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**Syria: At least 750 Christian
Houses Illegally Seized in Jisr
al-Shughur, Idlib**

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*The takeovers conducted by The Guardians of Religion Organization
and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham*

Summary

The Guardians of Religion Organization/*Hurras ad Din* seized about 250 houses belonging to Christians- citing their absence-, in Jisr al-Shughur since early 2018 until its December. Some of those seized houses have been occupied by families of the Organization's fighters, according to witnesses.¹

Rural Jisr al-Shughur has been jointly controlled by the Guardians of Religion Organization and the Turkistan Islamic Party since early 2018, while HTS has controlled the city of Jisr al-Shughur since 2016. Falling under the control of radical Islamic groups, most of the Christian families chose to displace toward regime-held areas or abroad. Those who remained, however, are facing harassment by the Guardians of Religion Organization members, who restrict their religious practice and rarely allow them to visit churches, as reported by STJ field researcher, who added that the Guardians of Religion Organization also confiscated many agricultural lands in Jisr al-Shughur.

Our field researcher confirmed that the number of houses seized by the Guardians of Religion Organization, the Turkistan Islamic Party and HTS in Jisr al-Shughur and its suburbs, is over 750, mostly belong to Christians.

Earlier, in November 2018, HTS seized 400 houses and 50 shops, owned by Christians, in the province of Idlib. Besides, HTS confiscated three souks in the province which are 'Khan Kabbad, for cereals, Khan Fahdi, for oils, and Khan Ghannoum'. Those souks have shops and warehouses owned by Christian traders and they are of great symbolic importance for Idlib people.

It's not the first time HTS seizes civilian properties, as it took over many civilian houses in the province of Idlib during 2018. On that, STJ prepared a report in collaboration with the Syrian investigative journalism group, SIRAJ.²

HTS also seized more than ten houses- belong to government supporters- in the town of Kafr Zita in northern rural Hama, during October 2018.³

Further, HTS members looted and pillaged public properties in the province of Idlib, including the Saraqib- based grain silos.⁴

¹ The Guardians of Religion Organization/*Hurras ad Din* formed in January 2018. It includes several armed groups that have split from HTS, specifically those who are known for their loyalty to Al-Qaeda, including (Jaysh Al-Malahem, Jaysh Al-Badiya and Jaysh al-Sahel). ¹ The Guardians of Religion Organization has been active in the eastern and western rural Idlib since March 2018, specifically in Saraqib, Jisr al-Shughur, Ghassaniyeh, al-Qarah, Darkush and Yacubiyeh. The Organization has an estimated 1500 fighters of different nationalities, including Egyptians, Libyans, Saudis and Uzbeks.

² "Investigative Report – Warrant for Eviction", STJ, July 16, 2018 <https://stj-sy.org/en/535/>.

³ "Hama: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Seizes Houses and Public Buildings in Kafr Zita", STJ, October 23, 2018, <https://stj-sy.org/en/894/>.

⁴ "Idlib: Hayat Tahrir al-Sham Seizes Public and Private Properties", STJ, November 15 2018 <https://stj-sy.org/en/975/>.

I. “My house had been seized by HTS and later took by the Guardians of Religion Organization”

Since its formation in 2018, the Guardians of Religion Organization seized lots of civilian houses in rural Jisr al-Shughur, particularly in the villages of Al Gassaneyah, Yacubiyeh, Qunaya and Jdayde. The Organization regarded the seized property as spoils of war, and thus has a free hand on them, according to Nabeel M., a local of the village of Jdayde, which he fled in 2014. Nabeel talked to STJ saying:

“In 2015 my house was seized by HTS and occupied by a family of one of its fighters. When the Guardians of Religion Organization took over the village of Jdayde in 2018 it seized my house and that of my uncle, under the pretext of our presence in regime-held areas, specifically on May 1, 2018, as I learned from my relatives who are still in the village. The population of Jdayde in 2011 was 7000, but now only 30 families are still living there, as most of the village’s people have displaced to regime-held areas or abroad. The Guardians of Religion Organization also confiscated our land of olive trees and is taking its whole harvest. My relatives who are still in the village also told me that they are constantly harassed by members of the Organization, who accused them of gun possession or visiting regime-held areas, in order to drive them away.”

II. Stifling the remaining Christians in rural Jisr al-Shughur

Joseph S., 65, -lives in Yacubiyeh village and works as a farmer- told STJ that the Christians’ conditions getting worse day after day, and they have been living in fear and insecurity since the Guardians of Religion Organization took over their village. He said:

“I live with my wife in the village of Yacubiyeh, where many civilian houses have been seized by the successive controlling Islamic groups; HTS, the Turkistan Islamic Party and the Guardians of Religion Organization. On September 10, 2018, the Turkistan Islamic Party sized our neighbor’s house. He called Yousif and has left the village for years. He used to visit his house, however, once in a while, but he has been prevented from doing that by members of the Turkistan Islamic Party, who asked him to go to the Sharia Court in Jisr al-Shughur to sign his house over to the Uzbek family which occupied it. Further, the Guardians of Religion Organization confiscates agricultural lands of Christians and rents them to farmers.”

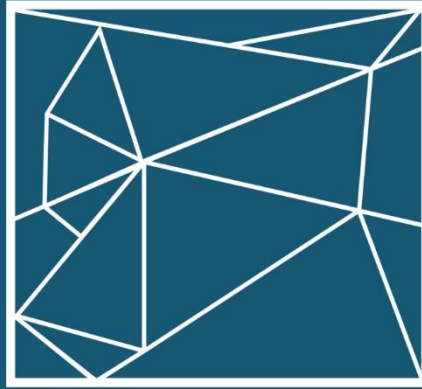
Joseph added that the remaining Christians in the village of Yacubiyeh are prevented from practicing their religion outside their houses by the Guardians of Religion Organization members, who allow them to visit the St. Joseph 's Monastery in the village of Qunaya only once in a year.

III. The Guardians of Religion Organization seized over 200 houses in rural Jisr al-Shughur

In another statement, a media activist from rural Jisr al-Shughur said that over the past eight years, many Christian families had been abused by all the successive Islamic groups that took control of the villages. He went on to say:

“the situation of the Christians in Idlib continue to be difficult due to loss of property and violations of their rights, which led most of them to displace to regime-held areas or abroad. More than 200 houses, mostly belong to Christians, were seized by the Guardians of Religion Organization. While HTS seized 100 houses and about 40 shops belonging to Christians in Jisr al-Shughur, during October and November 2018. The number of Christians in the city of Jisr al-Shughur was estimated to be about 4,000 people in 2011, but currently there are only about 200 Christians, all because of the harassment they are facing.”

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
والعدالة
Syrians
For Truth
& Justice



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.

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