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Desertification Threatens the Ghab Plain after TIP Removed Irrigation Pipes Fed by the Orontes River

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*The removal of irrigation water pipelines led to a greater flow of the
Orontes towards Turkey*

Executive summary

After dismantling the Zayzoun power stations and selling most of its equipment, including the gas pipelines supplying it, in late 2019,¹ the Syrian branch of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) continues to loot and sabotage public property in the Ghab Plain, Hama, in 2020.² The Party's acts amounted to digging up the galvanized water pipes (extending over a distance of more than 10km) feeding the dams of the Ghab Plain from the Orontes/Asi River. Those pipelines removed are the backbone of the irrigation systems in the region, as more than 2000 dunums (equivalent to 200 hectares) of land planted with vegetables rely on them for irrigation.³

That led farmers to rely on artesian wells as alternatives to feed their lands,⁴ which is, however, a costly process, as the well's one-hour operation needs 7 litres of Mazut (fuel oil), which thus raises crop production cost and threatens the main livelihood of the region's residents.

Nevertheless, the most dangerous consequence for the pipes' removal is the long-term desertification of the region. Means that around 100 thousand dunams (equivalent to 10.000 Hectares) of land at the very least are on the verge of drought, while the rest of land would be cultivated again with wheat and barley, and hence would lose its agricultural quality over time.

STJ field researcher suggested that several parties benefit from the TIP's uproot of water pipes, on top of which is Turkey, as the entire water of the Orontes will thereby flow to its territories.

A geopolitical expert and hydrologist explained to STJ that since it has an estuary, Turkey used to get 36% from the water of the Orontes River a year, equivalent to 1.2 or 1.3 km³ out of 3.3 bn km³, or 2.5 bn km³, of the total amount of the river's water flow. But today, after

¹ "Syria: Turkistan Islamic Party Seizes and Pillages Public Property in Rural Hama", STJ, 4 November 2019, <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-turkistan-islamic-party-seizes-and-pillages-public-property-in-rural-hama/> (last visited: 7 August 2020).

² Most of the references written about the Turkistan Islamic Party/TIP/Uighurs track the beginnings of the Party in Syria to 2012, for its fighters have initially grouped in Turkey and then entered Syria crossing the border strip between the two countries. The TIP's fighters amassed mainly in the strategic city of Jisr al-Shughour, the city of Idlib, al-Summak Mountain, the Ghab Plain, and the Kurd and the Turkmen mountains, known as Latakia Mountains which are located in the province's rural parts alongside the Turkish-Syrian border. Being deployed near the Turkish-Syrian border strip indicates that they have obtained logistic aid from Turkey, at least when it comes to recruits that the Party is in need for. The US State Department [added](#) the party (which was formerly known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement) and its leader, Abdul Haq al-Turkistani, on the terrorist lists in 2009, and it was included by the United Nations on the list of terrorist organizations in 2002 after the attacks of 11 September 2001 in the USA.

³ 1 hectare = 10 dunums.

⁴ The artesian well can be established by digging into layers of earth and it does not require a pump to bring water to the surface; this occurs when there is enough pressure in the aquifer.

the river stopped flowing to the Ghab Plain, Turkey's share of its water rose to over 65%, which allows it to better infrastructure mainly in agriculture and power.⁵

Continuing with its acts of looting, in mid-May 2020 the TIP started extracting metal panels fixed to the cooling tower of the Zayzoun power station to sell them, and to make the process easier, workers brought the tower to ground arbitrarily which resulted in its total damage.

Methodology

For this report, we interviewed 19 witnesses, two locals of al-Ziyarah district in the Ghab Plain, four farmers, three former employees in the irrigation project, three media activists who witnessed the lootings, a member of the al-Ziyarah local council, a fisherman, an informed source and a biological expert, who explained the consequences of destroying the irrigation system.

With regard to dismantling and looting the Zayzoun power stations, STJ talked to two media activists, a local of al-Ziyarah and a former worker at the station. The bulk of these interviews were conducted between early March and late July 2020, in person and online.

1. Removing water pipes pumping from the Orontes to storage dams in the Ghab Plain

The Ghab Plain is divided into the districts of Qalaat al-Madiq, Shatha, Salhab, the regime-held al-Suqaylabiyah, and al-Ziyarah, which is 80% under the control of opposition armed groups, mainly the TIP, which dominates the villages of al-Ziyarah, al-Qarqur and al-Mashyak the Guardians of Religion Organization/Hurras al-Din and the Ansar al-Islam group rule the villages of Sirmaniyah and Duwayr al-Akrad, whereas the Idlib Army and Army of Victory/Jaysh al-Nasr, which are affiliated to National Front for Liberation of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, stationed in the Khirbat al-Naqus, al-Qahira and al-Ankawi. It is worth mentioning that the al-Ziyarah district is administratively affiliated to the Syrian Salvation Government of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In February 2020, the Syrian government retook the villages of al-Manarah, al-Omqia and al-Fatatrah.

The TIP forces deploy along the east bank of the Orontes River, from the village of al-Hakoura to the village of al-Mashyak, while the Syrian Army stations 2km to the west of the River.

⁵ Syria and Turkey did not agree or even discuss the share of each from the Orontes River, since it is controversial as the River flow through the disputed Hatay province., and eventually emptying into the Mediterranean. Syria also considers the Orontes a national river not a transboundary. However, in 2010 relations between the two countries improved and there was an initial agreement to build a friendship dam between the two countries on the Orontes River, but the project stopped after the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

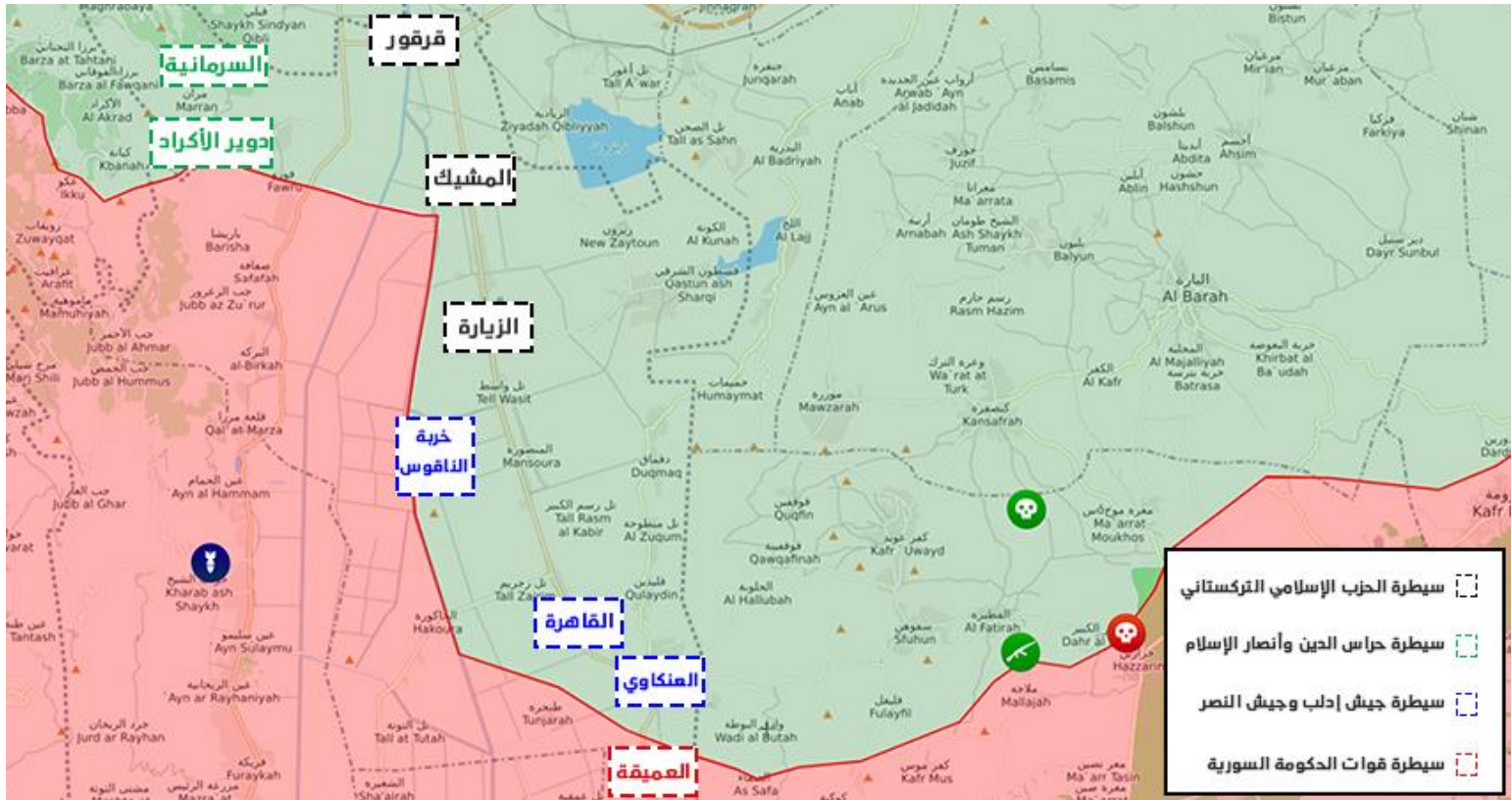


Image 1- Who controls what in the Ghab Plain on 15 August 2020?

On 28 March 2020, members of the TIP came to the water plant near Zayzoun dam with workers and heavy machinery, including a bulldozer and a truck, and started excavating pipelines which pump water from the Orontes River to Zayzoun and Qastun dams in the Ghab Plain, western Hama.

STJ field researcher reported in late August 2020 that the TIP was still dismantling and looting the Zayzoun power station and its cooling tower.

And for the record, these water pipelines were established in 1989 by the Syrian government for drawing water from the Orontes River towards the Zayzoun dam, which used to have a capacity of about 71 million m³.

According to a local of the al-Ziyarah district, the TIP started inspecting the sites of the water pipelines since early 2020, to decide which they want to remove. Locals then complained about the Party's acts citing that would damage their area and prompt the regime forces to bombard it. The local added:

“A man called Faisal al-Turki, who hails from the Muhambal town, was the Party's guide to find the water pumping pipelines, as he was seen tracking the pipelines extending through the villages of al-Mashyak to al-Ziadiyah to end in Zayzoun dam with members of the Party. When locals knew about the Party's plan to remove the pipelines they asked Faisal to try to dissuade it from doing that, citing that the

results on the area would be destructive; if the regime forces – which are only four km away - monitor the heavy machinery in the area they will bombard it, like what happened during the process of removing the gas pipeline feeds the Zayzoun station in the fall of 2019.”

The media activists Omar H. confirmed that the diggings to remove water pipelines was launched on the morning of 28 March 2020 near the Zayzoun dam, starting with a pipeline which is estimated to be 10m long and about 2m in diameter.

The activist added that that pipeline was attached to one another and that led the Party members to call blacksmiths to separate them. In a week the Party removed 12 pipelines, some of which were too long to fit in the trucks so they were cut in half. Until 20 April the TIP had removed the pipelines extending over 2.200 m – a pipeline in each 10m – from the village of al-Ziadiyah to a station near Zayzoun dam.

A local mentioned that these lootings coincided with the government’s military escalation against the area in early 2020 and suspended for 15 days to be resumed after organizing the work and dividing it into two shifts one for the labourers (hired from the same area) and the other for the blacksmiths, he added:

“We tried to reach the dig site repeatedly, but withdrew at gunpoint of the Party members. However, I managed to talk to a driver of one of the trucks who used to transport the pipelines and he told me that they take them through the villages of al-Ziadiyah and Faria in rural Hama and then head east to Ma'arrat Misrin city in Idlib where they unload them within a fenced area yard which contains electrical equipment, pipes and other iron and copper scrap, guarded by members of the Party”

The TIP’s removal of water pumping pipelines destroyed the 30-year-old irrigation project and thus impacted the agriculture in the region. That led farmers to call for the Syrian Salvation government to intervene and stop the Party’s acts of sabotage and looting, the government responded in a statement calling on the Party to stop those acts, but the latter paid it no heed.

A member of one of the local councils in the Ghab Plain said to STJ:

“On 31 March 2020 we headed to the headquarters of the Syrian Salvation Government, affiliated to the HTS, in Idlib and asked it to address a statement to the Party to stop its looting acts. Indeed, on the same day we received an electronic version of a statement signed by the water resource manager in the Salvation Government, explaining the current and future importance of the irrigation project in the Ghab Plain and calling for members of the Party whom it called ‘our Turkistan brothers’ to stop the destruction of the project. The Government asked locals to deliver a copy of the statement to the workers and security forces of the TIP at the digging site near Zayzoun dam.”

He added:

“Indeed, we went there and showed the statement to the members of the Party, who reacted by yelling at us to leave, threatening to arrest us if we did not. A farmer then intervened and said that the excavations must stop as provided in the Salvation Government’s statement, and a member of the Party replied to him: “we do not know if the Salvation Government really exists. Leave or we will arrest you all.” So, we went back disappointed.”



Image 2- the statement directed from the Salvation Government to the TIP. Credit: the previous witness (a member of a local council in the Ghab Plain).

According to a farmer in the Ghab Plain, the destruction of the irrigation project will eliminate about 2.000 dunums (equivalent to 200 hectares) of land currently planted with vegetables, which means that farmers will suffer unemployment, destitution and hunger:

“Instead of improving irrigation and agricultural projects, those self-proclaimed governments are seeking to destroy our lives and lands. Many here see that there is no difference between these governments and the regime's, that made us desert our land for years, and now when we return to cultivate it, the TIP came and destroyed our crops and hence our hopes for a decent living.”

A media activist in rural Hama confirmed that HTS has knowledge of the TIP's looting acts and shares with it the pipelines' sales profits. He also recounted that in the meeting of farmers and local councils' members with the Salvation Government, the latter's Minister of Agriculture promised to stop the TIP's acts of looting. But what happened was that the Government asked farmers and locals to go and show the Party its statement in which it called the latter to halt the excavations and lootings, which actually can be stopped by a mere verbal order from HTS.

The activist indicated that the Salvation Government's issuance of an online statement was to fool the population and escape its responsibility on this matter. The least the Ministry of Agriculture could have done was to contact officers in the TIP, the economic officer Zaid al-Turkistani for example, and ask them to immediately stop excavating and looting water pipelines.

According to locals, security officers of HTS, including Abu al-Ala'a and Abu Tarik Hadoud, were present while members of the TIP were looting the water pumping pipes.

Locals also mentioned that security officers of HTS used to frequent the dig sites, and the day of issuing the Salvation Government's statement witnessed six visits by them to the then dig site, which confirms the HTS' involvement in these acts and its benefit from the lootings' profits.

A farmer in the Ghab Plain complained that employees of the Salvation Government asked him to pay a tax on his land in al-Ziyarah district on 15 April 2020:

“I was spraying pesticide in my land when two men holding a receipts book came and asked me to pay a tax of 1.000 Syrian Pounds (SP) per dunum, claiming that the money will go to the Ministry funds to be used in emergency. However, I refused to pay and said how are we supposed to pay taxes after the irrigation water was cut, why did you not stop the TIP from destroying the irrigation project? One of them replied: why you farmers of the region did not express rejection to the TIP's acts, how do you want us to stop them? The government cannot confront such an armed group.”



Image 3- a side of an area in the Ghab Plain dug by the TIP to remove water pipes. Credit: STJ.



Image 4.



Images 4&5- Analysis of visual evidence of a site excavated in the Ghab Plain to remove water pipes.



Image 6- a side of the removal of water pipes in the Ghab Plain. Credit: STJ.

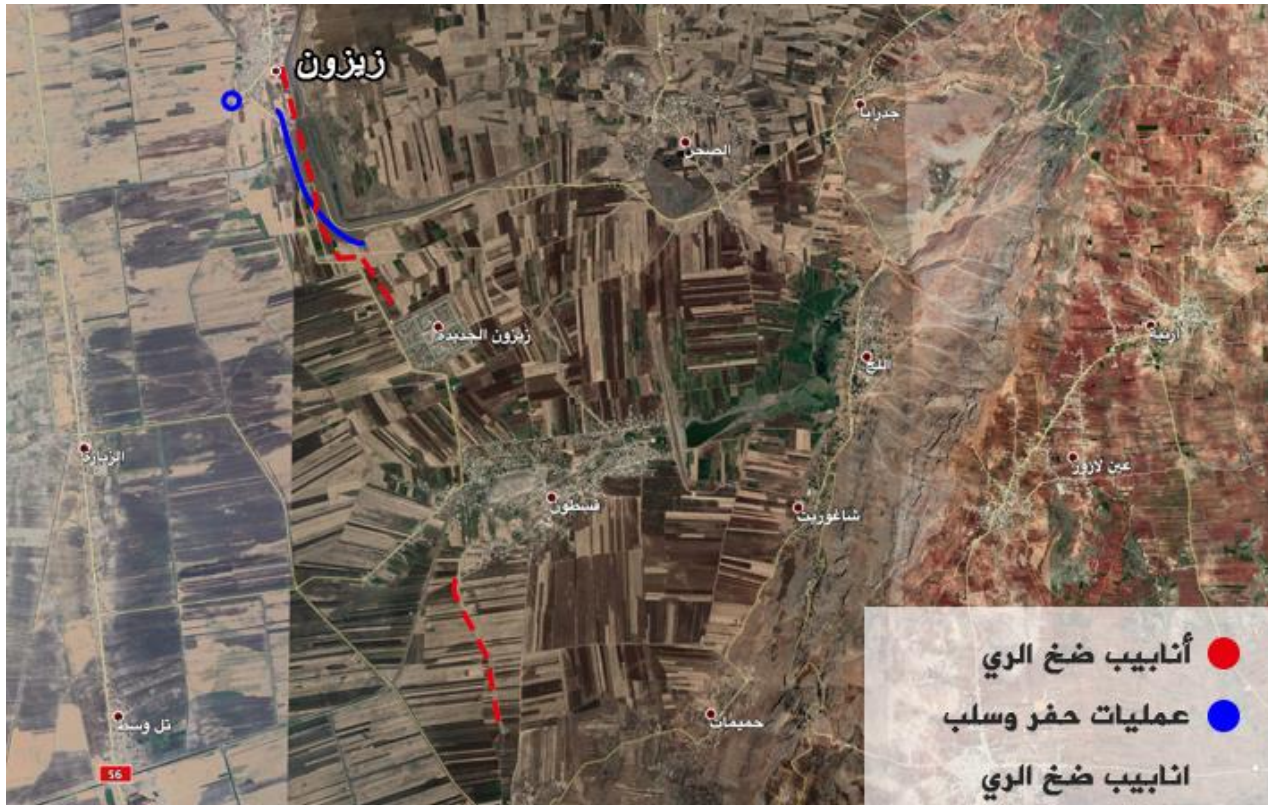


Image 7- A satellite image, showing the extension of the irrigation water pumping pipeline in the Ghab Plain at a distance of more than 10km, in addition to the sites dug by the TIP.



Image 8- A satellite image shows an area estimated of 100.000 dunums of agricultural land threatened by desertification after the stop of the irrigation system in the Ghab Plain.

2. The importance of water pipelines between the Orontes River and the Ghab Plain

The water pumping pipelines established by the Syrian government, through the Orontes Basin company, to pump water from the Orontes River to the storage dams, are the backbone of the irrigation project in the Ghab Plain, most prominent of which are those extending on 10km from east of al-Mashyak village to Qastun and Zayzoun dams in the Ghab Plain.

A former engineer in the irrigation project stated to STJ that the Ministry of Irrigation of the Syrian government decided in 1989 to implement a two-phase project to pump water from the Orontes River to the Zayzoun Dam, the first phase was digging traditional irrigation canals and the second was constructing metal pipelines with a diameter of up to 2m.

The same engineer added that the project was executed by Reema and Orontes Basin companies, as the former supervised the construction of the dam while the latter dug canals, laid pumping pipes and established stations to control water level. The project was completed in 1995 and the water started pumping towards the dam through pipes in 1996.

He added that controlling the amount of water flowing to the dam by means of metal pipes is easier than when traditional irrigation canals are used, as the latter need the use of excavators and other machinery to cut the water and pump it towards the dam.

Pumping water by metal pipes ensures that all of the water pumped enters the dam, while pumping it through traditional irrigation canals may waste some of the water supply due to farmers' excessive use, the witness continued:

“When the dams are higher than the river – as in the case of the Zayzoun and Qastun dams with the Orontes River in the Ghab Plain -irrigation by pipes is easier and more successful, as using the traditional canals in this case leads to the water’s flood on the agricultural land. Further, pumping through pipes is more powerful and fast; each pipe can pump 4.7m³ per second, which is half the time the traditional irrigation canals need to pump the same amount.”

A former employee in the irrigation project noted that establishing the pumping lines was costly and took about two years.

a. The importance of the Ghab Plain

The Ghab Plain is a fertile depression given the abundant irrigation water it has and its strategic importance goes back to before 1960.⁶

The Plain used to be a swamp for the Orontes’ water for centuries – before the Syrian government drained it – which made its soil full of organic materials and thus rich and

⁶ According to many sources, the area of the Ghab Plain is estimated at 50.000 hectares, equivalent to 500.000 dunams.

suitable for all summer, winter, seasonal and early crops. That made this area one of the most important agricultural areas in the province of Hama.

And because of the Orontes River's flooding in every winter, the Syrian government established storage dams in the Ghab Plain, notably the dams of Qalaat al-Madiq, Zayzoun and Qastun, and entrusted their management to the Orontes Basin company, which organized the pumping process from the Orontes to them.

The abundance of irrigation water in these storage dams, enables the farmers to cultivate various types of crops such as sugar beet, tobacco, cotton, wheat, seasonal and early vegetables of all varieties and legumes, and also allowed them to establish fish farms and apiaries.

Nevertheless, after the onset of the Syrian uprising in 2011, cultivation decreased in the Ghab Plain due to the fierce battles there, which also resulted in the cessation of water pumping from the Orontes River to the storage dams, and thus undermined agricultural productivity.

A farmer explained how the cultivation in the Ghab Plain changed after 2011:

"Irrigation was not costly before 2011, because the water was abundant and could easily reach all agricultural lands. We used to pay for the irrigation process an annual tax of 300 SP per acre and about 400 SP per dunum for diesel. My family and I used to cultivate about 50 dunums of land with crop our region famous for, especially tobacco, sugar beet and cotton, and we used to generate good funds, which allowed us for a decent living. However, after the storage dams rendered inoperable, the irrigation process became very costly, especially since it has come to rely on artesian wells, whose operation needs a lot of fuel. In addition, the Islamic armed groups prevented tobacco planting while the sugar beet and cotton are no longer sold."

The farmer went on to say that only 2.000 dunums in al-Ziyarah are now cultivated with only vegetables and wheat, because the agricultural inputs and supplies became so costly in the absence of government support. That prompted more than 60% of farmers in the area to abandon agriculture, which income is no longer sufficient to secure the basic necessities of life.

In 2018, the irrigation system was reoperated, but in reverse; the water collected in Qastun and Zayzoun dams was pumped towards the agriculture lands, and that led 30% of farmers to recultivate their lands with summer crops, since the irrigation water became available from the storage dams in summer and from the pumping project in winter. Farmers shared water from storage dams through pumps installed on metal pipes.

b. The strategic importance of the Orontes River

Most of the land in the Ghab Plain lay in the water basin of the Orontes River, which is the only major river in the region, and considered the second important river in Syria after the

Euphrates in terms of length and annual discharge. The Orontes River flows from south to north the Ghab Plain and it is the main irrigation source in it, as it irrigates 50.000 hectares of fertile agricultural land, lay on its both sides.

The Orontes River begins from the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon flowing northwards through Syria's Homs Hama and Idlib provinces before entering the Mediterranean Sea in Turkey. The Orontes is 571-kilometer-long and it occupies 6% of the Lebanese territory, 36% of the Turkish's and 58% of the Syrian's.⁷

A former engineer at the Orontes Basin company confirmed that the company stopped its works in early 2012, after the Syrian government forces stationed in its administration building. Later, in 2015, the Syrian Army withdrew from the area and the TIP occupied the company's building and looted all of the equipment in it.

The same engineer asserted that the TIP's damaging of the irrigation system in the Ghab Plain is in the interest of Turkey which is now the biggest beneficiaries from the water of the Orontes, whose flood reached 27 m³ per second at the gate of the town of al-Qarqur in the Ghab Plain between November and April 2019. But Syria's north however, did not benefit from this water for irrigation, despite the presence of river tributaries such as Ain ez Zarqa at the town of Darkush in western Idlib, as no project has been undertaken to use this water in irrigation.

The engineer added that the conflict and the shared control over the area made the farmers unable to benefit from the Orontes water, as since 2015 farmers have not been able to plant near the river, in al-Ziyarah district because it came to be situated between the Syrian government forces' points in the west and the armed opposition groups in the east. In 2016, the TIP warned farmers in al-Ziyarah of planting the fields to the west of the district under the pretext that it is its military zone and cultivating them will lead to the advancement of the Syrian government forces.

3. The consequences of destroying the irrigation system in the Ghab Plain

Since the 1970s, the Syrian government has worked to provide irrigation water to the fertile Ghab Plain to develop agriculture and thus evolve the economic reality, given the fact that Syria's economy is highly dependent on agriculture.

According to a member in one of the agricultural associations in al-Ziyarah district, the TIP's acts of removing and looting the water pumping pipelines has impacted over 2.000 dunums planted with vegetable, which used to be irrigated from the storage dams, and that led farmers to rely on artesian wells – as an alternative – that require 7 liters of fuel per hour.

⁷ For more info please see: "Asi River Basin", Fanack water, April 2017, <https://water.fanack.com/specials/asi-river-turkey-syria-friendship-dam/asi-river-basin/> (last visited: 22 July 2020).

Hence, that will reduce agricultural production, since not all farmers can afford artesian wells' costs. It is worth mentioning that many farmers returned to their fields this year to cultivate them after being displaced for years from the area because it was in conflict.

He added that the long-term threat is the desertification of the Ghab Plain, as an estimated of 100.000 dunams at the very least are vulnerable to drought, while the rest of lands will be cultivated with wheat and barley – as before – that will lead to a gradual loss to their quality. Deterioration of agriculture will lead to a catastrophe for the area's residents.

A farmer in the Ghab Plain said that he owns a field estimated at 50 dunams in which he used to grow summer crops and get good returns, but after 2011, however, the field's productivity declined considerably to be ceased completely in 2015 due to the lack of irrigation water after the stop of the irrigation system following the withdraw of the Syrian Army from the area.

He detailed:

“In 2015 hostilities forced us out of our homeland, but I used to return every year at the growing season to plant my field with wheat in the hope that the irrigation water will be pumped again from the storage dams. My family and I lived with hope to get out of the miserable life in the camps, but our dream was completely destroyed after the TIP damaged the irrigation system in the Ghab Plain. It seems that we are destined to remain here, which means that I have to look for a new job to feed my family.”

An agricultural engineer in the Ghab Plain recounted that hundreds of farmers hoped for the return of the irrigation water to their thirsty fields, but after the TIP destroyed the irrigation system, they would think to leave the area without a return. He confirmed that thousands of dunams are now threatened by desertification, as in the district of al-Ziyarah 80% (72.000 dunams) of agricultural land are now without irrigation water, which means that farmers will plant it with barley and wheat in the coming years which will let it lose its quality gradually, portending a crises on farmers and local market, as many crops will be priced up or disappear.

A witness stated that removing water pipelines has already destroyed the irrigation project in the area, which in turn destroyed the farmers' hope to cultivate their fields again, as there is no other way to get back the irrigation water to the area.

The Ghab Plain was Syria's second food basket after al-Jazira region, and one of the world's most important agricultural zones, for its fertile soil, diverse crops, and abundant irrigation water. Nonetheless, damaging the irrigation project will lead to the loss of 200.00 donums of agricultural land and eventually to the Ghab Plain's desertification.

In this regard a farmer said:

“The interruption of irrigation water to my 20-donums field will lead to the drought of my crop and thus to the hunger of my family. Not only me, more than

50 other farmers in al-Mashyak totally depend on the water of this station to irrigate their fields which they cultivate with early crops (cucumbers, eggplant and zucchini). We had high hopes that we would access irrigation water again, but it seems that there are some parties that do not want us to settle in our homes and enjoy the returns of our fields.”

Farmers now rely on artesian wells as alternatives; they equipped them with pumps that push water up to 4km to reach their agricultural fields, and that requires enormous sums, thus many farmers sold their homes to afford their fields' irrigation to not to lose their harvest.

Another farmer from the Ghab Plain asserted that if the area was of interest to those armed groups, they would have filled the storage dams at a lower cost, which would optimise farmers and secure irrigation water for their fields.

4. Who benefits from the destruction of the irrigation system?

Many sources indicated that the TIP has strong links with the Turkish government, especially that the latter facilitated the cross of the Party's members to Syria – after bringing them from China – openly and explicitly in 2013, through Bab al-Hawa border crossing before the eyes of Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya group, which was then supported by Turkey.

A well-informed source said:

“Turkey's observation points in the villages of al-Alya and Ghassaniyeh, western Idlib, are still fully protected by the TIP, which always expresses its pride in Turkey's support for it. The latter took care of the Party's members in Syria and settled them in Turkmen-majority border villages in western Idlib and rural Latakia.”

A media activist from the Ghab Plain stated that in the spring of 2018, a Turkish media delegation came to the Ghab Plain to monitor the developments of the situation there and a Turkish media worker from the delegation asked to be taken to a military point of the TIP near the city of Jisr al-Shughur to conduct an interview with the Party's members there. Initially, the latter refused to be interviewed, changed their mind after they learned that the journalist was Turkish:

“In early 2020, when I was preparing a report near Bab al-Hawa border crossing, I saw Turkish militaries in an armoured Turkish military vehicle stopped in front of the building of the Islamic Relief Commission in the town of Sarmada, took members of the TIP and drove them to the Syrian territories. Later, the Turkish militaries returned in another vehicle.”

A fisherman from the Mount Zawiya/Jabal Zawiya who used to fish in the Orontes River at the village of al-Qarqur indicated that the general economist in the TIP called Zaid al-

Turkistani, had imposed taxes estimated at 300 USD on each fisherman, in late 2018. When fishermen refused to pay those taxes, Zaid threatened to open the river's gates fully towards Turkey which means that fish would be drawn there. However, after several attempts to convince him, a tax of 150 USD was agreed upon for each fisherman, and hence he ordered the close of 40% of the river's gates to be 60% opened towards Turkey and when the fishermen asked him to close the gates completely, he said: "Frankly, I cannot close the gate completely to Turkey, it must be more than 50% opened."

In this regard, a resident of the village of al-Qarqur, who works as a translator for the TIP, talked about the Party's commitment to the Turkish instructions and recalls the previous incident, saying:

"After the argument between the fishermen and the TIP's general economist, Zaid al-Turkistani, the latter asked the Party's commanders in the Ghab Plain not to inform the Party's supreme leaders about his intention to partially close the gates of the Orontes to Turkey."

According to Malik M., a geologist, the Orontes River's annual greatest flood lasts from October to April. The Syrian government by its Directorate of Water Resources and the Directorate of the Orontes Basin, used to fully fill the water storage dams in this period (the Zayzoun dam 71m³ and the Qastun dam 27m³).

The Syrian government used to make the most of the Orontes' water before 2011, but after conflicts in the region and the sabotage of the irrigation system, the Orontes River became directed towards Turkey, which is today get 65% of its water after it used to get 36% of it, which allow it to improve agriculture and power projects.

The witness confirmed that Turkey is the sole beneficiary of the TIP's destruction of the irrigation projects, as that will provide it with the Orontes' water for the next ten years at least. He went on to say that after the end of the conflict, the irrigation projects in the region would need international companies to implement it given the collapse of the economic structure of Syria, and continued:

"If the conflict in Syria extinguished, the concern of the new state will be the reconstruction of civilian homes and urgent projects, far from the real productive projects, which means that restoring the looted irrigation system would take a long time, and there is no doubt that water security in Syria is under direct threat after the Orontes' pumping stopped towards the storage dams, which, if filled, would be a reserve of irrigation water when the river dries up and its rate of flood decreases."

The witness added that the Syrian government used to benefit from storing irrigation water in the dams in several areas, most notably agriculture and fire suppression in the event of the annual fires that erupted almost always in summers. Here we recalled the Syrian government' sending of several firefighting helicopters to the Qastun dam in 2008 to get water in order to extinguish a fire that broke out in the forests of the Latakia mountains,

which are relatively close to the dam. Today, after the dams dried up and the irrigation system was destroyed and stopped, there is no longer any water reserve in the region that can be relied upon in the emergency.

According to the witness, the Orontes' water level reaches 2.8 bn m³ per year, while the low of groundwater is 1.11 bn m³ annually. Syria used to get two-thirds of the River's water due to the long passage of it in its lands but today it gets less than a third, due to the disruption of storage dams and the destruction of the water pumping system in it.

5. Dismantling and looting the cooling tower of Zayzoun power station

Concurrently with sabotaging and looting the water pumping pipelines in the Ghab Plain, the economic apparatus of the TIP ordered the removal and sell of the metal panels installed on the cooling tower in the Zayzoun power station, whose equipment and employees' housing had been already looted by the Party.

According to a media activist from the Ghab Plain, the TIP's Zaid al-Turkistani, together with Faisal al-Turki, hired workers from the villages adjacent to the Zayzoun power station to dismantle the metal panels installed on its cooling tower. The operation took the days and parts of the nights from 10 April 2020 to 27 May of the same year.

Workers managed to remove only the panels on the tower's lower section and reached them by climbing, since the height of the tower is about 50m.

In parallel, after the end of the party's labourers' daily work, locals from villages near the tower used to come and steal panels by climbing the tower and removing them with iron shears.

On this matter, a local of the village of Mintar, in rural Idlib, detailed STJ:

“The removal of one panel takes around an hour and a half, and it cannot be taken out without being damaged, due to its durability and tight adhesion to the tower. And because each panel sized is about 2m, a person can only hold one. We sold those panels in the city of Jisr al-Shughur or to scrap traders, who have been buying the acquisitions of the Zayzoun power station for several years. As for prices, we sell the one panel for only 10.000 SP, but the traders may sell it clandestinely for more than 50.000 SP.”

On 6 May 2020, the TIP brought down the cooling tower of Zayzoun power station to the ground arbitrarily, in order to complete the process of dismantling it more easily. Hitting the ground hard, the tower and its panels were greatly destroyed.



Image 9- the cooling tower of the Zayzoun power station falling on the ground after being looted by the TIP. Credit: STJ.



Image 10.



Images 10&11-Analysis of visual evidence of the incident of dropping the Zayzoun power station's cooling tower in May 2020 by the TIP. Credit: STJ.

A video circulated by media activists in May 2020,⁸ showed the fall of the cooling tower of the Zayzoun power station to the ground.



Image 12- a screenshot from the aforementioned [video](#) shows the cooling tower of the Zayzoun power station being dropped.

⁸ For more info please check: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=699120164171374>



Image 13.



Images 13&14- Analysis of visual evidence of the incident of dropping the Zayzoun power station's cooling tower.

On 26 July 2020, media activists also shared photos of the cooling tower of the Zayzoun power station, before and after being brought down and dismantled by the TIP.⁹

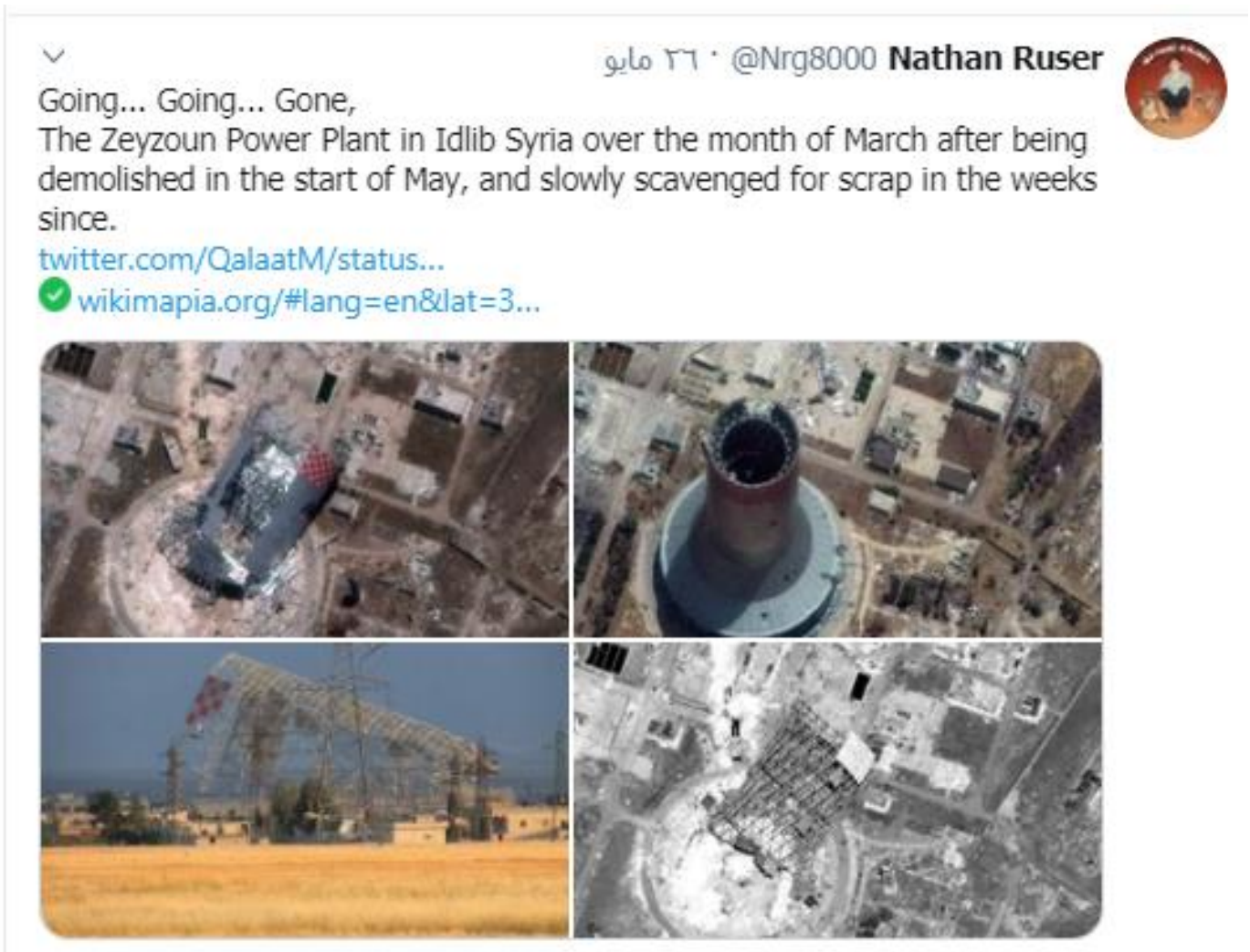


Image 15- A screenshot of the abovementioned media activist's [tweet](#) showing the cooling tower of the Zayzoun power station, before and after being brought down.

According to a media activist in the Ghab Plain, blacksmiths were seen working at the Zayzoun power station since the morning of 29 May 2020, starting with the removal of the iron pillars holding its cooling tower.

⁹ For more info please check: <https://twitter.com/nrg8000/status/1265295998680629248?s=21>

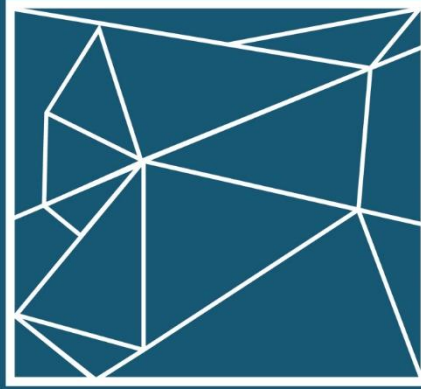
The witness stated that the blacksmiths may have been brought from the city of Idlib or its environs, and that they used to work all day even when the power goes off, as the TIP brought huge electricity generators in case, he continued:

“Trucks did not stop entering the Zayzoun power station throughout the working days of the blacksmiths, to exit loaded with iron scrap and head towards the village of Farika and then take the Latakia-Aleppo highway and head east. The first phase of dismantling the base of the tower continued until May 6, and the second phase began by dropping the tower to the ground to continue the process easily.”

A former worker in the administrative department of the Zayzoun power station said that the tower’s main role was to re-cool the water, and the circuits, generators, feed pumps and other machines that cooled with water in the tower. He also mentioned that the tower was established through the German Koch and Siemens companies, under an undertaking of a company affiliated with the Syrian government at the time.

Dismantling the cooling tower of the Zayzoun power station lasted for about 40 days, and the disassembled stuff was being transported by trucks to Idlib through the Latakia-Aleppo highway throughout that period. The TIP’s looting acts are still continued to the date of this report, 10 August 2020.

سوريون
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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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✉️ editor@stj-sy.org