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# Afrin: Shaykh Al Hadid: Intimidation and Economic Tightening

## **Afrin: Shaykh Al Hadid: Intimidation and Economic Tightening**

*Since Turkey and allied National Army took over Afrin in March 2018, the latter has controlled firmly the economic life and carried out massive violations against the Kurds there*

The Turkish-backed armed groups of the National Army which exercise control over the town of [Shaykh Al Hadid](#) in the Kurdish-majority district of Afrin, is following intimidating policy towards the local Kurdish populations who haven't left their homes and suffocating them economically, in an attempt to push them to displace, as locals narrated to STJ.

The Suleiman Shah Brigade (also known as al-Amshat) is the primarily responsible for these abuses, as it imposed different types of taxes and royalties on homes, lands, agricultural crops, and shops, along with confiscating civilian homes after expelling their owners from them.

Further, the National Army groups have fully dominated the business operations in Afrin since it controlled it in March 2018.

## I. About Shaykh Al Hadid:

[Shaykh Al Hadid \(Şiyê\)](#) is a town in northeastern Syria, administratively part of the Afrin district near the border with Turkey. The area of Shaykh al-Hadid is 93.52 sq.km. and it had a population of 13871 in the 2004 census.

Currently, Shaykh al-Hadid is mainly controlled by the Suleiman Shah Brigade, with a little presence of al-Waqqas Brigade in the suburbs.

According to STJ field researchers, no more than 20% of the town's Kurd population remained in the town after Operation Olive Branch. Being taken over by the National Army, Shaykh al-Hadid has been settled by hundreds of families, who had displaced from the provinces of Damascus countryside, Homs, Hama and Idlib, and whose sons are fighters in the ranks of the National Army.

STJ documented 64 arrests in Shaykh al-Hadid, out of 506 made in all Afrin, in the second half of 2019.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of documenting the abuses, STJ field researchers met ten Kurds affected by the armed groups' acts-which has amounted to the suppression of economic rights and the arbitrary control of livelihoods- in addition to four individuals displaced to Afrin from Homs and Damascus countryside. The witnesses talked about the deliberate harassment of the Kurdish population. Besides, an STJ researcher interviewed a leader of a group in the National Army, who revealed some practices that specifically targeted the Kurdish people.

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<sup>1</sup> "Afrin: 506 Arrests in the Last Six Months of 2019", STJ, January 10, 2020, (last visit: January 17, 2020), <https://stj-sy.org/en/afrin-506-arrests-in-the-last-six-months-of-2019/>.

## II. An overview of the present situation in the region:

Since Operation Olive Branch was initiated by Turkey in March 2018, the seven districts of Afrin region (Afrin, Sharran, Shaykh Al Hadid, Maabatli, Bulbul, Jindires and Rajo) have witnessed mass exodus of Kurds, as those who remained are very few; only the elderly, between 40 and 85, and the poor and those who remained in order to protect their property.

The Kurdish population experienced numerous abuses throughout the 21 months of the National Army's control over the region, as the latter used to appropriate property and make arbitrary arrests, mostly aiming at ransoms. This was in addition to Turkey's attempts to obliterate the Kurdish identity of the region.<sup>2</sup>

On the economic front, the armed groups of the National Army, which divided the region into "sectors of influence", controlled the economic life; the trade and market, through its control of the crossings and checkpoints between areas of the regions, in addition to assuming and managing the border crossings with Turkey and governing trade between Turkey and areas of the Euphrates Shield and the Olive Branch.

STJ field researchers confirmed that the Sham Legion/ *Faylaq al-Sham* and the military police controlled the al-Ghazzawiyya checkpoint, between Idlib and northern rural Aleppo at the town of Darat Izza. The researchers also reported the presence of the Sham Legion, the military police and the Turkish forces on the Deir Ballut crossing/checkpoint between Afrin and Idlib. There are also checkpoints, at the entrances to the city of Afrin, jointly operated by the military police and Turkish forces.

The field researcher met A.S., a driver of a cargo vehicle, who confirmed that all checkpoints ask the drivers varying amounts of money/ royalties/fines/taxes in exchange for allowing their goods of all kinds to enter or exit Afrin. He said:

**"All of the checkpoints force the drivers of cars loaded with goods to pay at least S.P.500 to let them pass, as Al-Ghazzawiyya checkpoint take S.P.5000 to S.P.10000 from each passing car. Even minibuses carrying passengers are forced to pay for their passage. However, only civilian cars loaded with home furnishings or other personal effects are allowed to pass without paying."**

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<sup>2</sup> For more info see: "Syria: Turkish Identification Cards Obliterate Identity of Natives and Displaced populations Alike", STJ, October 21, 2019 (last visit: January 13, 2020) <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-turkish-identification-cards-obliterate-identity-of-natives-and-displaced-populations-alike/>.

See also: "Afrin: 72 People, including 5 Women, arrested in November 2019", STJ, December 11, 2019, (last visit: January 13, 2020) <https://stj-sy.org/en/afrin-72-people-including-5-women-arrested-in-november-2019/>.

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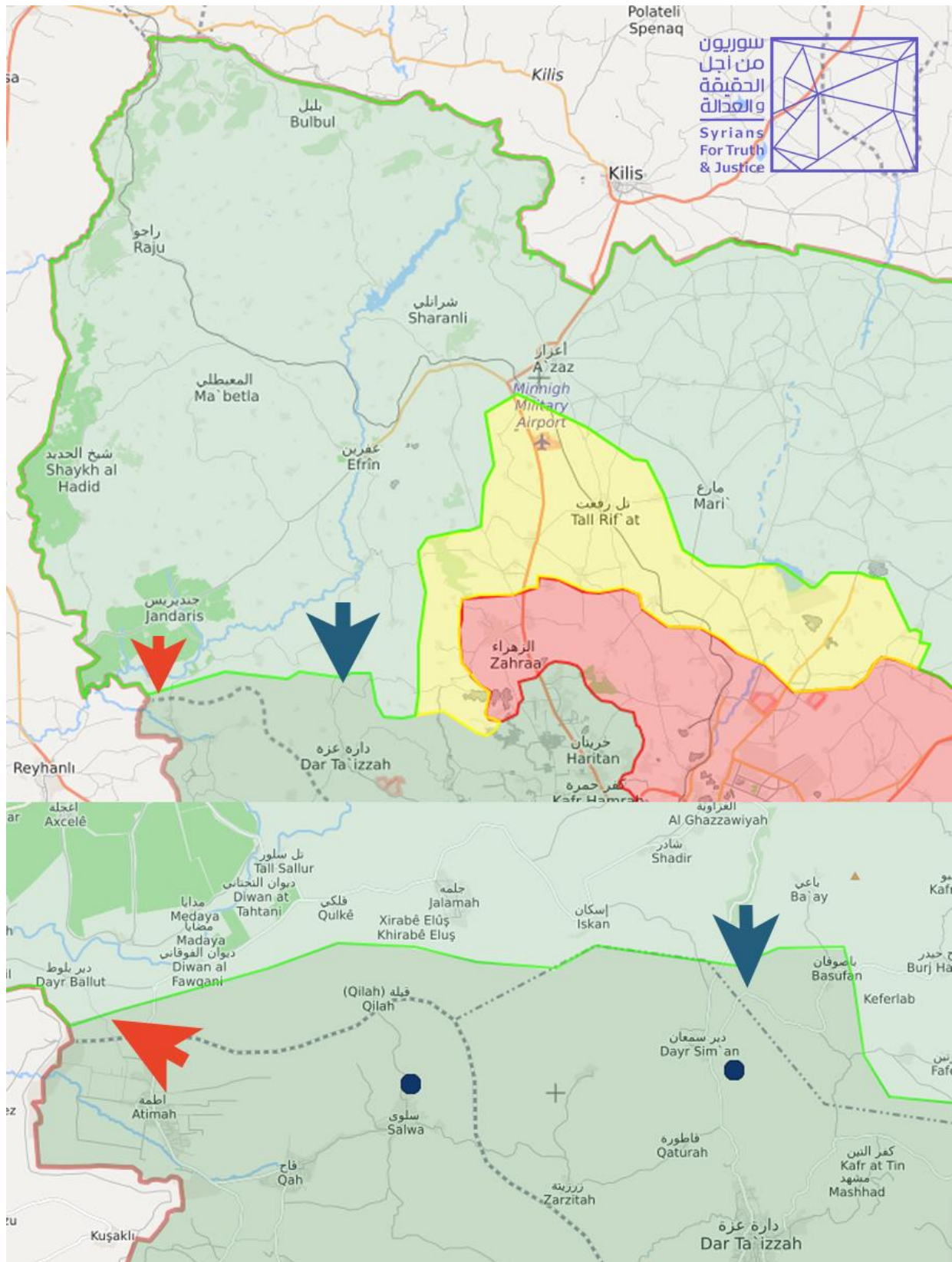


Image (2) a map of the crossings in Afrin.

### III. About the Suleiman Shah Brigade/ al-Amshat:

The Suleiman Shah Brigade is one of the groups of the 1<sup>st</sup> Corp in the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army affiliated to the Syrian Interim Government. The Brigade is led by Mohammad Hussein al-Jasim, known as "Abu Amsha". Most of its fighters are from the Turkmen nationhood, who reside in Hama. The group is known as al-Amshat in the media.

The group was formed in late 2011 in Hama, under the name the Banner of the Line of Fire Brigade/*Lowaa Khat al-Narr*, in order to confront the pro-government forces. As, the Brigade participated in several battles, including the one launched to lift the siege on the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo which was led by the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham/HTS (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra). Later, the group moved to rural Aleppo, where it operates in coordination with the Turkish forces.

In early 2016 the Line of Fire Brigade was renamed to Suleiman Shah Brigade, after the grandfather of Osman I, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, and then called al-Amshat due to its leader Abu Amsha.

In the same year, 2016, the group participated alongside the Turkish forces and other groups of the Syrian National Army in Operation Euphrates Shield launched by Turkey against the "Islamic State" in northern rural Aleppo. Later in 2018, it participated alongside the Turks in Operation Olive Branch, which aimed to control the Kurdish-majority region of Afrin, and in November 2019, it also fights alongside the Turkish army in Operation Peace Spring.

On several occasions, the leader, Abu Amsha, showed loyalty to Turkey and its Army, as he appeared in a video faulting demonstrators in Idlib for burning the Turkish flag; he said: "the Turkish flag reflects our history, and the history of our ancestral warriors and the names of our martyrs who buried in Turkey when we fought colonialism together, the Turkish flag represented the blood of Arab and Turkish martyrs, especially the Syrians.

The group organized a military training course-in the town of Shaykh Al Hadid-, from which a batch of youths were graduated as fighters in April 2019, and the batch held the name of "Ertugrul's Gradsons".<sup>3</sup> The graduation ceremony was decorated with Turkish flags and Ottoman music was played in and it was attended by members of the Turkish-backed National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

Like other groups of the National Army, the Suleiman Shah Brigade committed systematic violations in the Afrin region against the indigenous population, as it contributed to the housing of displaced families in the homes of the indigenous people who fled hostilities during Operation Olive Branch, and also participated in the arrests made against dozens of citizens to extort money from them. Besides, it seized the olive harvest in the town of Shaykh Al Hadid.

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<sup>3</sup> Ertugrul was the father of Osman I, according to Turks.

Abu Amsha, the group's leader, was accused by a young woman called Israa Khalil, of raping her repeatedly at gunpoint and threatening to kill her and her family if she told anyone about that. However, Abu Amsha was not subjected to any independent judicial investigation into these accusations. Further, STJ documented 22 arrests made by the Suleiman Shah Brigade during the second half of 2019 across the Afrin region.

#### **IV. About al-Waqqas Brigade:**

The al-Waqqas Brigade is affiliated with the 1<sup>st</sup> Corp of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army of the Syrian Interim Government. It has around 200 fighters, hail from the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib and Damascus countryside.

The Brigade is led by a man named Abu Mohammad, who had defected from the Samarkand Brigade in August 2019. The al-Waqqas Brigade took part in Operation Olive Branch and stationed in the town of Shaykh Al Hadid and erected checkpoints and headquarters around it.

STJ documented the arrest of 27 people, from all Afrin, by the Brigade in the second half of 2019.

#### **V. Money in exchange for not being evicted from their own homes:**

The Suleiman Shah Brigade imposed taxes/royalties on the Kurdish population within the areas it controls in the town of Shaykh Al Hadid. The royalties ranged between \$200 to \$400 and forced the remaining Kurdish homeowners to pay this fee in exchange for allowing them to stay in their homes. The Brigade also beat and tortured those who refused to pay and obliged them to pay through a "sponsor".

Witnesses told STJ also, that members of the Brigade forced more than five families in the town of Shaykh Al Hadid to share their own homes with displaced families, threatening to expel them if they refused. That forced some elderly to leave their homes and the country.

According to STJ field researcher, in late November, with the end of the olive harvest season,<sup>4</sup> the Suleiman Shah Brigade imposed what he called a "tax" on the Kurds who are still living in their homes. The "tax" ranged between \$200 to \$400; it determined according to the area of the home and the lands owned by the person.

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<sup>4</sup> The olive harvest season begins in October and continues until late December and sometimes until January. The number of olive trees in Syria is about 67 million trees, and the number in the Afrin region alone is about 13 million trees. The olive crop in Syria is considered one of the most important crops for food security, and it comes in third place in terms of income after grain and cotton crops, and it constitutes more than 60% of the total area of other fruit trees.

The Brigade assigned the task of informing locals about the “tax” to the *Mukhtar* and people chosen by it from the villages and towns. Those who were assigned went door to door to inform people about the “tax” imposed on them, giving them a period of several days to pay it either in one payment or in installments, depending on the financial situation of each. And they said that they would return after several days to collect the amounts and hand them over to the Brigade, and those who refuse to pay or who do not have money would be given other periods. When all the periods expired, members of the Brigade will storm their homes and took them to the Brigade’s headquarters where they will be held and beaten until they agree to pay, either directly or through a "sponsor", as the Brigade forced some merchants to pay the taxes imposed on the homeowner and thus the latter becomes indebted to the merchant.

A local called J.F. detailed to STJ what happened with him and his friends saying:

**“When the Brigade imposed the tax, I had a discussion with my friends about that and we agreed not to pay. I don’t know how our words reached the Brigade, as its members came and arrested us from our homes; me and my two friends A.T. and S. In the headquarters, where we were held, they said that we must pay or they will torture us by wheel after which we even must pay. There was a 60-year-old man put in the wheel room in order to be scared and thus forced to pay, he then promised to pay a tax of \$500 on his home.”**

In another incident, the witness, Abu Ismail, spoke about what happened to him, saying:

**“Members of the Brigade came and asked me to pay \$500 to allow me stay in my own home! They asked this large sum because I have a number of olive trees, as they said. However, I said to them that I don’t have money and won’t pay. They came three more times after that and I insisted not to pay, so they arrested me and took me to their headquarters and said that I would either pay or be tortured. I repeated that me and my migrated sons don’t have such an amount to pay. Members of the Brigade then brought Zahr al-Din and Mahmoud Darwish- they are rich men- and forced them to pay the \$500 on behalf of me-to be my sponsors-and now I’m in debt to them with that sum.”**

The Brigade also forced the same two men, Zahr al-Din and Mahmoud Darwish to pay a tax of \$400 on behalf of an elderly man who couldn’t secure the sum. Further, they forced an oil merchant to pay \$200 as a “tax” instead of a farmer called Abu Alan, because the latter sold oil to that merchant and did not get its price from him.

The field researcher spoke to M.H./Abu Joan, who paid \$200, F. R./ Abu Sheikho, who paid \$400, and to S. A. Al., who paid \$600. the latter went and made the payment directly for not to be subjected to torture or his mechanism to be confiscated. The researcher also met H.H. who paid \$700 because he owns olive trees and H.Sh., who is a land worker, gets paid on a daily basis.



## VI. Forcing people out of their homes:

STJ field researcher documented five incidents of forcing Kurdish people to leave their homes in the village of Qurra Mutlaq in November and December 2019. Members of al-Amshat-the group in control of the village- harassed elderly people who were living alone, through intimidation, raids, imposing taxes and forcing them to share their homes with displaced families, which led those elderly to leave their homes and the country.

A neighbor of an elderly who had forced out from her own home talked to STJ saying:

**“Al-Amshat members forced my 70-year-old neighbor, who was living alone, to share her house with a displaced family. She didn’t object, as she put all of her home belongings in one room and left the rest of the house to that family to use. But, the family, who is related to members of the Brigade, harassed the woman, which made her imprisoned in her room. She couldn’t bear their acts and the inconvenience caused by its so many children, which pushed her to go and live with her son in Turkey.”**

The elderly man B.Sh. narrated to STJ how he was forced out of his home in November 2019, as he said:

**“I’m living alone in the house I own; my wife deceased and my sons are in Turkey, I remained in town in order to protect my property from muggers. In November, members of al-Amshat came to me and said that I have to get out of the house, because it shouldn’t be for me alone, they said: “go and handle yourself, there is a displaced family in need for this house.” They expelled me out- without allowing me to take any of my belongings- and settled the displaced family in my house. I sat on the street thinking about what I should do, after a short time one of the members came to me and told me that I can get back the house if I pay \$800. I accepted to pay the amount but in installments, not in one payment. Next day, I returned to my home after the family evacuated it; and shocked to see many of my furniture pieces and electric tools had been stolen by the very same family.”**

In conjunction with the wave of displacement in Idlib province due to the military escalation waged by the regular forces and Russia, the Suleiman Shah Brigade rented several houses in the Shaykh Al Hadid subdistrict for IDPs coming from Idlib for \$200 per house, as reported by STJ field researcher.

## VII. Economic Suffocation:

The Turkish-backed National Army is firmly in control of the economic life in all Afrin, as the armed groups affiliated to it—each in its sector of influence—govern the markets, shops and goods.

According to several local sources from different areas in the Afrin region, almost all of the goods existing in the region are Turkish, imported by merchants through the border crossings, whether in the Euphrates Shield region or the Olive Branch. The border crossing near the village of Hemam in Jindires district, which was opened in November 2018, is considered one of the most important active commercial crossings in the region. Despite the short distance between the crossing and the towns and districts, the armed groups impose on merchants a royalty so-called “al-Tarfiq” (a military column to accompany a commercial convoy in order to protect it until reaching its target location. It is a method followed by pro-government militias in order to extort money from merchants), as they take \$700 on each car carrying goods, and the amount increases according to the type of goods coming.

STJ met a leader in the National Army,<sup>5</sup> who revealed the massive violations committed in this area. He said:

**“In general, all the shops are under the armed groups’ control, whether their owners are Kurdish or displaced. The Kurdish owners, however, are constantly subjected to pressure and harassment from the armed groups, which forced them to pay a monthly tax on the shops they own or rent. The Kurds are also forced to pay bribes and gratuities in the form of goods or money for the armed groups in control, in exchange for not being harassed or for their shops not to be destroyed or their goods confiscated. The displaced workers are less harassed, since they pay the store’s fare in advance to the controlling groups.”**

The source added:

**“The seven districts of Afrin have been divided into “sectors of influence”, each of which is firmly controlled by one of the National Army’s armed groups, without being watched or held accountable by the Turkish government. It seems that the latter intended to give the groups a free hand aiming at creating a gap between the locals and displaced. Actually, Turkey can impose and implement a decision to stop the hands of the National Army from these violations and to control things but it has not.”**

In the town of Shaykh Al Hadid, the Suleiman Shah Brigade prevented farmers and owners of olive trees from selling their crop and oil outside the town and prevented the passage of cars loaded with olives and restricted the sale process to be only in the al-Hal market, which was set up in the town of Shaykh Al Hadid by the Brigade itself and its pro-merchants. In

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<sup>5</sup> The field leader was interviewed personally in Afrin, in November 2019, and he requested to conceal his identity and that of the group he affiliated to.

addition, the Brigade takes a tax of 20% of the value of the crop, from every owner, worker and investor of a land and from the oil output, they take 25%.

The Suleiman Shah Brigade took over the lands and olive trees owned by people belonging to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) or the Self-Defense Forces as well as the lands of their first-degree relatives, and also those belong to people who left the area at the beginning of the Operation Olive Branch and haven't returned. In this regard, a landowner who still in the Shaykh Al Hadid district, said:

**“The Suleiman Shah Brigade told peasants and merchants of oils that it possessed the lands and trees, and it would allow them to take only one harvest in exchange for large sums of money. When the harvest season ended, the Brigade re-seized the lands and prevented their real owners as well as their relatives and friends or anyone else to approach them.”**

He added:

**“Last year/last harvest, locals planted the lands of those who left the town and the armed groups didn't prevent them from doing that, they only registered the names of those locals and sent the price of crops to their owners. But, at the end of the current harvest season, people surprised that the group brought up lists and names of those locals from the local council and the *Mukhtar*, and asked them to pay the outcome of the entire crop after they estimated the value of each land, with the help of traders cooperating with them.”**

Also, the group set the selling prices of firewood resulting from trimming olive trees, as it set the price per ton of firewood at S.P.35.000, besides, it prevented its sale outside the town of Shaykh Al Hadid, while it is sold in other markets at a price of S.P.60.000.

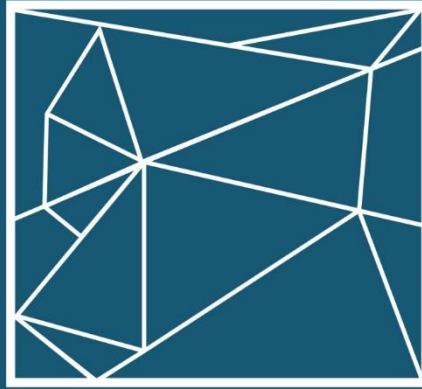
## **VIII. Appropriating public utilities and imposing taxes and royalties:**

STJ field researcher in Shaykh Al Hadid reported that the Suleiman Shah Brigade took over the well-known “Shaykh Al Hadid Spring” and imposed a tax of S.P.500 for each hour of watering fields from it and then raised it to S.P. 1000 per hour.

The Suleiman Shah Brigade also took over another spring in the village of Qurra Mutlaq, as its members stole hoses and water pipes that the farmers had extended on 5km. to irrigate their agricultural lands. Further, the Brigade forced the Kurds to pay S.P.1000 monthly for using the spring water, while the displaced people weren't asked to pay a penny for that.

The group also imposed on every house inhabited by a Kurdish family or individual the amount of S.P.1800 in exchange for the use of one ampere of electricity. Despite the fact that people did not need amperes or asked to subscribe to it, since they rely on solar panels, they were forced to pay despite their lack of use, while the displaced did not be asked to pay for that.

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## 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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✉ [editor@stj-sy.org](mailto:editor@stj-sy.org)