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550 Homes and Businesses
Belonging to Christians in Idlib***

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lease it for large sums*

Introduction:

In late 2018, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) started confiscating houses and businesses belonging to Christians-who were forced by war to leave the city- citing their absence.¹ Up to 550 houses and businesses were seized by HTS as of October 2019. According to witnesses, HTS used those properties for lease or as residences to families of its fighters.

According to STJ field researcher, many Christian families have left Idlib abroad or to areas inside Syria since extremist groups took over Idlib in 2015, leaving all their property. Some, however, rented their homes and businesses or entrusted them to relatives or acquaintances who remained in the city. Only a few numbers of Christians are still residing in the city, specifically in its western part, but facing harassments and abuses by HTS agents, who even prevented them from practicing their religious rituals. And it is to be noted that HTS has seized the only church in Idlib since 2017, and rented parts of it to a person, who established an educational institute in there.

HTS' arbitrary seizures extended to include three old markets (in Arabic: khanat sing. Khan) in Idlib Kabbad al-Hubob Khan, Fahdi Khan-for the sale of oils- and Ghannoum Khan. STJ field researcher confirmed that HTS has seized entirely these three old markets, which have stores and warehouses owned by Christian merchants and of a great symbolic importance for Idlib's people.

Earlier in 2018, HTS with the Guardians of Religion Organization/ *Hurras al-Din* seized 750 houses belonging to Christians, in rural Jisr al-Shughur, citing their absence. Some of those seized houses have been occupied by families of the Organization's fighters.²

Added to that, HTS' robbery of public facilities and properties in Idlib, and the seizure of the grain silo in southern Saraqib.³

¹ On January 28, 2017, several Jihadi factions in northern Syria announced the merger under the name of "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham/HTS" They were; Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Al-Nusra Front), Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Liwa al-Haqq, Jabhat Ansar al-Din, Jaysh al-Sunna and Ansar al-Sham. However, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement declared its secession from HTS against the background of the recent clashes between the latter and Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya in northern Syria on July 20, 2017.

² "Syria: At least 750 Christian Houses Illegally Seized in Jisr al-Shughur, Idlib", STJ, September 10, 2019 (last visit: October 11, 2019) <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-at-least-750-christian-houses-illegally-seized-in-jisr-al-shughur-idlib/>.

³ "grain silo southern Saraqib Syria: Large-Scale Public Facility Robberies and Pillage Committed by HTS in Idlib", STJ, November 15, 2018, (last visit: November 21, 2018) <https://stj-sy.org/en/974/>.

I. HTS seizes 100 houses and businesses in Idlib in 2019:

Since June 2019, HTS has seized 100 houses and businesses owned by Christians, who have left Idlib during the years of the Syrian conflict. Most of the businesses seized are in the Clock Market and the Jewelry Market; the biggest markets in Idlib. According to a local source, HTS' annual revenues from the rent of the Christians' houses exceeded 70,000 USD. The same source added that HTS still seizing the only Christian church in the city and had leased part of it to some person, who established an educational institution there, and now repairing the left part to rent it also; thereby capturing all properties of the Christians who had left the city.⁴

Ahmed M., from Idlib, had rented a two-floor building owned by a Christian-who left the city in the war years- and turned it to an educational institution. Ahmed used to send the amount of rent to the owner until the HTS' "Spoils Office" sent him a summons in June 2019; He said:

"I went to the "Spoils Office" few days after I receive the summons, and told them that I had rented the building under a legal contract between me and its original owner and that I pay him the rent regularly. They said, however, that this contract is void because it should be registered at their office in Idlib by the original owner and until then the building would be at their disposal; thus I have to conclude a new contract with HTS and to pay the rent amount to its "Spoils Office". When I refused, they gave me an ultimatum to the end of June 2019 to empty the building from my stuff and get out of it or they would remove me by force; indeed, this is what happened, and the building is now completely at their disposal."

Subhi S., another witness from Idlib, said to STJ that HTS seized a business he had been renting for several years under a contract with its Christian owner, whom he used to send the amount of rent every three months to his new residence in Aleppo, until HTS sent him a summons in late June 2019 to investigate this matter; he said:

"The next day I received the summons, I went to HTS' "Spoils Office", and met its head, Abu Ubaida, who told me that HTS took possession of the business I'm renting, and thus I have to give the rent amount to the "Spoils Office" from now on or to terminate this lease otherwise. He said that this was a temporary measure pending the return of the original owner to Idlib to attest the rent contract. He gave me a period of about a week, either to pay the rent to them or to get out of the business. Indeed, I got out of it and removed all of my stuff and it is now at their disposal."

⁴ In 2015, the church of Idlib was seized by groups affiliated to Al-Nusra Front/Jabhat al-Nusra, who turned part of it to a Sharia institute and used the other parts as accommodations for their fighters.

II. The takeover of 400 homes and 50 businesses in Idlib, in late 2018:

Only very few of the Idlib's Christians are still living there, knowing that most of those who left, own businesses in the famous Jewelry Market in the city. This was confirmed to STJ by Joseph B., 60, a textile merchant from Idlib, as he said that he had assumed responsibility for several homes belonging to his relatives who had abandoned Idlib due to war hostilities. However, since Idlib has been taken over by HTS in 2015, the latter started asking the Christian families in the city to present titles of the homes they are living in, and confiscated the empty houses whose owners left, including that of Joseph's brother, which was seized on October 19, 2018 on the pretext of the latter's reside in a regime-held area in the city of Hama, Joseph went on to say:

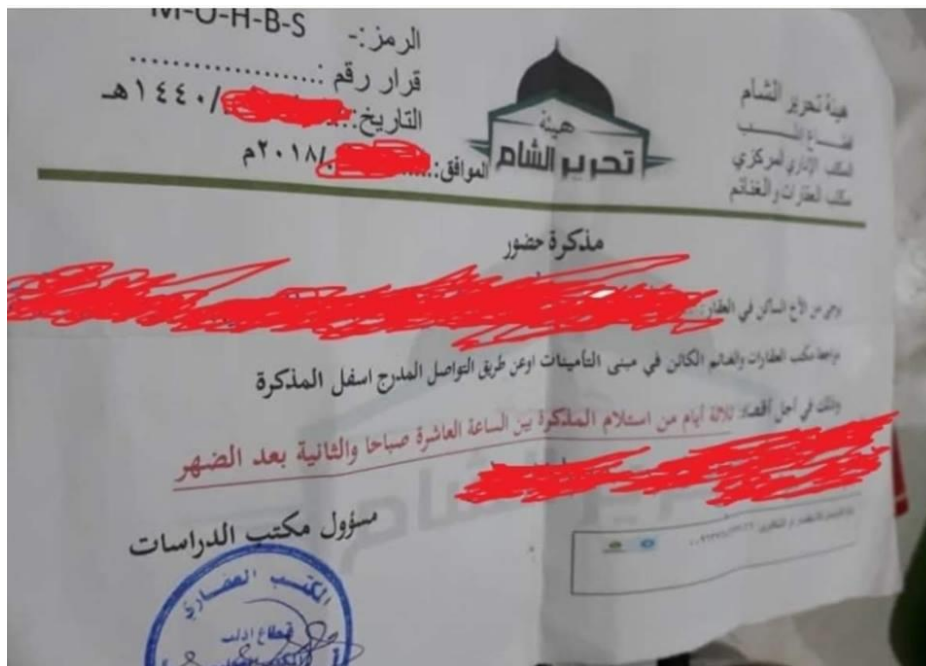
" On that day, HTS members seized my brother's house-located in the western neighborhood of the city- and didn't allow me to take any piece of furniture or even to enter it. Frankly, the life of the Christians who remained in Idlib became very harsh, especially since their numbers are very few, as the majority of them migrated to the neighboring countries or to Europe, or displaced to regime-held areas. Today, HTS trespassing the properties of all the Christians who left the city; estimated 50 businesses and 400 houses. In addition, HTS has got its hand on the markets (khanat) under legislation from the Department of Services of the Salvation Government. Added to all of this, the lack of security and safety in the city of Idlib, not to mention our inability to practice our own religious rites."

III. HTS claims the rent amounts:

In early October 2019, HTS announced its possession of the properties owned by Christians in Idlib and summoned the tenants to their offices to obtain a consent authorizing them to stay in these properties, provided paying the monthly rental fee to it, not to the properties' original owners. In this regard, George M., a jeweler from Idlib, said to STJ:

"I have been living in Idlib for nearly 65 years. I'm a jeweler and my parents own more than one store in the Jewelry Market. On October 17, 2018, the Salvation Government closed the shops in the Jewelry Market, and issued ultimatums to their tenants to go to the services department of the Salvation Government within three days to obtain new lease agreement papers. The surprise was that HTS asked to conclude new lease contracts, with it to be the second party instead of the original owners, and thereby getting paid the monthly rent. However, when a tenant refused to renew the contract with HTS, the latter forced him out of the store, knowing that the original owner of this business residing in regime-held area and doesn't dare dealing with the Salvation Government for fear of arrest by the

regime. HTS seized more than 50 businesses in Idlib and most of the houses in its western neighborhood.”



The template of the summons sent to the tenants of the businesses in Idlib, ordering them to come to the real estate office of the Salvation Government within three days. Credit: Activists from Idlib.

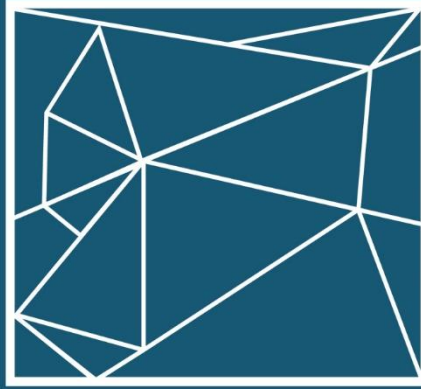
Joseph I. another witness from the city of Idlib, who had been displaced several years ago to the province of Aleppo, and rented his house and business in Idlib to one of his friends called Rifaat Sh., who called him in October 2018, telling him that he was told to go to the Salvation Government’s real estate office and pay the monthly rent to them instead, he said:

“I used to rent my house and store for SYP 15.000 per month, but after they became at the disposal of the HTS, their tenant forced to pay SYP 35.000, to HTS’ real estate office in Idlib. This decision has been circulated to all tenants of Christians’ homes in Idlib. I have been told by the tenant of my property that HTS justified that seizure by my absence from the city, as I have displaced from it since 2015.”

Rifaat. Sh., a friend of the witness, Joseph I. also gave a statement saying that on the morning of October 17, 2018, HTS agents came to him and told him to visit the real estate office to conclude a rent contract with HTS instead of that he had with the original owner, giving him a deadline until the end of the same month, otherwise the house and the shop will be confiscated and he will be removed from them, he continued:

“I went to HTS’ real estate office, where I was told that the rent amount of the house and shop became SYP 35.000 and I have to pay it to HTS from then on. I asked them to reduce the amount but they refused and told me to evacuate the estate or to pay. However, I told Joseph-the original owner of the house and store-about that and he accepted me to conclude a new contract with HTS and providing that he will send me an amount of SYP 25.000 per month in exchange for my stay in the house and the store in order to maintain the furniture. The number of homes whose residents were forced to conclude new rental contracts with HTS was estimated at 100 in Idlib, in addition to approximately 40 shops.”

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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