al-Housh, al-Sharia, Qiratah and Qalaat al- Madiq—on January 1, 2019, the armed group embarked on changing the local council in the district, announcing its affiliation to the Salvation Government. HTS also met with dignitaries and representative of the district's villages and towns to inform them of the decisions it made and the royalties they are supposed to pay in return for water and electricity, in addition to the fact that all the Syrian Government's facilities are to be tackled by the Salvation Government.

Laith al-Alawai, Qalaat al-Madiq-based activist, who attended the meeting that brought together representatives of HTS' Office of Economic Affairs, Hamdan Abu Omar and Tariq Nassar, on the one hand and representative of the villages and towns in the Qalaat al-Madiq District on the other, said that HTS' delegates informed the civilians, residing in houses in the district, that they all have to pay a subscription fee to be provided with electricity, which amounts to 2000 Syrian Pounds per monthly ampere. In addition to this, every single family, residing in one of the area's houses, must pay a 1000 Syrian Pounds in return for drinking water.

He added that, in Qalaat al-Madiq, the towns and villages are fed with electricity by the Syrian Government-controlled Muhradah Power Plant. It is important to mention that the Syrian Regime was coerced into providing the towns and villages of the Qalaat al-Madiq District with electricity as to safeguard the al-Sharia Power Plant, responsible for supplying electricity to the Syrian Government-held villages and towns of Jourin, Shattaha and As Suqaylabiyah in Hama Province.

The HTS-affiliated Salvation Government, al-Alawi pointed out, managed to have full control over the al-Sharia Power Plant after it took over the Qalaat al-Madiq District, giving the Syrian Government-tied employees an access to the plant as to manage its affairs. In addition to this, adjacent to the al-Sharia Town, a 5000-dunam-agricultural air base is located, the agriculture lands of which are to be leased out the next year, as the al-Sharia Town Local Council has been informed by HTS.

On February 4, 2019, HTS, STJ's field researcher added, has also seized a 400-dunum-plant nursery in the city of Kafr Zita, which it leased out for a monthly 1000 Syrian Pounds per dunum.

5. Zayzun Power Plant Continues to Suffer Robberies and Acts of Pillage:

The majority of the cities and towns in Idlib Province and rural parts of Hama, Latakia and western Aleppo are yet deprived of electricity, which went off in 2015 after the Zayzun Power Plant was rendered completely out of service, for the plant was a target for robberies and pillage committed by extremist armed opposition groups, most notably the Turkistan Islamic Party, in addition to the damage that befell the plant during the confrontations the area witnessed in the same year, fought by armed opposition groups on one side and the Syrian regular forces on the second.

Control over the Zayzun Power Plant dates back to April 2018, when opposition and extremist armed groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Nusra Front, the Turkistan Islamic Party and Ahrar al-Sham, embarked on an attack against the Syrian regular forces, stationed in Idlib City, which ended with the latter's withdrawal. The armed groups, for their part, continued to progress towards Syrian regular force-held areas in the towns of al-Mastoumeh, Ariha and Muhambal in Idlib Province, reaching the Zayzun Power Plant in June 2015. The attacker armed groups managed to finally have full control over the plant in early August, the same year.

When the armed groups first stormed the Zayzun Power Plant, electricity was yet being generated and provided to several areas. However, affected by the crossfire, exchanged by the armed opposition groups and the Syrian regular forces, especially the latter's airstrikes that targeted vital parts, the plant stopped producing electricity. The warplanes destroyed the fuel storage tanks, the cooling tower and several of the secondary turbines, which were responsible for gas circulation. In September 2015, the plant was rendered out of service, to be declared under the full control of the Turkistan Islamic Party in October 2015, green-lighted by Ahrar al-Sham, which at the time was commanded by Abu Abdulrahman al-Ghab. In return, Ahrar al-Sham controlled the Qalaat al-Madiq District, including its wealth, products and governmental facilities.

At the onset of 2016, the Zayzun Power Plant was turned into a target for robberies and pillage, under cover of the armed opposition groups which controlled the area and wished to make an investment out of it. The plant was accordingly emptied of its most precious contains, which were sold to merchants affiliated with the Syrian regular forces. On this note, a resident of the Marj Zuhour Village, adjacent to the Zayzun Power Plant, recounted the following to STJ:

"In early January 2016, small vehicles, Suzuki type, started to enter the Zayzun Power Plant, coming out a few hours later while loaded with brass cables. Back then, the sell operations, however, were done on a small-scale and limited to a number of the militants positioned within the plant, where per kilogram of brass was being sold for over 6 USD. In April 2016, the matter developed, for teams of blacksmiths, equipped with cutting and dismantling devices, started to refer to the plant, accompanied by vehicles of the Turkistan Islamic Party. They began to dismantle the

furniture, electric devices, windows and doors of the employees' houses, located within the plant's area. There were more than 300 houses within story-formed buildings. The robbed items were loaded onto large vehicles that headed towards the Latakia-Aleppo Highway."

The witness added that the Party brought in other teams, which spread around the plant, especially where the cooling tower, the fuel tanks, metal pipes and other little logistic equipment were installed. All these parts were sold on the local market.

A second witness, one of the workers of the teams brought into the plant, said that during the summer of 2016, the plant was visited by experts and merchants who had an Aleppian accent, who asked the militants of the Turkistan Islamic party to dismantle specific pieces. The militants would often resort to the workers for translation to Arabic.

The merchants, the witness added, used to pay the price of each piece separately, after it is shipped, pointing out that some pieces would take the workers three days to dismantle.

In armed opposition group-held areas, there was not a suitable market for the pieces and logistic equipment stolen from the Zayzun Power Plant, so the only outlet was areas controlled by the Syrian regular forces, according to one of the workers, also a member of the dismantling teams called into the plant, who bore witness to the robberies and acts of pillage back then. He told STJ the following:

"One of the merchants that bought the contents and the equipment of the plant, asked me to translate to Zaid, the financial official of the Turkistan Islamic party, that the purchase price must consider the taxes the merchants are paying to the regular force-affiliated checkpoints, set up on the road between Aleppo and Hama, and that the Party must give up on 10% of the price its demanding for each piece, so that the merchant could preserve a margin of profit."

On his turn, one of the members of the Zayzun Power Plant's administrative team, said that most of the robbed heavy machinery, were shipped from the plant to Aleppo City, from where they were meant to be transported to Hama City. The witness added that the prices paid by the merchants to the armed groups in return for the plant's equipment, no matter how high they are, they do not cover 4% of the devices' original price, which can be estimated at millions of dollars.

According to STJ's field researcher, even when HTS had full control over rural Hama's areas, the Turkistan Islamic Party did not obstinate from committing acts of confiscation and robbery in the Zayzun Power Plant, al-Ghab Plain, for it embarked on these violations under the supervision of HTS. The Party, to the date this report was written —April 9, 2019 — continues to sell the remaining scarp parts and steel in the plant, after it sold all the plant's strategic equipment in the past years. In early 2019, the militants of the Party and others of HTS dismantled the plant's cooling tower, the steel columns and boards, which are to offer for sale. In addition to this, the scrap and used steel vehicles continue to enter the Zayzun Power

Plant, which they exit while loaded with items, after it was turned into a military barrack and a source of investment to both armed groups.



A photo of the Zayzun Power Plant after it was seized and pillaged by the Turkistan Islamic Party.
Photo credit: Media activists.



History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.