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בזוה המקום נמשח הנביא אלישע בן שפט
על ידי אליהו הנביא זל שגא מגלי צידה

في عام ثلاثة واربعين وثلاثة آلاف للتخليفة وفي هذا المكان
مُسَّحَ إِلِيْشَاعُ بْنُ شَافَاتِ نَبِيًّا عَنْ يَدِ إِلِيَّا هُوَ نَبِيٌّ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ

C'EST ICI, QU'EN L'ANNÉE 3043, DE NOTRE ÈRE,
FUT OINT LE PROPHÈTE ELICHAA BEN CHAFAT

**Opposition and Regime Forces
Took Turns Looting Eliyahu
Hanavi Synagogue, Jobar**

Opposition and Regime Forces Took Turns Looting Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue, Jobar

*The fate of most of the Synagogue's artefacts entrusted to an armed
group still unknown*

Syria's rich tapestry of cultural heritage has been ripped to shreds in the severe circumstances during the years of conflict, as several cultural, historical and archaeological sites in Syria were damaged or being looted including the ancient Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue in Jobar. According to eyewitnesses interviewed by STJ, a lot of the Synagogue's antiques and artefacts were looted by both, regime forces, who entered Jobar in 2012 and armed opposition groups who seized control over the neighborhood in 2013 and started excavations under the Synagogue with the aim to find buried treasures or any valuable archaeological pieces.¹

Eyewitnesses, who were present in Jobar during the period of the armed groups control till 2018, reported that large sections of the Synagogue devastated during exchanges of fire or shelling by parties to conflict. Therefore, much of its collection moved to another place for safekeeping, under the guidance of a committee composed of a member of the former local council of Jobar and commanders of al-Rahman Legion (Faylaq al-Rahman).²

After the government forces regained control of Jobar in March 2018, dignitaries of the neighborhood summoned the committee entrusted with keeping Jobar Synagogue's artefacts, in order to consult on finding a way to transfer the Synagogue's collection to the northern areas of the country, and were shocked to know that three of the committee members already sold the pieces they were supposed to protect. However, the remained artefacts entrusted to al-Rahman Legion commanders, who were displaced to northern Syria and have concealed the fate of the pieces they had till the date of preparing this report, October 17, 2018, as locals and activists from Jobar confirmed to STJ field researchers.

The Jobar Jewish Synagogue was of a great cultural value for the people of eastern Ghouta, in particular those of Jobar, that's what prompted the neighborhood's youths to make every effort to protect it and its contents. But, unfortunately, the war incidents made that impossible, as the armed groups decided to move the Synagogue contents claiming to keep them protected from bombardments, but that led to their eventual loss, according to activists who asserted that the armed groups wanted to have things their way and every choice they made was in their best interests.

¹ The most prominent of those armed group who controlled Jobar was the Harun Al-Rashid Brigade, which was formed from a number of Jobar youths, and merged later with the al-Rahman Legion.

² The al-Rahman Legion was formed in early August 2012 under the command of the dissent captain Abdel Nasser Shammeir, who hails from the province of Homs. Initially it was named the Al-Baraa brigade then changed into the al-Rahman Legion in late 2013, after it expanded to include Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari Brigade, Liwa Shuhada Al-Ghouta, Ahl al-Sham Brigades, al-Liwa al-Awal in Qaboun and Tishreen neighborhood, and Al-Adiyat Brigade in Western Ghouta. Reportedly The al-Rahman Legion had some 9000 fighters.

Irina Bokova, the former Director-General of UNESCO said on May 2014:

“The destruction of the oldest Synagogue in Syria is a new blow against its religious and cultural heritage, which has already suffered tremendous damage.” And she added: **“This Synagogue bears witness to the cultural diversity of Syria’s history and to the potential of peaceful coexistence among all communities in the country”**. She also declared that **“Syria’s rich with social mosaic and cultural fabric, including the religious heritage of all confessions.”**³

It is worth mentioning that the old city of Damascus inscribed on the UNESCO’s World Heritage List.⁴

In other incidents, illicit excavations took place in the towns of Kafriya and al-Fu’ah during August 2018. More than 500 pot-hunters were given the green light for conducting excavations in the both towns after being taken over by armed opposition groups, including Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya Movement, and Suqour al-Sham Brigade.⁵

I. Looting the Jobar Synagogue’s artefact collection

Eliyahu Hanavi Synagogue (The Jobar Synagogue) is the oldest in the world, dates from 720 BCE. The Synagogue located at al-Madrasa street in the center of Jobar and holding thousands of religious and cultural treasures, including the oldest copy of Torah, which is engraved on the skin of a deer and preserved in silver tanks in addition to a library of priceless ancient books and the shrine of the prophet Eliyahu, according to Firas al-Masri the advisor of the Syrian Association for Preservation of Archeology and Heritage,⁶ who added that the Rabbi Abraham Hamra had taken up responsibility for the Synagogue till 1988; the year he emigrated to USA:

“After the Rabbi left, a Jewish family took charge of the Synagogue, which used to be visited by Jewish on pilgrimage and politicians. The Synagogue hadn’t been attacked or any of its contents got robbed until the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011.”

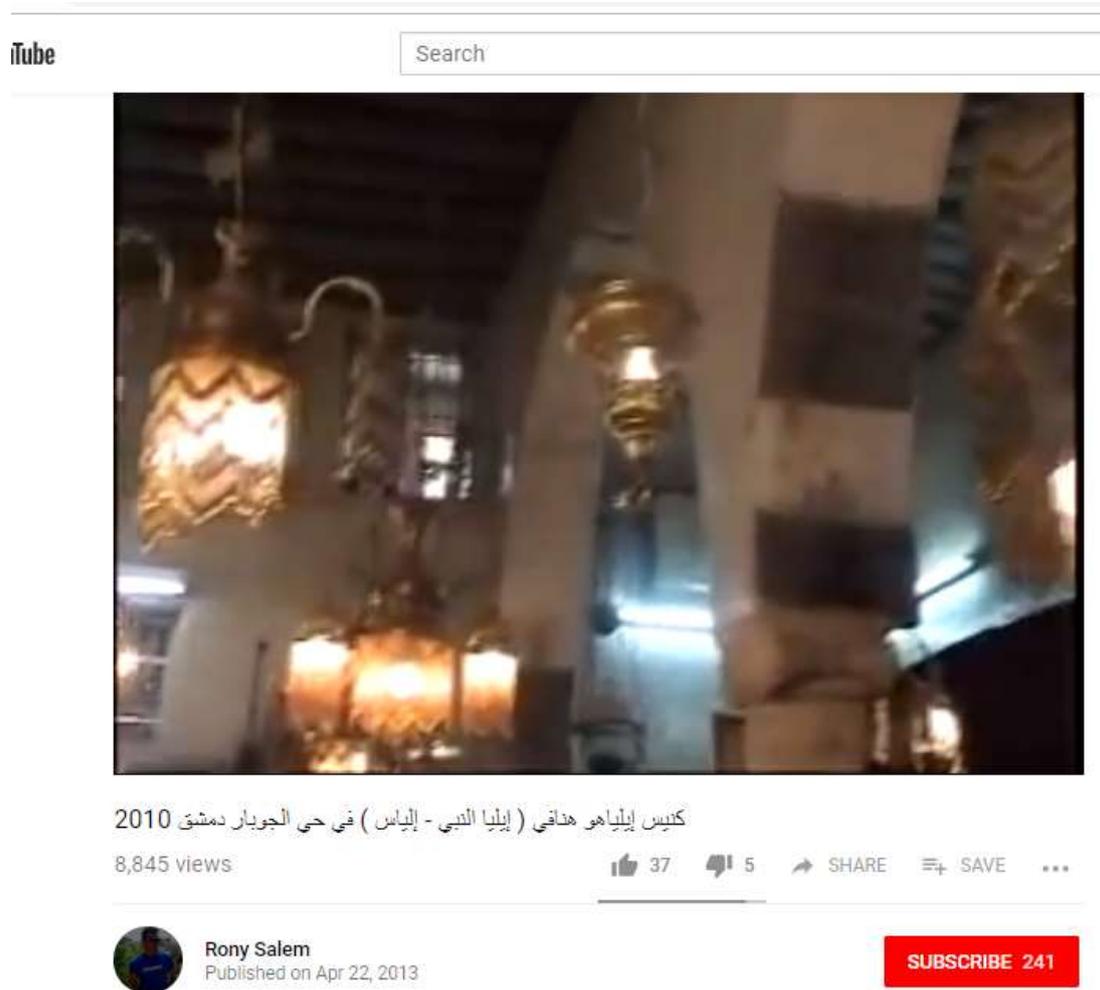
³ “UNESCO Director-General calls for the protection of all religious heritage in Syria, after the destruction of historical synagogue in Damascus”, UNESCO, May 28, 2014 <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-director-general-calls-protection-all-religious-heritage-syria-after-destruction>.

⁴ “Ancient City of Damascus”, UNESCO, October 2018 <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/20>.

⁵ “Excavations in Kafriya and al-Fu’ah Following Rebels’ Control”, STJ, October 9, 2018 <https://stj-sy.org/en/759/>.

⁶ NGO active in a number of Syrian regions. For more info see: https://www.facebook.com/pg/psahrteam/about/?ref=page_internal.

A [video](#) circulated on social media shows the Jobar Synagogue with all its contents; it was filmed before 2011.



A screenshot taken from the aforementioned [video](#)

On June 20, 2012 the Syrian Army launched powerful assault in Damascus' Jobar neighborhood included massive raids on the houses. Omar Salha, an activist from Jobar witnessed the assault, said to STJ:⁷

“Government forces, specifically those of the Air Force Intelligence, besieged the Jobar Synagogue when they entered the neighborhood in 2012 and were seen entering it. However, after they withdrew, we went to check up on the Synagogue’s contents, and we found that many of its artefacts, antiquities and books were disappeared. I couldn’t tell what the pieces are exactly or how valuable they are.”

⁷ Most of the witnesses interviewed in this report were recently displaced to northern Syria.

Another witness from Jobar confirmed what reported about the Syrian Army' stealing of artefacts from the Synagogue in 2012 and said that the armed groups who later managed to control the neighborhood on February 28, 2013 were no better, as they looted what was left.

In the few years that followed, the Syrian Army couldn't enter Jobar but it used to shell and bomb it regularly. The Synagogue wasn't spared; it was hit with missiles and rockets, as reported by a resident of Jobar who was present in the neighborhood in 2013 saying

"After armed opposition groups took control over Jobar in 2013, the Syrian Army escalated its bombardments on the neighborhood, as on April 2013 it directly targeted the Synagogue with six mortar shells causing it significant material damage, and in another time a rocket landed near it. Every site and place in Jobar were bombed regardless of whether sacred or not."

A [footage](#) published by a media activist on June 23, 2013 shows the destruction caused to the Synagogue by the regime forces' bombardments.



A screenshot taken from the aforementioned footage.

II. Armed opposition groups excavated around the Synagogue for hidden treasures

When the regime forces mounted their operations against Damascus' Jobar, the local council there, which was formed by the opposition at the time, took charge of protecting the Synagogue's contents, as asserted by Majd al-Hasan, an activist from Jobar who was there at the time. Majd talked to STJ saying:

"The intensified bombardments led the local council members to decide unanimously to move the Synagogue's contents somewhere else to protect them from further damage. A committee was formed to keep Jobar Synagogue's artefacts, it was composed of a Sheikh called R. Kh., a commander of Harun Al-Rashid Brigade, a youth called A. B. and three other men who all agreed to move the Synagogue's pieces, which included a valuable copy the Torah, to a secret place, no one else knows. However, in late 2013 a member of this committee disappeared and showed up later in USA through a [footage](#) showed him meeting the Rabbi Abraham Hamra, the former leader of the Syrian Jewish community, who owns a Jewish Heritage Center in US."

Majid added that by the beginning of 2014 most of the Synagogue's valuable artefacts were disappeared and members of the both armed groups; the al-Rahman Legion and the Army of Islam (*Jaysh al-Islam*), started digging around the Synagogue in search for valuable artifacts, saying in this regard:

"Each group dug a side of the Synagogue searching for hidden treasures. However, a dispute arose between Jobar's locals and the Army of Islam, which led to prevent the latter's members from digging while those of Harun Al-Rashid Brigade continued in their excavation. Actually, no one knows if any artefacts were found."

Another witness from Jobar neighborhood assured STJ that the local council was entrusted with protecting the Synagogue's contents and set up a committee for that in early 2014, in agreement with the then controlling armed groups, mainly Harun Al-Rashid Brigade, he added:

"It was widely reported that a member of that committee sold the artefacts entrusted to him in the black market, but when questioned he denied, and the investigation closed without any results."

In a further testament, a witness who was present in Jobar in 2014 said that the illicit excavation, led by al-Rahman Legion and the Army of Islam, started in late 2014 and in digging the 'Arabic Houses' area where the Jobar Synagogue located, they started to find artefacts. But the real surprise, as he termed, was finding an ancient building containing relics and ancient manuscripts as well as golden icons which led to the instigation of conflicts between the two groups on the right of digging in the area. He added:

“Almost all of Jobar people know what happened during that period. Once, during their diggings, members of the two groups crossed paths in a ditch where they were looking for buried treasures and gunfights started between them which resulted in the dead of 7 and the injury of others. However, since the Harun Al-Rashid Brigade had greater control on the Jobar neighborhood it managed to loot most of the Synagogue’s artefacts and sell them to the regime through intermediaries, among them was the dealer Mohieddine M. or smuggle them through tunnels to Barzeh neighborhood and from there to Lebanon. All of those participated in the smuggling operation got large sums. The whole contents of Jobar Synagogue were looted by the beginning of 2018 and its building was mostly destroyed by the regime forces’ bombardments.”

A [footage](#) published by Step News Agency on August 17, 2015 showed a side of the destruction caused to the Jobar Synagogue being bombarded by the Syrian Army in 2015.



A screenshot taken from the aforementioned [footage](#)



A side of the destruction caused to Jobar Synagogue by the Syrian forces' bombardments. Taken on May 28, 2014. Photo credit: activists from Jobar.

III. Unknown fate of the looted artefacts

In February 2018 the Syrian forces and allies stepped up an offensive aiming to take over eastern Ghouta and massive casualties fell as a result.⁸ According to an activist, dignitaries of Jobar summoned members of the committee entrusted to keep the Synagogue's artefacts for questioning, and shocked to know that three of them sold the pieces they were supposed to keep.

The al-Rahman Legion, who was in control of the central sector which contained the towns of Irbin, Zamalka as well as the neighborhood of Jobar, signed an agreement with the Syrian government and its allies under which it accepted to evacuate its fighters and their families along with those of HTS as well as civilians who wished to join them, toward northern Syria. On the back of this agreement, differences emerged among the commanders of the al-Rahman Legion, among them was Abu Harun, the leader of the Harun Al-Rashid Brigade, as confirmed by the activist Ali Zeidan from Jobar , who talked to STJ saying:

“Abu Harun planned to smuggle the artefacts he found in diggings around the Jobar Synagogue to northern Syria, but his plans failed as a security force of the al-Rahman Legion led by Abu Hasan Fahed surrounded his location compelling him to surrender and hand over the all the artefacts he had which fate concealed since then.”

⁸ “The Unprecedented”, STJ, June 28, 2018 <https://stj-sy.org/en/607/>.

Another witness from Jobar neighborhood confirmed the sale of artefacts from the Jobar Synagogue by three members of the committee, who entrusted to keep them, as he said:

“The real monetary value of the artefacts and golden objects taken from the neighborhood exceeding hundreds of millions of dollars. They were smuggled out of Ghouta in coordination with officials of the Syrian Army and local intermediaries and were sold to dealers in Damascus and Lebanon. However, the Israeli Government bought the vast part of those artefacts through intermediaries in Lebanon and Damascus, yet, heavy artefacts are still there in eastern Ghouta. I’ve learned that the regime forces raided houses in Jobar neighborhood after they took control over it and arrested former opposition fighters, who already signed settlement agreements with the government, to force them tell where the remaining artefacts are”

The Times of Israel newspaper published a report on March 25, 2018 stating that Syria’s Ambassador to the UN Bashar Jaafari accused Israel of cooperating with the terrorist groups that were active in Jobar, to loot artefacts from the ancient Synagogue there and then smuggle them through local and foreign intermediaries.”⁹

Firas al-Masri the advisor of the Syrian Association for Preservation of Archeology and Heritage told STJ that it wasn’t the first time artefacts got looted from the Synagogue of Jobar, as before 2000 several objects had been stolen and smuggled to Israel, in this regard he goes on to say:

“Among the artefacts disappeared from the Synagogue and then showed up displayed in Israel museums were 9 manuscripts from the Hebrew Bible, 40 ancient scrolls of Torah and 32 boxes of ornate Torah scrolls. According to the 1970 UNESCO Convention it is prohibited to illicit export, deal in, or damage cultural property. The States Parties to this Convention undertake to return any such cultural property imported after the entry into force of this Convention in both States concerned. However, the convention is not applied to Syria, since the country is involved in a war”

Anadolu Agency reported on May 8, 2018 the Turkish authorities’ arrest of four Syrians and a Turk in possession of two ancient Torah scrolls inscribed on deer leather and embroidered with gold, emeralds and sapphires, trying to sell them for two million dollars. Officials of the Turkish Museum Directorate said that copies of the Torah, date back to the year BC.¹⁰

⁹ “Syria accuses Israel of stealing artifacts from Damascus”, The Times of Israel, March 25, 2018

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/syria-accuses-israel-of-stealing-artifacts-from-damascus/>

¹⁰ “Turkey: Two Ancient Torah Copies Seized before Sold”, Anadolu Agency, May 27, 2018

<https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7/%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%B6%D8%A8%D8%B7-%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%82%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%85%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86->

Activists reported that among those arrested were former members of the al-Rahman Legion.

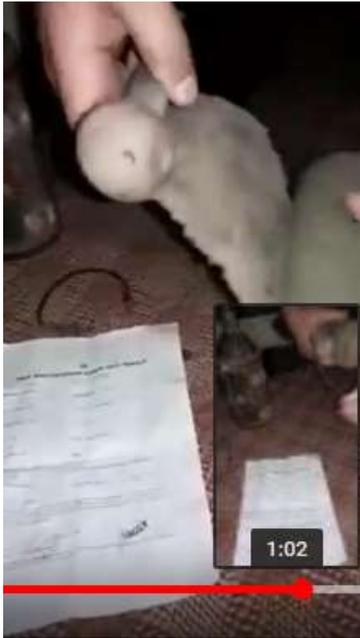
Against the background of the incident, a major dispute arose between the members of Jobar local council and commanders of the al-Rahman Legion, as reported by an activist from Jobar who talked to STJ saying:

“After signing the evacuation agreement, the head of Jobar’s local council, Abu Hafs, entrusted all the Synagogue’s artefacts to the Rahman Legion commanders who transferred them to northern Syria, and when then were asked about the relics’ fate, they denied they even kept them and denied responsibility. It’s not yet known, however, whether the Jobar Synagogue was the source of artefacts seized by the Turkish authorities from the Rahman Legion members or not.”

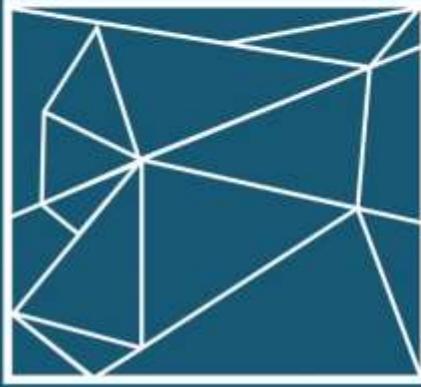
STJ managed to obtain exclusive footage shows manuscripts and artefacts looted from Jobar Synagogue then smuggled outside Syria in 2018.



[%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A9-%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%84-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%87%D9%85%D8%A7/1138567](#)



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STJ is an independent, nongovernmental organization whose members include Syrian human rights defenders, advocates and academics of different backgrounds and nationalities.

The initiative strives for SYRIA, where all Syrian citizens (females and males) have dignity, equality, justice and equal human rights.

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