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**Raqqa: The Northern  
Democratic Brigade Arbitrarily  
Seizes over 80 Houses**

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*This report documents the seizure of houses in different neighborhoods of Raqqa by groups affiliated to the SDF*

## Background

Since February 2020 the Northern Democratic Brigade/*Liwa al-Shamal al-Democrati*, operates under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), has seized dozens of houses whose owners had displaced or migrated owing to the domination of the Islamic State (IS) on the province of Raqqqa and the military operations that followed, led by the international coalition. STJ field researcher confirmed the seizure of over 80 houses in the neighborhood of Masaken al-Shurtah only, in intention to settle families of the Brigade's members in them.

STJ met three witnesses who returned to Raqqqa in 2020 and were shocked to see members of the Northern Democratic Brigade residing in their houses. One of them said that a member of the Brigade threatened to kill him if he came near his house again. Owners of some of the houses seized filed complaints to the People's Municipality/Real Estate Committee of the Autonomous Administration of north and east Syria, to reclaim their houses, presenting legal ownership documents, but to no avail. Thus, they rented other houses in Raqqqa and are still watching members of the Brigade occupying their houses to the date; mid-November 2020.

Similar seizures were made in al-Sakan al-Shababi and al-Sakan al-Ummali areas in the neighborhood of Rumaila to the east of Raqqqa. In 2019 People's Protection Units (YPG) put its hand on about 200 houses belonging to civilians displaced or migrated abroad. Two sources met by STJ confirmed that the YPG settled its members and people displaced from Afrin in those houses. The sources also asserted being unable to reclaim their confiscated houses despite having documents proving their ownership.

A private source from the People's Municipality/Real Estate Committee of the Autonomous Administration, stated to STJ that the number of seized houses whose owners filed complaints against military groups affiliated to the SDF, from late 2019 to June 2020, reached 1200 in whole Raqqqa.

According to STJ field researcher, in November 2020 the YPG sent notices to residents of five buildings in the Euphrates River Basin to vacate their houses in a week, citing those buildings owned by the Syrian government. However, our researcher said that residents of those buildings were former civilian employees of the Syrian government and that the latter sold them those houses by instalments deducted from their salaries for many years.

Further, our researcher reported that the YPG seized five residential buildings in the first neighborhood of the city of al-Tabqah, Raqqqa, while the Manbij Military Council seized two buildings (each contains eight flats) in the third neighborhood of the same city. The buildings were turned to housings for members of the General Security Forces of the SDF. Details of ownership of those buildings are yet unknown.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the Autonomous Administration issued on 5 August 2020, the 'Protection and Management of the Absentee Property Act' consisting of 21 articles, which regulate the management of properties – within its areas – owned by

Syrians abroad. The Act stipulates the formation of an 'Absentee's Property Protection Committee', with 11 members – from all components of the north and east Syria – headed by two curators, under a decision of the Executive Council of the Autonomous Administration. The committee supposed to survey and protect properties of the absentee, without having the authority to buy or sell them, but has the right to rent them or invest them in social development projects without changing their specifications.<sup>1</sup> However, on 12 August 2020, the Autonomous Administration suspended the enforcement of the Act to review and amend it after it sparked controversy and objection among the population of north and east Syria, who accused the Autonomous Administration of attempting to seize the absentees' property through this law.<sup>2</sup>

## Recommendations to institutions of the Autonomous Administration of north and east Syria

1. To form a special independent and impartial committee to look into the claims filed by owners of the seized properties.
2. Meetings of the committee must be open to the public, particularly civil society organizations and the media.
3. Decisions to be taken by the committee must be immediately enforceable, while preserving the victim's right to resort to the court through due process.
4. Members of the committee as well as claimers and witnesses, if any, must be protected and never get pressured or intimidated.
5. To hold accountable all those involved in the seizures, ensuring non-repetition of such acts, and compensating owners for the damage caused to their property while seized.

### 1. About the Northern Democratic Brigade/Liwa al-Shamal al-Democrati

The Brigade was formed in Idlib province around 2013 by Alexander Khalil and was originally known as the Free Syrian Army's al-Qa'qa' Brigade part of the Free Zawiya Brigade based in the Jabal Zawiya region of Idlib.

In the course of 2014, it joined the Free Syria Brigade, and then switched to the Syrian Revolutionaries Front (SRF) and eventually became part of the opposition' Syrian Salvation Front by May 2014.

<sup>1</sup> "The General Council Issues Protection and Management of the Absentee Property Act", the General Council of the Autonomous Administration of north and east Syria, 6 August 2020, <http://smne-syria.com/gc/2020/08/06/%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d8%ac%d9%84%d8%b3-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85-%d9%8a%d8%b5%d8%af%d8%b1-%d9%82%d8%a7%d9%86%d9%88%d9%86%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d9%82%d8%a7%d8%a8%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%a7/> (last visited: 18 November 2020).

<sup>2</sup> For more info please see: <https://www.facebook.com/952306884959249/posts/1390185504504716/>

The Northern Democratic Brigade had many battles against the al-Nusra Front, Jund al-Aqsa, Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and the Islamic State (IS) in the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo. In November 2015 the Brigade joined the SDF in Afrin and when the latter was taken by the Turkish forces the Brigade moved to Manbij in full capacity and equipment and joined the Manbij Military Council by March 2018.

According to military sources, the brigade has 1200 to 1300 fighters based in Manbij, Raqqqa and its suburbs. Alexander Khalil and Alexander Alaa led the fighters in Manbij, while those in Raqqqa led by Taha Absi, also known by his nom de guerre Abu Omar al-Idlibi.

In October 2019, the Brigade headed from Manbij towards Raqqqa to take part in repelling the Turkish attack, named as Operation Peace Spring. About 17 of its fighters fall dead and others wounded during confrontations.

## 2. Seizing over 80 houses in Masaken al-Shurtah neighborhood, Raqqqa

On 17 October 2017, after months of battels, the SDF, supported by the US-backed coalition, claimed full control over the city of Raqqqa which was then the IS' capital and its key stronghold in Syria.

The Civil Council of Raqqqa has been running the city and its countryside in accordance with the decentralized and autonomous systems since the IS left it.

Since the SDF took control of the city of Raqqqa, military groups affiliated to it such as the YPG and the Northern Democratic Brigade, have confiscated a number of houses in the neighborhoods of al-Sakan al-Shababi and al-Ummali which belong to civilians who had displaced or migrated abroad.

80 houses in Masaken al-Shurtah neighborhood were the last to be seized by the Northern Democratic Brigade of the SDF and they are still captured by it since February to the date of this report.

### A. Statement by victims, witnesses and sources

Suleiman M., 55, a Christian from Raqqqa said to STJ that his house was seized by the Northern Democratic Brigade in April 2020, after he fled the city for fear of the IS, he recounted:

**"In 2014, I fled with my family from Raqqqa to Lebanon after being subjected to intense and constant harassment by the IS just like other Christians in the city. the IS used to describe us as 'pure infidels', and it offered us the 'dhimma contract',<sup>3</sup> which was such a humiliating one. However, I started a new life in Lebanon, as I lost hope to return to my city. So, I started a small business and enrolled my**

<sup>3</sup> The dhimma contract: is a contract offered by the IS to the Christians in Raqqqa giving them a choice between entering Islam or paying jizya. Christians, however, refused this contract and left the city.



children in school; I was somehow ok with the stay in Lebanon alongside my relatives. I never imagined that the IS would leave the city one day, but it really did. I felt overwhelmed then, as I finally had the chance to return to my city, for a visit at least.”

He added:

“In the spring of 2020, I decided to sell my house located near al-Istiqlal park in the neighborhood of Masaken al-Shurtah, Raqqā, for I was in financial difficulty. So, I headed to Raqqā last April where an acquaintance told me that my house was seized by the Northern Democratic Brigade. Nonetheless, I insisted on going to my house; when I reached the entrance to the neighborhood, the Brigade’s members stopped me but under my insistence they allowed me to enter and check on my house. A woman in a niqab opened my house’s door and asked me who I was and why I came. I told her that I am the owner of the house she occupied and asked by what right you entered my house and changed its windows, doors and front. She answered that it was none of my business and that I had to talk to her husband, who is a member of the Northern Democratic Brigade.”

Indeed, Suleiman met her husband, and said to him that he came from Lebanon to check on his house, which is his whole life savings. However, the member yelled at him saying: “how you dared coming to my house without permission. I am Azrael and I will take your soul if you come near the house again. Go away.” Suleiman went on to say:

“Then, I left confused and overwhelmed. However, I tried to get to Abu Omar al-Idlibi, the Northern Democratic Brigade leader in the city, as I knew from an acquaintance, but I was told that he was in Manbij for a visit which may be long. So, I talked to an officer in the Brigade close to Abu Omar called Mohammad al-Ashqar, nicknamed Abu Shahin, who said to me: “Welcome to Raqqā, we are your family who loves you. For your house it became a military point like other houses in the area. Do not ask me how and why, it is a purely military matter. Our members must stay close to their families for the serious security situation in the area as they may be targeted in case they fragmented.” I asked him if I can sell my house to them or to anybody, and he replied that that was impossible; I tried to discuss it with him, but he left asking me to talk to the Brigade’s leader.”

Suleiman added:

“I wished then my house was destroyed but not seized by people who even do not relate to Raqqā. Later, in an attempt to reclaim my own house, I went with a friend to Raqqā’s civil court, Raqqā’s Civil Council, the Command of the public security forces and the Public Relations Office and told them my story. But it was like fetching water in the desert, no one helped or justice me. Now, I cannot enter, reside or sell my house, which I have owned for 35 years. On what religious or legal grounds the Northern Democratic Brigade based its acts; I have recently learned that it confiscated 25 flats in the neighborhood I used to live in.”



Image 1- a side of Masaken al-Shurtah neighborhood. November 2020.

Credit: STJ.



Image 2- a side of Masaken al-Shurtah neighborhood. November 2020.

Credit: STJ.

Amer Sh., born in 1982 in Raqqā, married with five children, stated to STJ about his house in Masaken al-Shurtah neighborhood which was seized by the Northern Democratic Brigade in March 2020:

**“My wife died during bombardments by the US-led Coalition on the city to expel the IS in 2017. That led me to flee with my children to Aleppo, where I stayed for several years before I decided to return house in the winter of 2020, when things got calmer in the city. However, members of a checkpoint of the Northern Democratic Brigade, at the entrance to my neighborhood from the south did not allow me to enter, citing that zone owned by the Northern Democratic Brigade and only its members allowed to enter it.”**

Amer added that members at the checkpoint threatened to beat him if he came and tried to enter the neighborhood again, saying that this considers an attack to a military point:

**“I went to the Office of Military Relations and the Raqqā Civil Council and there they told me that I have to meet the Brigade’s leader Abu Omar al-Idlibi. Indeed, I waited for him at the entrance to the seized residential block and stopped him for a talk. He asked me to get into the car, and after he heard my complaint, he said: “your complaint is not the first, dozens claimed the same before, but the case is more military than civilian. You can reside or rent any house in the SDF of regime-held areas. But our fighters and their families must be in the same block for their safety. When I told him that this house is the only property I own, he replied “this is none of my business, your house is now dedicated for a military service, so do not talk about it again or you and your family would not be safe.”**

Amer said that he filed a complaint to the military and civil courts in Raqqā, but to no avail. Further, he learned that there were 75 complains similar to his, that cannot be decided upon for the matter is military:

**“I rented another house so that my family and I would not be in the open. What should I do? We are awaiting help from heaven not from people; I have many contacts in the SDF but they did not offer any help.”**

Rama H., born in 1994 in Raqqā, mother of two girls, was among people whose property was confiscated. Two houses of her in the neighborhood of Masaken al-Shurtah have been confiscated by the Northern Democratic Brigade since last February. She said:

**“I work in the Communications and Energy Division of the Autonomous Administration. Recently, the Northern Democratic Brigade seized 85 flats in Masaken al-Shurtah neighborhood, including one for me and another for my parents, as well as two primary schools and several stores in the same block. The Brigade established an isolated residential block with school, mosque and businesses in it, for its members and their families. My father and brother filed a complaint regarding the seizure of our houses; one of which is located on the second floor of Building No. 8 with an area of 175 m<sup>2</sup> each. My father and I used to**



rent those houses to support our living as we are residing in my grandfather's house in Rumaila neighborhood. However, despite all the complaints filed and the mediators sent to talk to Abu Omar al-Idlibi, the latter refused to evacuate the seized houses citing that he would not abandon families of his fighters who had offered their blood to defend Raqqa."

Rama added:

"Not only in Masaken al-Shurtah, in Rumaila neighborhood also, specifically in al-Sakan al-Shababi and al-Sakan al-Ummali areas, more than 50 residential buildings, include 200 flats, as well as stores and agricultural lands were seized by force of arms and under false pretenses. Our complaints were ignored, and dozens of families are staying in rented houses for around 60.000 Syrian Pounds (SP) per month, while their own houses were occupied by members of the Northern Democratic Brigade simply because they participated in the expulsion of IS from Raqqa and fought Turkey."

## **B. Response of the People's Municipality of Raqqa**

STJ field researcher contacted head of the People's Municipality/Real Estate Committee to inquire about the fate of the houses that were seized in Masaken al-Shurtah neighborhood in October 2020

**"Everything related to the SDF and its institutions can never be discussed".**

We tried to contact the leader of the Northern Democratic Brigade Abu Omar al-Idlibi on 12 October 2020 to obtain a comment from him on this matter but we could not. However, our researcher managed to talk to a commander in the Brigade who was resettled in a house of a civilian in Masaken al-Shurtah neighborhood, he said:

**"I fought with the Northern Democratic Brigade against the IS and managed to expel it from Manbij in 2016. Then we liberated al-Tabqah and Raqqa in 2017. We used to reside in Manbij under the patronage of Manbij Military Council. But when Turkey attacked the area in 2019, we triggered general alarm and changed our positions according to the battle's scenario, as we are stationing today north of Raqqa along the posts of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army, from the district of Abu Rasen north of al-Hasakah through Ayn Issa district to the village of al-Hurriyah to the west of Tell Abiad."**

He added:

**"Due to the instability in the region, Abu Omar al-Idlibi told us that the SDF would settle fighters and their families in uninhabited apartments in the neighborhood of Masaken al-Shurtah in Raqqa and in the first neighborhood of the city of al-Tabqah. He said that if any of the houses' owners came and started asking questions, we have to send him to the Brigade's leader. They set military posts at the entrances to those neighborhoods. They gave me an apartment in Masaken al-**

**Shurtah neighborhood in February 2020. Today the neighborhood is house to about 250 families in 92 flats and schools which were turned into accommodation centers.”**

The source added that about 70 families were settled in the first neighborhood in the city of al-Tabqah by the Northern Democratic Brigade in coordination with the al-Tabqah Military Council:

**“Dozens of real owners of those seized houses, including migrated, came and filed complaints to reclaim their houses presenting ownership papers, but to no avail. We are not happy with residing in others’ houses and as a member of the Brigade, I cannot rent a house outside this block, as it is considered a violation of the command’s orders, and entails penalties, and even dismissal. The house I am residing belongs to a man from eastern rural Raqqa called Tariq Majwal al-Hamidi, who aged about 53. He came to me many times and I told him to talk to Abu Omar al-Idlibi. He actually did but gained nothing, as he could not reclaim his own house whose instalments deducted from his salaries over 20 years. Above that, I learnt that the Northern Democratic Brigade is seeking to evacuate houses in Euphrates Basin in Raqqa for fighters of the Manbij Military council whom he would bring to reinforce the fronts against the Turkish forces.”**

### **3. Earlier seizures in al-Sakan al-Shababi and al-Sakan al-Ummali, Raqqa**

In 2019, dozens of houses, which belong to immigrated locals, in al-Sakan al-Shababi and al-Sakan al-Ummali areas in the Rumaila neighborhood and others in Masaken al-Dubbat neighborhood to the north of Raqqa, were occupied by military groups of the SDF.

That was followed by the seizure of buildings and farms in rural Raqqa, specifically in the areas of Kasrat, Yaarub, al-Qahtaniyah and al-Karamah, in addition to the use of schools in Raqqa and its suburbs as military bases.

Abdullah M. used to reside in al-Sakan al-Shababi area in Rumaila neighborhood but his house was seized by the YPG in May 2019, he said:

**“I fled Raqqa after the Free Syrian Army (FSA) took over it in 2013. I used to work in a government oil company, which built us – its employees – buildings in the Rumaila neighborhood, gave each a flat and took its prices as an instalment dedicated from our monthly salaries; I spent 24 years paying for my apartment. However, when the FSA took control of Raqqa, it put its hand on all of the institutions there, so I lost my job and thus decided to go to Lebanon with my family. Yet, after the IS left Raqqa I decided to return and did it in May 2019, but I was shocked to see a displaced family from Afrin residing in my house. I asked them how that happened; they replied that the SDF gave it to them and I have to inquire about the matter from it.”**

The witness added that he headed to the Military Relations Center in the Panorama neighborhood in the city of Raqqqa to inquire about the matter. An official there called Haval Baran told him that they would secure another house for him as the family would stay in his:

**“Haval answered me that families displaced from Afrin and families of the martyrs must have priority over me and anyone else to settle in those houses because I fled and failed to protect my land and my country. Then I had two choices, either to occupy a house whose owners left the city or to rent one. Actually, I chose the second because I did not want to wrong anyone as I was wronged.”**

Rami J., a witness from Raqqqa, had his house seized by the YPG in early 2019, he recounted:

**“I fled the raging war in Raqqqa in 2017 towards Lebanon, where I stayed in my brother’s house. However, in early 2019, I decided to return to my city and to my house, which I inherited from my father, in the al-Sakan al-Ummali area in Rumaila neighborhood. When I reached the neighborhood, I was surprised to see it fenced with high cement walls and when I tried to enter it, members of the SDF stopped me, citing that the neighborhood became a military block. I Women’s office to ask if they can help me reclaim my house; an official there told me that I had to meet the official Haval Baran. Indeed, I went to him and he told me that the problem was not only mine, as he received more than 140 complaints about seized houses in the al-Sakan al-Ummali area, saying that we should put the military interest ahead of ours”**

The witness went on to say that he met the head of Raqqqa’s Civil Council, Laila Mustafa, and asked her for help but she replied that she was not authorized to deal with these issues. For the same purpose, the witness went to the Office of Military Relations, the Military Court, and the Civil Court in the city of Raqqqa but to no avail.

**“My house and other locals’, were seized without a legal ground or a justification. And because the SDF is the ruling power in the area, no one can condemn it. Our only fault was that we fled the hell of war to save our lives.”**

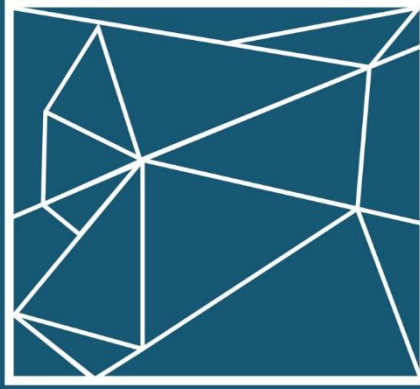
According to STJ field researcher seizures in al-Sakan al-Shababi and al-Sakan al-Ummali areas were made concurrently with those in the city of al-Tabqah, where five residential buildings – in the first neighborhood – were occupied by members of the YPG, and two other buildings (eight apartments in each) – in the third neighborhood – were taken by Manbij Military Council and turned to accommodations to members of the General Security Force of the SDF. Those buildings are still seized to the date of this report; mid-November 2020.

A source from the People’s Municipality/Real Estate Committee confirmed that over 1290 houses in Raqqqa were seized, based on the number of complaints locals filed against military groups affiliated to the SDF between late 2019 and June 2020, in addition to four schools and 11 governmental institutions of the Syrian government.

سوريون  
من أجل  
الحقيقة  
والعدالة  

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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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