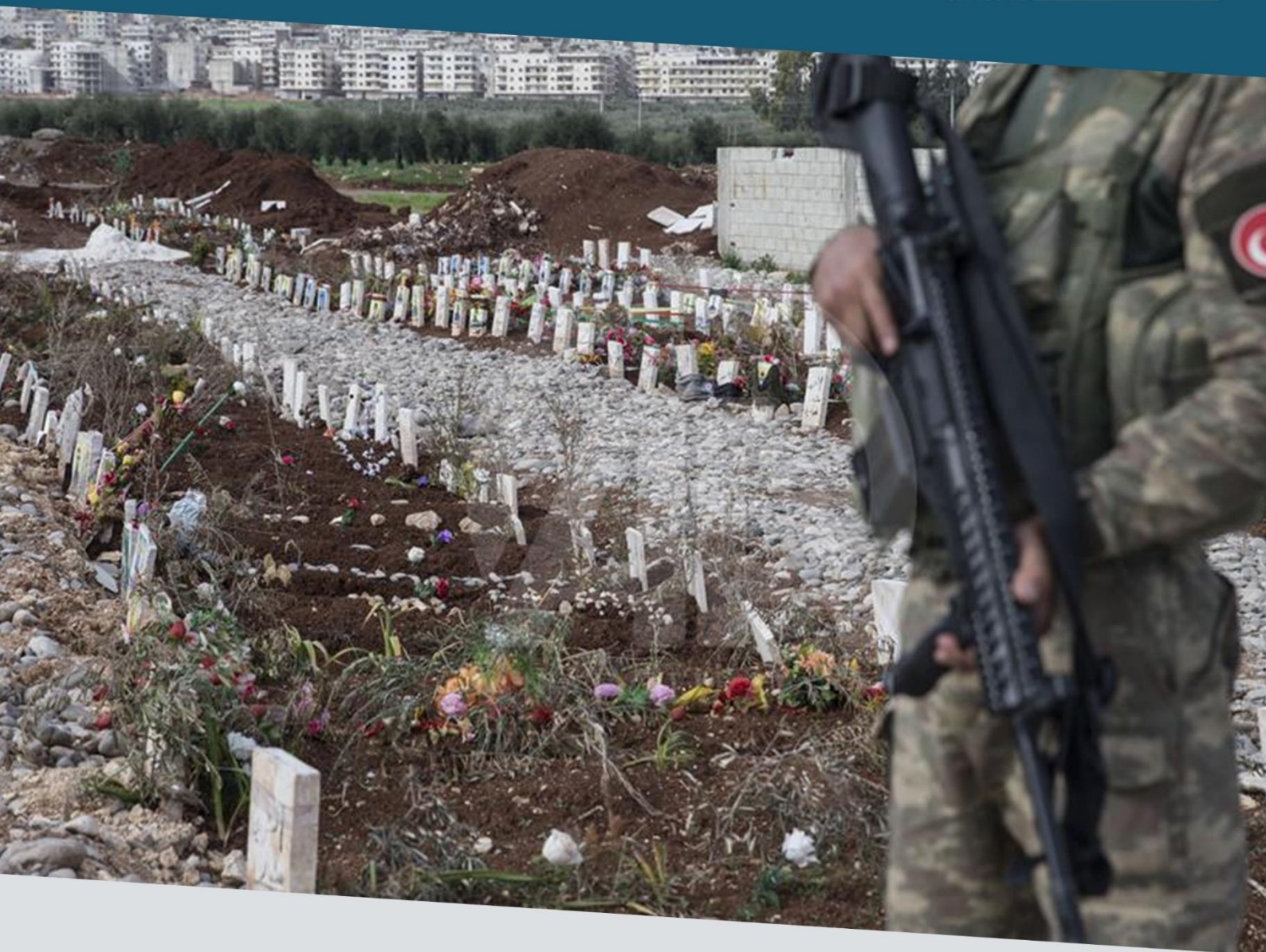
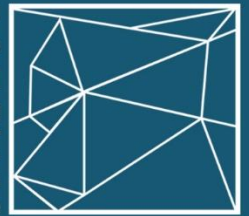


April 2021

سوريون  
من أجل  
الحقيقة  
والعدالة  
Syrians  
For Truth  
& Justice



## **“Blind Revenge:” Cemeteries and Religious Shrines Vandalized by Parties to Syrian Conflict**

## **“Blind Revenge”: Cemeteries and Religious Shrines Vandalized by Parties to Syrian Conflict**

*In this report, STJ documents the desecration of graves, which were sometimes destroyed beyond recognition, by Syrian regular forces, Turkish forces and affiliated Syrian National Army (SNA) forces, and the Turkistan Islamic Party.*

## Executive Summary

Over the last few years, parties in the Syrian conflict vandalized and destroyed several cemeteries, historic sites, and religious objects. In some cases, actors carried out the violence for revenge. In other disturbing cases, they desecrated cultural sites for religious and ideological reasons. In this extensive report, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) documents 12 separate incidents involving the destruction and desecration of cemeteries, historic sites, and religious objects.

In the reports STJ's field researchers and digital analysts authenticate, graves and shrines were deliberately defiled as perpetrators sought revenge by setting sites aflame, vandalizing them, and looting their contents. The identifying features of some cemeteries were completely obliterated when perpetrators bulldozed them, turning them either into cattle markets or military posts. Three main parties were responsible for the cases of vandalism discussed in this report: Syrian regular forces, Turkish forces and the opposition-affiliated armed groups of the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), and the Turkistan Islamic Party.

Syrian regular forces and allied militias perpetrated three incidents after they took over different areas across Aleppo and Idlib provinces in 2020. The first was the vandalization of the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine in Deir Sharqi town, rural Idlib, which Syrian forces controlled in late January 2020. In the second incident, Syrian regular forces vandalized and smashed over 40 headstones set up at the graves of pro-opposition civilians and militants. These graves were desecrated in the al-Shuhadaa Cemetery (Martyrs Cemetery) in Khan Assubul town, rural Idlib, which Syrian forces seized on 31 January 2020. The third incident documented Syrian forces setting fire to two graves where the bodies of two former armed opposition fighters were buried in the cemetery of Hayyan town, rural Aleppo, on 18 February 2020.

Turkish forces and the opposition-affiliated armed groups of the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA), operating under the Syrian Interim Government/Opposition National Coalition, also committed similar crimes. STJ recorded the vandalization and demolition of at least eight graves where bodies of civilians, as well as fighters of the People's Protection Units (YPG), were buried. The abuses occurred during Operation Olive Branch<sup>1</sup> after the entire area and its suburbs were occupied by Turkey. In a major incident, members of the Turkey-backed SNA vandalized a civilian cemetery in Sheikh Khourouz village in Bulbul district, Afrin region. Perpetrators attacked the cemetery twice, first in February 2018 and later in July 2020. Additionally, in the Abu Ka'aba village in Jindires district, Afrin region,

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<sup>1</sup> The Turkish army, supported by several armed opposition groups, embarked on military Operation Olive Branch in Afrin city on Saturday, 20 January 2018. The operation ended with the allied forces' control over the city's center on Sunday, 18 March 2018, after 59 days of fighting.

armed groups of the SNA vandalized another civilian cemetery, again twice in 2018 and March 2020.

In addition to disturbing graves and vandalizing headstones, Turkish-backed forces demolished cemeteries. Notably, in August 2018, Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery in Kafr Shīl village, Afrin region was bulldozed and later turned into a cattle market. Later, the Martyr Rafiq Cemetery in Metîna/Matenli village in Sharran district, Afrin region, was bulldozed in the second half of May 2020, and the Martyr Seydo Cemetery in Mount Kazikli, overlooking Kafr Safra village, northwest Jindires district, was vandalized in the same month.

Furthermore, groups affiliated with or protected by the Turkish-backed SNA raided and looted several shrines in Afrin region while searching for antiquities. One of the key shrines subjected to abuses in August 2018 was the Hannan Shrine in Masha'ala village, Afrin region. The shrine houses the graves of a Kurdish icon, Nuri Dersmi, and other Kurdish figures. In another incident, the Chail Khaneh Shrine, a Yezidi site in Qibar village, rural Afrin, was raided in May 2020. The shrine was previously a community site for “worship, blessings, and quietism.”

The incidents verified in this report are not the only cases of Turkish-backed groups disturbing cemeteries and destroying shrines. After taking over Afrin following a week of fierce battles with the Autonomous Administration's People's Protection Units (YPG) during Operation Olive Branch, Turkish forces bulldozed a large part of the 400-year old, al-Foqania Cemetery (the Upper Cemetery), in the village of Senarê/Sinnara of the Shaykh al-Hadid district, rural Afrin. They also completely demolished its historic Ali Dada Shrine.<sup>2</sup>

The Turkistan Islamic Party is also responsible for abusing a religious landmark. In March 2016, fighters of the Turkistan Islamic Party vandalized and looted the contents of a religious shrine, believed to be of Jabir ibn Abdullah al-Ansari, a companion of Prophet Muhammad, in al-Zeyarah town, located al-Ghab Plain. The fighters vandalized the shrine, partially destroyed its interior, and seized all its contents.

## Methodology

In addition to authenticating visual evidence, this report draws on a total of 18 testimonies and interviews to verify reports of the vandalism, looting, and demolition of cemeteries and cultural heritage sites in Syria. Our team interviewed sources and witnesses online from early 2020 to early December of the same year.

Relating to the vandalization of the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine, STJ interviewed a media activist and three residents of Deir Sharqi village, corroborating their accounts with evidence provided by STJ's digital forensic analyst.

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<sup>2</sup> “Syria: New Visual Evidence of Bulldozing the ‘Ali Dada’ Historic Shrine in Afrin,” STJ, 10 September 2019. <https://stj-sy.org/en/syria-new-visual-evidence-of-bulldozing-the-ali-dada-historic-shrine-in-afrin/> (last visited: 25 February 2021).



STJ also obtained the testimonies of two local sources regarding the assault on the al-Shuhadaa Cemetery in Khan Assubul village.

STJ interviewed another local source in Hayyan village, Aleppo province, who provided information on the burning of two graves where former armed opposition fighters were buried.

To corroborate the accounts, STJ obtained cross-checked information presented by several open sources and references.

## **I. Desecration of cemeteries by Syrian regular forces**

In this section, STJ documents three separate incidents in which Syrian regular forces vandalized cemeteries and historical shrines. The violence took place between the beginning of 2020 until July of the same year, after Syrian government forces took control of areas across Aleppo and Idlib provinces.

### **1. Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine Vandalized**

Umayyad Caliph Umar Ibn Abd al-Aziz's shrine is located in Deir Sharqi village, 30 km south-east of Ma'arat al-Nu'man. The shrine contains the tombs of Caliph Umar, his wife Fatima bint Abd al-Malik, and the shrine's attendant Abu Zakariya Yahya al-Mansour. Known by locals as Deir Semaan (Simeon Monastery), historian Dr. Badi' al-Hamoui dates the shrine to the 5th century AD. First built under the rule of the Mamluk Dynasty, the shrine has since lost much of its distinguishable features over time. In the 1990s, the Directorate-General for Antiquities and Museums (DGAM), operated by the Syrian government's Ministry of Culture, restored the shrine. The work was overseen by archeologist Kamel Shehada, who was then serving as the director of the Ma'arat al-Nu'man Museum.

Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz's shrine is a significant Syrian cultural landmark for two reasons. First, the Caliph Umar is a prominent religious and historical icon for many Muslims, making his burial place a cultural and spiritual landmark. Second, the shrine's location close to the prominent Ma'arat al-Nu'man Museum contributed to the area becoming an important tourist destination.

The shrine was assaulted in early 2020; however, the identity of the perpetrators was at first unclear. In order to determine who vandalized the shrine, STJ investigated and verified information on the incident, notably two videos. On 28 January 2020, the state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) published a video claiming that "terrorists" vandalized and set fire to the Caliph Umar Shrine. However, on 26 May 2020, pro-opposition media activists published a video reporting that the shrine had been vandalized after Syrian regular forces took control of the area. Activists claimed that the contents of the Caliph's shrine had been looted and that the Caliph's body had been relocated somewhere unknown.

In the following section, STJ breaks down the disparate accounts of what befell the shrine and constructs a likely timeline of events using both visual evidence and witness testimony.



Image 1 - Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine in Deir Sharqi village, taken before it was vandalized. Credit: Madain Project.



Images 2 - the Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine in Deir Sharqi village, taken before it was vandalized. Credit: Madain Project.



Image 3- Satellite image locating Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine on 11 September 2019, a few months before the Syrian regular forces controlled the area.

### A. Constructing A Timeline of Events

On 24 January 2020, Syrian regular forces announced their advance into several towns south of Idlib, including Deir Sharqi, where the Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine is located. The town was previously held by the military group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

On 25 January 2020, pro-government Facebook pages, such as Hama News<sup>3</sup> and Aleppo News Network,<sup>4</sup> posted photos of the shrine, displaying the partial damage of the structure, likely caused by aerial shelling. However, the photos showed that the building surrounding the graves remained intact, with paintings still hanging on the walls and other cultural artifacts secure in the room.

<sup>3</sup> For more:

<https://m.facebook.com/614856112359900/photos/pcb.802516976927145/802516913593818/?type=3&source=48>

<sup>4</sup> For more:

[https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=2606342889651127&id=1407430666209028&refid=52&tn=R](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2606342889651127&id=1407430666209028&refid=52&tn=R)





Image 4-The Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine following the Syrian regular forces' control over Deir Sharqi town. Credit: [Hama News](#).

While Caliph Umar's shrine remained largely intact at this point in January, the area surrounding the shrine suffered massive infrastructural damage during the shelling of Deir Sharqi town by Syrian regular forces as they assaulted the city. Media activist Anas al-Ma'arawi documents the damage in a video published in early January 2020.<sup>5</sup>



Image 5 – Screenshot from [video](#) showing massive damage in the area near the Caliph Umar shrine.

<sup>5</sup> For more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jACBt83LGQE>

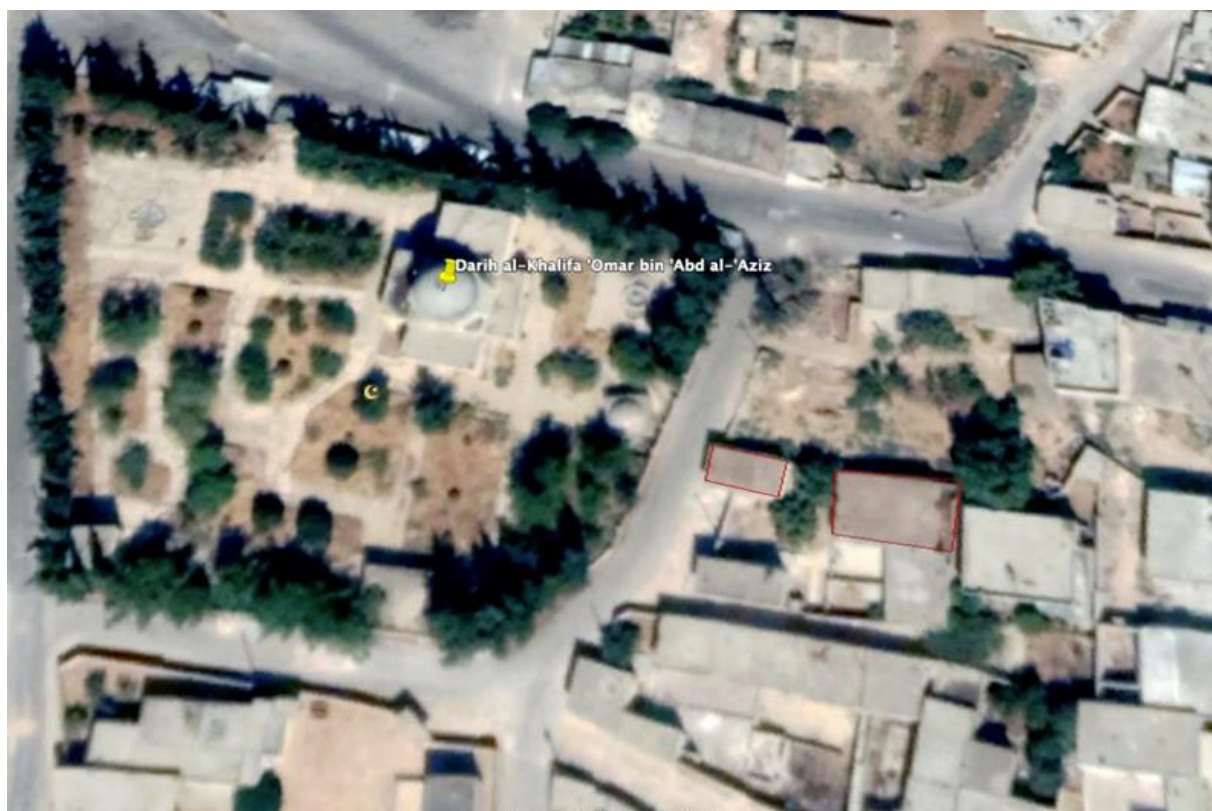




Image 6 - Screenshot from [video](#) showing massive damage in the area near the Caliph Umar shrine.



Image 7 – This photo provides analysis of the visual evidence of the decimation in the area near the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine, as shown in the [video](#) published by media activist Anas al-Ma'rawi.



Images 8- Visual evidence of the decimation in the area near the Caliph Umar Shrine



Image 9- Satellite image locating the destroyed sites reported in the video published by media activist Anas al-Ma'rawi, as caused by the shelling on Deir Sharqi town. Red locaters indicate large-scale damage. Orange locaters indicate partial damage.



On 28 January, three days after loyalist Facebook pages published photos of the shrine in relatively good condition, and a few days after Syrian regular forces took control over the city, the State-run Syrian SANA published another set of photos<sup>6</sup> and reported that the shrine had been further vandalized and burned by “terrorists” in Deir Sharqi town and Talmenes village, south of Idlib.

SANA’s photos show the large-scale damage that befell the shrine in late January. A fire appears to have burned the building housing the graves of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, his wife, and attendant. Despite evidence of the fire, a few of the shrine’s artifacts like books and paintings remain in the same places as they appeared in the early January photos published by pro-government Facebook pages.



Image 10 – Photo published by [SANA](http://www.sana.sy), captioned as acts of vandalism and fire perpetrated by so-called “terrorists” against the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine.

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<sup>6</sup> For more: <http://www.sana.sy/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/16-41.jpg>





Images 11-A photo published by [SANA](#), captioned as acts of vandalism and fire perpetrated by so-called “terrorists” against the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine.

On 26 May 2020, while the Syrian regular forces controlled the town of Deir Sharqi, media activists circulated a video<sup>7</sup> reporting that the shrine had been further vandalized. The activists said that the offenders raided the shrine and sabotaged its three graves. They attributed these abuses to the Syrian regular forces and their allied militias, claiming that the contents of the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine were looted and transported to an unknown location – including the Caliph’s body.

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<sup>7</sup> For more: [https://twitter.com/ahmadal\\_shame/status/1265357310475501568?s=20](https://twitter.com/ahmadal_shame/status/1265357310475501568?s=20)



Image 12- Screenshot from Anas al-Ma'rawi's [video](#), showing the damage that befell the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine in Deir Sharqi town on 26 May 2020.

The Syrian Ministry of Awqaf on 5 June 2020 published a statement regarding the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine<sup>8</sup> denying rumors by “opponent media outlets” which reported that the shrine was subjected to destruction and excavation. The ministry said:

“Opponent media outlets, which support terrorists, have published videos of vandalism at the shrine of the just and rightful Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, may God be pleased with him. After Ma`arat al-Nu`man was liberated from the wickedness of terrorist groups, the Ministry of Awqaf examined the site of the Caliph Shrine. It confirmed that neither the grave, nor the body, of Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz were tampered with, even though there are some marks of destruction on the walls and the shrine’s site done by the terrorist gangs and the al-Nusra Front.”

<sup>8</sup> For more: <https://www.facebook.com/awkafsyrian/posts/3577513712275968>



## وزارة الأوقاف السورية

June 5 • 🌐

...

بيان صادر عن #وزارة\_الأوقاف بخصوص ضريح الخليفة العادل عمر بن عبد العزيز رضي الله عنه.

تناقلت بعض وسائل الإعلام المعادية والداعمة للإرهاب أخباراً وفيديوهات حول العبث بقبر الخليفة العادل و الراشد #عمر\_بن\_عبد\_العزيز رضي الله عنه قرب معرة النعمان ، وللتوضيح فإن وزارة الأوقاف وبعد تحرير منطقة معرة النعمان من دنس العصابات الارهابية قامت بالكشف على موقع ضريح الخليفة الراشد وتبين أن قبر الخليفة عمر بن عبد العزيز ورفاته لم يتم العبث به، بينما توجد آثار لبعض أعمال التخريب في جدران ومكان الضريح من قبل العصابات الإرهابية وجبهة النصرة ، والذين دأبهم تدمير وتخريب المقامات والمزارات والأضرحة كما هو ثابت في فكرهم ومنهجهم الضال المنحرف ، وخلال فترة وجيزة سيتم فتح المقام للزوار بإذن الله سبحانه وتعالى .



Image 13- The statement made by the Syrian Ministry of Awqaf regarding vandalism of the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine. Credit: [Official Facebook page of the Ministry of Awqaf](#).





Image 14



Images 14, 15- The two photos are of the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine after it was renovated by the Syrian Ministry of Awqaf. Credit: [Official Facebook page of the Ministry of Awqaf](#).

On 8 June 2020, the Ruptly video news agency published a set of photos of the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine demonstrating interior and exterior renovation. .<sup>9</sup>



Image 16



Image 17

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<sup>9</sup> For more: <https://www.ruptly.tv/en/videos/20200608-021-Syria--Tomb-of-Caliph-Umar-bin-Abdul-Aziz-to-reopen-after-repairs>



Images 16, 17, 18- The photos are of the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine, renovated inside and outside. Credit: Ruptly video news agency.

Comparing the video posted by media activists and the photos by SANA throughout January, STJ's digital forensic analyst concluded the shrine had likely been damaged when the Syrian regular forces took control over Deir Sharqi town on 24 January 2020.

Before January 24, the town was subjected to extensive aerial shelling. Consequently, our digital forensic analyst believes that the shelling is likely responsible for the damage apparent to the shrine prior to Syrian regular forces taking control of Deir Sharqi.

The digital forensic analyst added that the shrine was likely subjected to further damage in the period between January 24 and January 28, given apparent evidence of fire and the shrine's black walls. This occurred over the period that separated the Hama News's photos, on 25 January 2020, and SANA's photos, on 28 January 2020, namely during the Syrian regular forces' control of the area.

By May 2020, it appears that the shrine only suffered some additional vandalism. STJ's digital analyst concluded that much of the damage in the May video is identical to those in SANA's January photos, with the exception of a few signs of additional harm.





Image 19- Comparison between the video and SANA's photos, demonstrating that the damage in the photos is extremely similar to that in the video, with only minor additional harm at the shrine, as belonging to May 2020.

## B. Accounts by activists and eyewitnesses

To obtain additional evidence regarding the vandalization of the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine, STJ interviewed a number of activists and eyewitnesses, including media activist Anas al-Ma'arawi.

Activist al-Ma'arawi confirmed to STJ that he visited the shrine a few days before the Syrian regular forces took over the region. He documented the damage to the building surrounding the shrine's structure due to the government forces' bombardment of Deir Sharqi.<sup>10</sup> He added that the shrine was then intact on the inside and there were no marks of sabotage.

The second witness that STJ met is a resident of Deir Sharqi town. He lives only 50 meters away from the shrine and left the town a few hours before the Syrian regular forces managed to take control. The resident's account matches al-Ma'arawi's. He said that the shrine was almost untouched on the inside and the material damage occurred exclusively at the shrine's exterior, caused by the Syrian regular forces' shelling.

<sup>10</sup> For more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jACBt83LGQE&feature=youtu.be>

A third witness told STJ that, when they took control over Deir Sharqi, the Syrian regular forces were stationed near the shrine's building— only 150m away. The forces established military posts for the 25th Division, in addition to reenforcing posts belonging to the 9th Division. This deployment would have made it difficult for any armed group or individuals to access the shrine and set it aflame after their arrival.

Other witnesses from Deir Sharqi town told STJ that jihadist organizations, such as the extremist Tanẓīm Ḥurrās ad-Dīn/Guardians of Religion Organization, had previously attempted to vandalize the shrine. However, the town's people thwarted their efforts.

Given the likely timeline of events, visual evidence, and witness testimony, STJ's experts concluded that the Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz Shrine was not vandalized by "terrorist" groups as Syrian media sources claimed, and instead was likely damaged by Syrian regular forces as they attempted to take control of Deir Sharqi town and during their time stationed there.

## 2. Headstones in al-Shuhadaa Cemetery Vandalized

As Syrian regular forces and armed groups clash for control over Syrian cities, their fighters are vandalizing graves to send retaliatory messages. One verified example is the destruction of headstones in al-Shuhadaa Cemetery.

The al-Shuhadaa Cemetery (Martyrs Cemetery) is located in Khan Assubul town in the southern countryside of Idlib and holds dozens of graves of the town's residents. Buried there are both civilians and militants who fell during active fighting with Syrian regular forces in previous years.



Image 20- Satellite image locating the al-Shuhadaa Cemetery in Khan Assubul town.

After Syrian regular forces gained control over Khan Assubul town, rural Idlib, on 31 December 2020, two videos went viral on social media. The first, published on 6 February 2020,<sup>11</sup> shows a Syrian regular militant filming himself while driving through the al-Shuhadaa Cemetery. He threatens: “I will return here when my work is done.” The second video features the same militant<sup>12</sup> with several other members of the Syrian regular forces as they vandalize a headstone in the al-Shuhadaa Cemetery — the grave of a commander of the armed opposition groups Muhanna Ammareddin, known as Abu Mujahid. They first use a stone to smash the headstone down and then start kicking it. Also filming the assault, one militant can be heard addressing a town resident, by the name Abu Kamal, saying: “Are you satisfied! We have kept our promise!”



Image 21-Screenshot from the above-mentioned video, filmed by a militant of the Syrian regular forces while driving through the al-Shuhadaa Cemetery in Khan Assubul town.

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<sup>11</sup> For more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i40RUXwC4X4>

<sup>12</sup> For more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yN9aKX-5F3k>





Image 22- Screenshot from the second video, showing the said militant, with others, vandalizing a headstone in the al-Shuhadaa Cemetery in Khan Assubul town.



Image 23- Screenshots from the two videos mentioned above, showing the militant that appeared in both videos, threatening he will destroy the al-Shuhadaa Cemetery in Khan Assubul town.

Commenting on the vandalism of the headstone, a local source told STJ that a group of the Syrian regular forces, affiliated with the 5th Brigade, one of the military formations operating under the Russia-founded 5th Legion, sabotaged over 40 graves of civilians and militants in the Khan Assubul cemetery, including the grave of opposition commander Muhanna Ammareddin.

**STJ's field researcher crosschecked the information collected and concluded that the militants from the video are Samer Haloum, known as al-Asla', Muhammad Adnan al-Mousa (al-Sarhan), Hassan Adnan al-Mousa (al-Sarhan), Abdulrahman Hamaddou Dahrouj, and Muhammad Dahrouj.**

A second local source provided STJ with additional information on the motive behind vandalizing the graves, notably the destruction of the opposition commander Muhanna Ammareddin's headstone in the video.

When Khan Assubul town was still controlled by armed opposition groups, Commander Muhanna Ammareddin gave families within the ranks of the Syrian regular forces two options: defect and hand over their weapons, or leave town. Ammareddin coerced multiple families into leaving Khan Assubul town immediately, leading to clashes between his fighters and families which killed five members of families loyal to the Syrian government. The dead belonged to the families of Dahrouj, al-Hassan, Qandah, and Sarhan al-Mousa.

Commander Ammareddin died on 12 May 2014. Unidentified gunmen blocked Ammareddin's way while driving his car on the Hartamiyeh road, the eastern countryside of Ma'arat al-Nu'man, during a tour to the battalions of the Liwa Dir' al-Shamal/Northern Shield Brigade. STJ's source added that the gunmen shot and killed the commander.

Given Ammareddin's actions against Syrian government loyalists, it is likely that the sabotage of the commander's grave was a retaliatory attack. Members of armed opposition groups responded to the destruction of his grave, and others, in kind.

In retaliation of the vandalism of the headstone, on 9 February 2020, media activists circulated a video<sup>13</sup> showing several persons who defined themselves as fighters of armed opposition groups near a grave in the al-Fu'ah town, Idlib province. One masked fighter addresses the militants of the Syrian regular forces who trespassed on the graves in the Khan Assubul town, south of Idlib, saying: "Avenging the graves in Khan Assubul town, we will destroy one of the graves here. We will use a hammer so that our feet do not touch these filthy graves."

STJ's field researcher could not obtain evidence about the identities of the fighters or the armed groups they belonged to. However, the video was filmed during Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's control over the area. HTS has been exclusively ruling in the two towns of al-Fu'ah and Kafarya since July 2018 until our source's report in late September 2020.

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<sup>13</sup> For more: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/184798443@N07/49512193231/in/dateposted>



Image 24- Screenshot from [the above-mentioned video](#), showing a masked fighter smashing down a headstone of a grave in al-Fu'ah town, allegedly “avenging the sabotage of graves in Khan Assubul town.”

### 3. Graves of two opposition fighters in Hayyan town burned down

Incidents of grave vandalism were not limited to Idlib province. Similar violations were carried out in areas across Aleppo province with the same retaliatory intentions behind them. After the Syrian regular forces took over the cities of Hayyan, Hraytan, Anadan, and Kafr Hamrah—the last armed opposition strongholds in Aleppo’s vicinity— on 16 February 2020, STJ’s field researcher documented that militants of the regular forces burned down and sabotaged two graves belonging to armed opposition fighters in the cemetery of Hayyan town, located in the northern countryside of Aleppo on 18 February 2020. Media activists circulated a video on the same day<sup>14</sup> showing a number of Syrian regular force militants destroying the headstones of two graves in the Hayyan town cemetery.

<sup>14</sup> For more: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R\\_GC4ovH2UA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_GC4ovH2UA)





Image 25- Satellite image locating the cemetery in Hayyan town in February 2020.



Image 26- Screenshot from the [above-mentioned video](#), showing a number of Syrian regular forces destroying two graves of former armed opposition fighters in Hayyan town, rural Aleppo.



Image 27- Militants of the Syrian regular forces setting fire to the grave of Omar Mansour Ossow, former armed opposition fighter. Credit: Media activists.

Commenting on the incident, a local source told STJ that 13 militants of the Syrian regular forces sabotaged and set fire to two graves of two former armed opposition fighters in Hayyan town, rural Aleppo. The first belonged to Omar Mansour Ossow, known as al-Hajj Ammour and commander of the Ahfad Omar/Grandchildren of Omar Battalion, and the second belonged to his younger brother Muhammad Mansour Ossow. The two brothers died in 2012.

The militants responsible for the vandalism are members of the families of al-Baj, Kasshou, al-Khatib, and al-Helo and were all born in Hayyan town, the source added. **Having crosschecked the information, STJ's field researcher managed to identify the militants appearing in the video, as Abdo Ahmad Naser al-Khatib, Muhammad Youssef Khalil al-Helo, known as Bami, Mustafa Youssef Kasshouf, known as Kahouf, Youssef Kahouf Kasshou, Muhammad Youssef Kahouf Hasshou, Mustafa Kahouf Kasshou, Khalid Kahouf Kasshou, Fouad Omar Abdullah al-Baj, and Mahmoud Muhammad Takhtoukh.**

The al-Baj and Ossow households were at odds even before the Syrian conflict started. The dispute spiraled after members of the al-Baj family joined the forces of the Syrian government while members of the Ossow family volunteered with armed opposition groups, STJ's field researcher reported.

At the onset of the protests in Hayyan town, the residents of Hayyan, Bayanoun, Hraytan, Anadan, and Kafr Hamrah, and Marea took to the street in a joint protest. In response, the al-Baj and Kasshou families shot the protestors, killing three persons from Marea and Hayyan. In response, the Ossow family expelled the majority of the two families' members from Hayyan town and burned down their houses, allowing only a few to continue living there. The evicted family members resettled in Zahraa and Nubl towns, the researcher added.

According to STJ's field researcher, on 22 October 2012, Commander Omar Mansour Ossow requested that one member of the Kasshou family be handed over to the armed opposition for dealing with the Syrian regular forces. However, the man's father refused to do so and smuggled his son to the Nubl town, giving rise to armed clashes between the two families which killed Omar Mansour Ossow and his younger brother.

## **II. Cemeteries Vandalized and Eradicated by Turkish Forces and SNA in Afrin Region**

The Turkish army and armed opposition groups operating under the Turkey-backed SNA are also responsible for the vandalism and destruction of cemeteries and heritage sites. Turkish forces and SNA factions have controlled the predominantly-Kurdish Syrian Afrin region, located within the northern countryside of Aleppo, since March 2018 following Operation Olive Branch.<sup>15</sup> Groups sabotaged and destroyed many cemeteries belonging to both civilians and YPG-affiliated fighters who fell during battles with Turkish forces. Cleared with heavy machinery, such as bulldozers, a number of these cemeteries were turned into cattle markets.

Turkish forces and SNA's factions also trespassed on a number of Yezidi religious shrines and Kurdish archeological sites, excavating them in search of antiquities.

### **1. Civilians and militants' graves vandalized and destroyed in Afrin region**

STJ's field researcher documented 18 incidents of vandalism, whereby graves of civilians and militants were destroyed in Afrin region. Additionally, the researcher recorded excavations at two Yezidi shrines and the looting of the contents of a third. All these violations were carried out during Operation Olive Branch or after the Turkish forces and the SNA factions took control of the Afrin region and its suburbs. These abuses occurred between February 2018 and mid-2020.

#### **A. Sabotage of three graves and assaults on headstones with Kurdish inscriptions in Afrin region**

In Sheikh Khourouz village, administratively affiliated with Bulbul district in Afrin region, SNA fighters vandalized and destroyed the majority of the graves within the village's cemetery

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<sup>15</sup> On 20 January 2018, the Turkish forces, backed by the armed opposition groups, launched Operation Olive Branch into Afrin City, controlling the city center on 18 March 2018 after 59 days of battles.



after they took control over the area on 7 February 2018. They sabotaged shrines later in July 2020, a resident told STJ. He added:

“They destroyed the graves and their headstones, including the graves of my mother and brother. Large-scale destruction befell the graves where headstones displayed Kurdish language writings. Only a few graves survived the assault.”

The witness added that Sheik Khourouz Cemetery included at least 50 graves of the village’s residents, noting that SNA fighters also seized several of the residents’ houses and turned them into military posts.

On 31 July 2020, during Eid al-Adha, residents who visited the Sheikh Khourouz Cemetery were surprised that additional headstones were destroyed. The witness told STJ that witnesses from the village confirmed that SNA fighters trespassed on the graves. A video posted in August 2020 by the Afrin Today Facebook page showed the destruction and sabotage at the Sheikh Khourouz Cemetery,<sup>16</sup> perpetrated by the Turkey-backed SNA.



Image 28– Screenshot from the [above-mentioned video](#), showing destruction at the Sheikh Khourouz Cemetery, as perpetrated by the Turkey-backed SNA.

<sup>16</sup> For more: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1169200500102471>

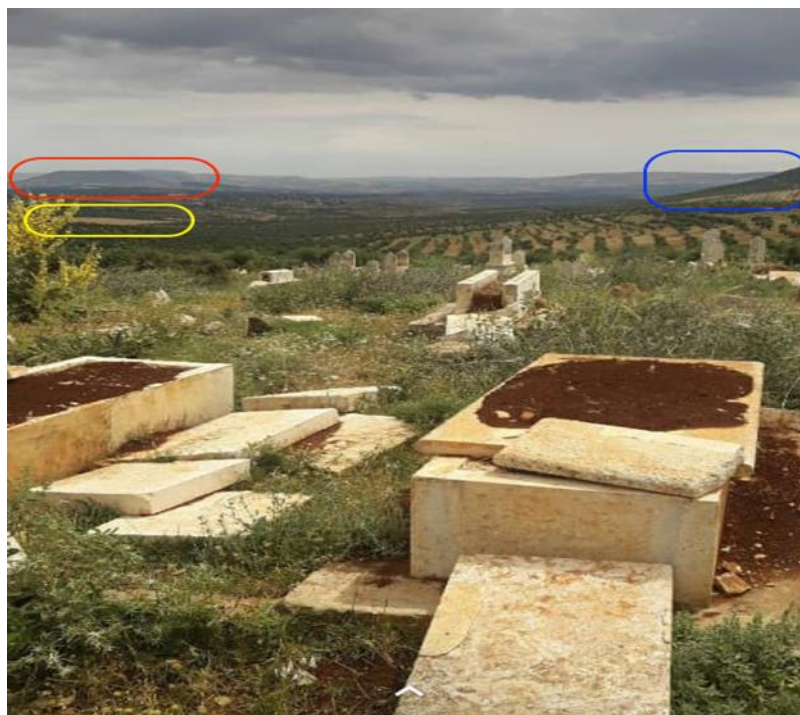


Image 29 – Sheikh Khourouz Cemetery after the assault. Credit: Local Facebook pages.

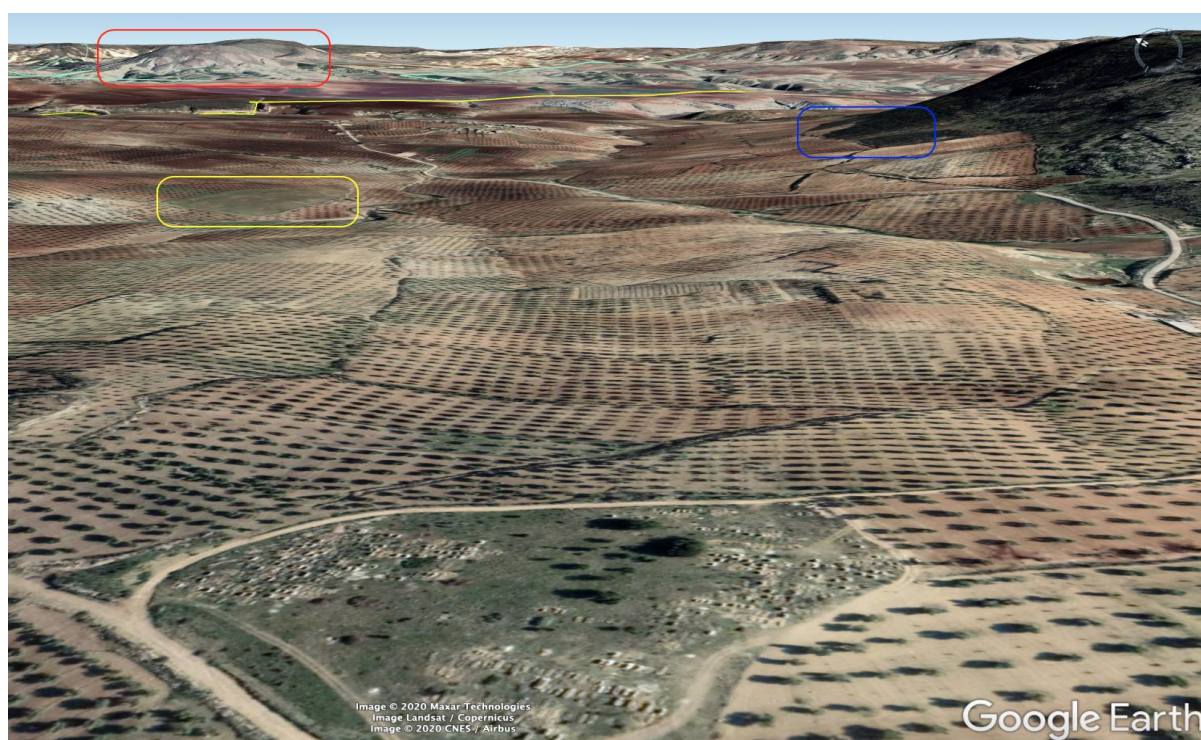


Image 30- The two photos provide analysis of the visual evidence obtained on the destruction and sabotage aimed at the Sheikh Khourouz Cemetery.



On 29 May 2020, local Facebook pages posted photos<sup>17</sup> reportedly of excavations in a grave at the cemetery of the Abu Ka'aba village, administratively affiliated to the Jindires district in Afrin region. STJ's field researcher investigated the reported incident and confirmed it took place. The cemetery, which includes civilian graves, was attacked twice in 2018 and in March 2020 by SNA armed groups.



Image 31- A grave dug up and vandalized in the Abu Ka'aba village, Jindires district, Afrin region.  
Credit: Local Facebook pages.

STJ's field researcher also verified a third similar attack on headstones in Afrin. On 9 May 2020, media activists circulated a video<sup>18</sup> claiming it showed the looting of marble headstones and the destruction of graves in Jindires town. These abuses were perpetrated by SNA fighters who planned to hand the headstones over to construction brokers, who would then sell them.

<sup>17</sup> For more: <https://t.me/vdcnsy/8066>

<sup>18</sup> For more:  
[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=1547505828761798&id=960856530760067](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1547505828761798&id=960856530760067)





Image 32



Images 32, 33-Two screenshots from a [video](#), showing the destruction of graves in Jindires town.



Image 34 – Analysis of visual evidence obtained on the sabotage and destruction of several headstones in Jindires town.

## B. Two cemeteries in Qurbê and ‘Erşqîbar/Arsh Qibar villages vandalized

The cemetery in the Qurbê village, administratively affiliated to Jindires district in Afrin region, was vandalized and then bulldozed in early 2019, a local source told STJ. The source added that the cemetery was bulldozed and leveled to the ground under the instructions of the Turkish Command and a *fatwa*( ruling) from Sheikhs in Eastern Ghouta. A Turkish Waqif Administration building was constructed in the cemetery’s place.

Before the cemetery was completely eradicated, the source said, Salafist sheikhs, displaced from rural Damascus, sabotaged a number of the cemetery’s headstones on 12 December 2018, alleging they violated Islamic Sharia rulings. The cemetery contained nearly 50 graves belonging to the village’s Kurdish civilians and militants. Media activists and local Facebook pages circulated a video of the sabotage of headstones in the Qurbê Cemetery on 12 December 2018.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For more: [https://twitter.com/ahmad\\_hasan67/status/1072614258448498689?s=21](https://twitter.com/ahmad_hasan67/status/1072614258448498689?s=21)



Image 35



Image 36





Images 35, 36, 37- Screenshots from a [video](#), showing destroyed headstones in the Qurbê Cemetery on 12 December 2018.

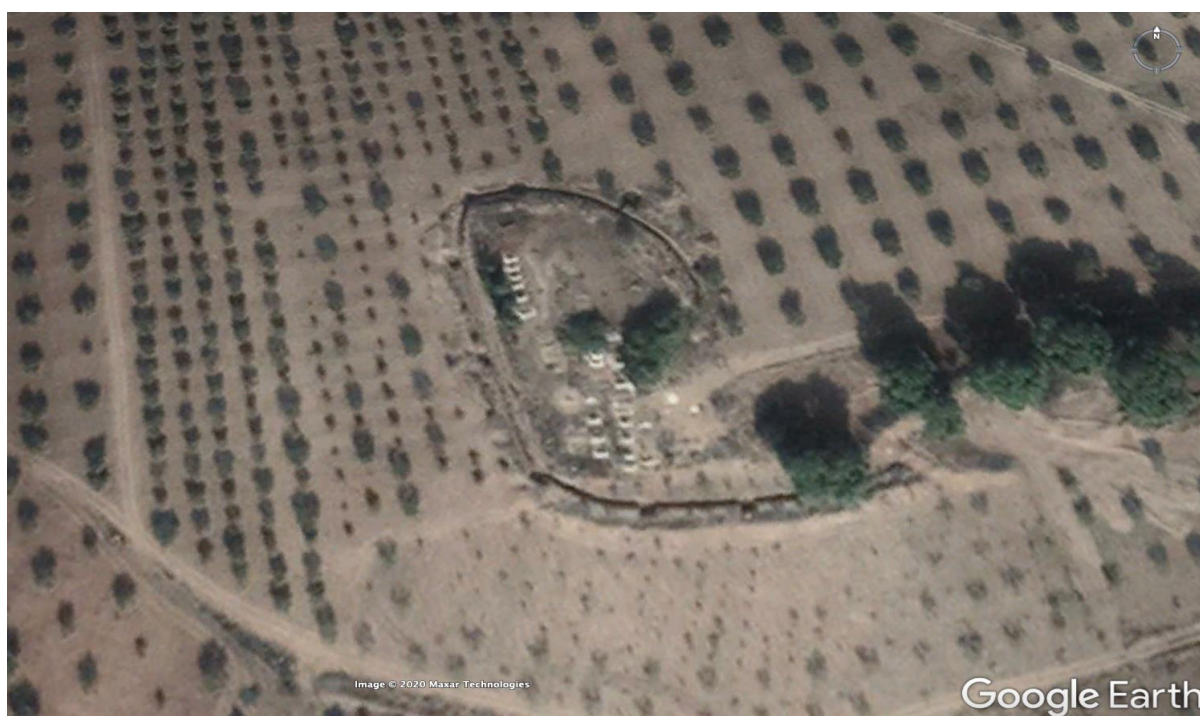


Image 38- Satellite image locating the cemetery in the Qurbê village, administratively affiliated to the Jindires district in Afrin region.

On 19 May 2019, media activists circulated a video of another incident disturbing cemeteries.<sup>20</sup> The video showed the decimation of a number of graves in ‘Erşqîbar/Ersh Qibar town, reportedly perpetrated by fighters of the Turkey-backed SNA.



Image 39- Screenshot from a [video](#), showing several destroyed graves in ‘Erşqîbar/Ersh Qibar town.

Documenting the same incident, Rudaw News Agency published a video on 28 April 2020,<sup>21</sup> showing the destruction of the graves in ‘Erşqîbar/Ersh Qibar town that appeared in the previous video, demonstrating that the graves were not repaired by May after their destruction in April.

<sup>20</sup> For more: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1067461613463054>

<sup>21</sup> “Yezidi shrines desecrated by Turkish-backed groups in Afrin,” Rudaw News Agency, 28 April 2020, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/280> (last visited: 28 February 2021).





Image 40



Image 41



Image 42





Images 40, 41, 42, 43- Screenshots from the [above-mentioned video](#), showing the destruction of several graves in the 'Erşqîbar/Ersh Qibar town, which proves that decimation reported earlier continued till 24 April 2020.



Image 44- Satellite image locating the cemetery in 'Erşqîbar/Ersh Qibar town.

### **C. Martyr Rafiq Cemetery in Metîna/Matenli village bulldozed**

Another incident of vandalism and eradication was aimed at the Martyr Rafiq Cemetery in Metîna/Matenli village, administratively affiliated with the Sharran district in Afrin region, perpetrated by the SNA factions and the Turkish forces. In the second half of May 2020, one witness from the area told STJ that fighters of the Sultan Murad Division demolished the cemetery's fence, destroyed headstones, and bulldozed graves with heavy machinery.

A significant community landmark, the cemetery contained hundreds of graves of both civilians and militants, as well as a mosque and square where villagers prayed for their dead and gathered during holidays. The cemetery featured a rest area of several rooms adjacent to the mosque. Later, the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade turned these rooms into a military post and built a housing area for internally displaced persons near the cemetery, the witness added.

A video,<sup>22</sup> posted by Hawar News Agency and probably filmed between April and June 2018, showed the destruction caused to the cemetery by the Turkish forces' shelling.



Image 45

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<sup>22</sup> For more: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODdd2J3yYYQ>



Image 46



Images 45, 46, 47- Screenshots from the [above-mentioned video](#), showing the damage caused to the Rafiq Cemetery by the Turkish forces' shelling in 2018.





Image 48- Satellite image locating Martyr Rafiq Cemetery on 28 January 2018, before it was hit during the shelling.



Image 49-Satellite image locating the Martyr Rafiq Cemetery on 21 March 2018.





Image 50- Satellite image locating Martyr Rafiq Cemetery in June 2018, after it was hit during the shelling.



Image 51



Images 51, 52- The Martyr Rafiq Cemetery after it was bulldozed by the Turkish forces and the Turkey-backed factions of the SNA in May 2020. Credit: Afrin Post Facebook page.

#### **D. Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery eradicated and turned into cattle market**

In August 2018, the Turkish forces and allied members of the SNA bulldozed the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery at the junction of the Kafr Shīl village, Afrin region. 200 to 300 graves were razed, holding the bodies of Kurdish civilians and militants who fell during Operation Olive Branch. Bulldozers and other heavy machinery were used to level the cemetery to the ground, according to information obtained by STJ.

After it took control over Afrin region in March 2018, Turkey announced it discovered a cemetery of “terrorists,”<sup>23</sup> buried there after they died during Operation Olive Branch, an Afrin-based female media activist reported.

<sup>23</sup> “Turkish army discovers cemetery for terrorists in Afrin,” Anadolu Agency, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/pg/%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%B6-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D8%B1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B4-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%AB%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A9->



The cemetery was established following Operation Olive Branch, particularly on 29 January 2020, because it was difficult to transport the bodies of the dead to the Martyr Seydo Cemetery in Jindires district or to Martyr Rafiq Cemetery in Metîna/Matenli village, in Sharran district, the activist added.



Image 53 – Photo taken from the article published in Anadolu Agency, describing the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery as a “terrorists’ cemetery.”

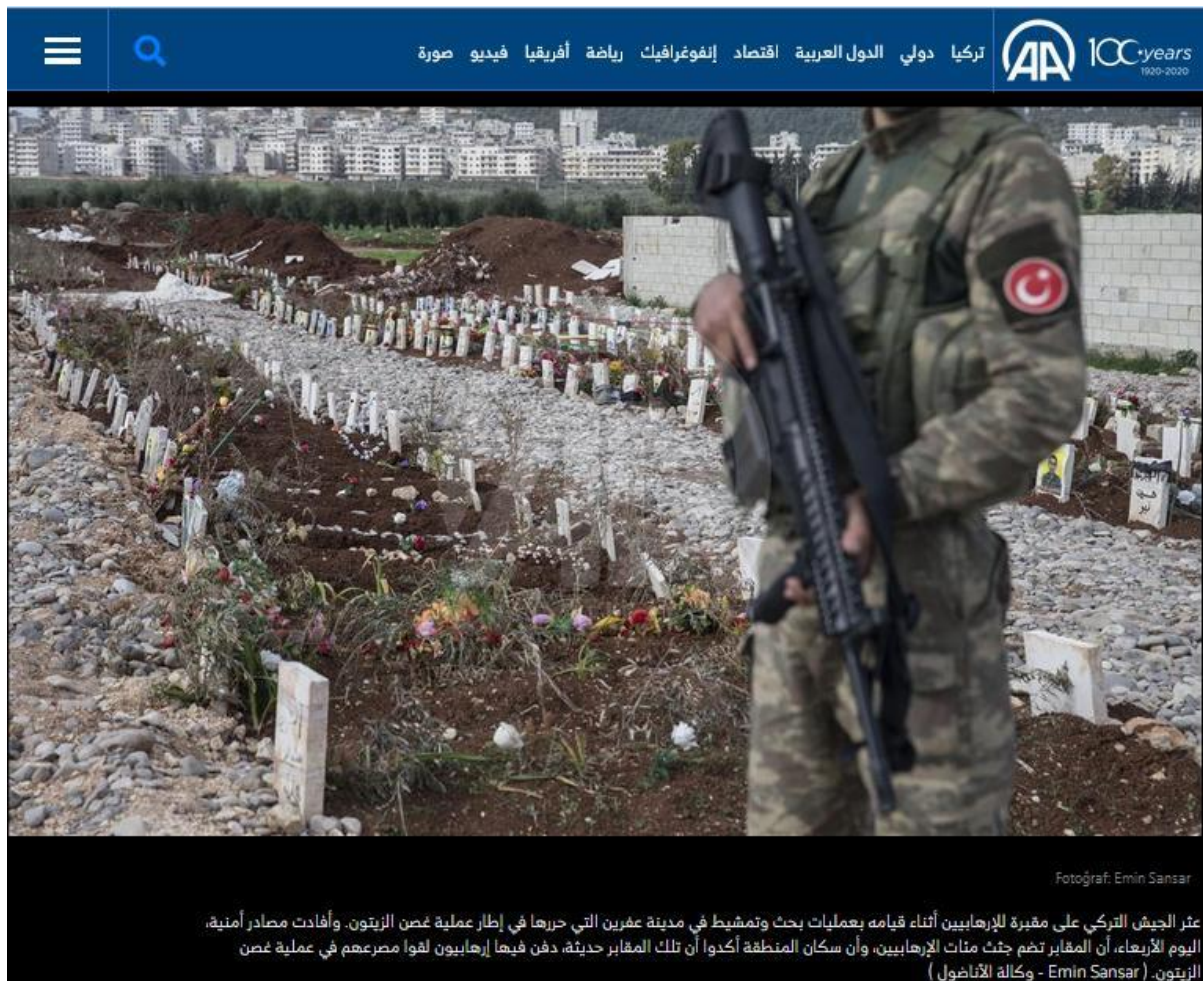


Image 54- Another photo taken from the same article, featuring a Turkish soldier positioned in the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery which Anadolu Agency called a “terrorists’ cemetery.”





Image 55



Images 55, 56- Two photos of the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery before it was bulldozed. Credit: Hawar News Agency.





Image 57- The Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery after it was bulldozed in August 2018. Credit: Local Facebook pages.

In August 2018, media activists circulated a video of heavy machinery bulldozing the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For more: <https://twitter.com/afrinactivists/status/1028616619101171712?s=21>



Image 58- [Screenshot](#) showing one heavy machine bulldozing the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery.



Image 59- Satellite image showing the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery on 28 January 2018, before it was leveled to the ground.





Image 60- Satellite image showing the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery in March 2018, before it was leveled to the ground.



Image 61- Satellite image showing the Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery on 21 August, after it was leveled to the ground.



The activist added that the cemetery included the graves of civilians and militants alike and that it was hit by the Turkish forces' airstrikes on 12 March 2020—that is, before the Turkish forces and the SNA factions took over Afrin region. The forces and the factions later turned the cemetery into a cattle market, called Souq al-Talata/Thursdays' Market.



Image 62- The Martyr Avesta Khabur Cemetery after it was bulldozed and turned into a cattle market in August 2018. Credit: Afrin Post Facebook page.

#### **E. Martyr Seydo Cemetery in Afrin Region demolished**

In May 2018, the SNA demolished the Martyr Seydo Cemetery in Mount Kazikli, overlooking the Kafr Safra village, 5km northwest Jindires district. The cemetery included over 500 graves of Kurdish fighters, deemed by the area's residents as icons. The residents visited these graves to remember their dead relatives and loved ones.



Image 63- The Martyr Seydo Cemetery after it was demolished in May 2018. Credit: Hawar News Agency.



Image 64- Satellite image locating the Martyr Seydo Cemetery in August 2017, before it was demolished.





Image 64- Satellite image locating the Martyr Seydo Cemetery in May 2018, after it was demolished.

On 5 February 2018, the Martyr Seydo Cemetery was partially damaged, hit by the artillery bombing carried out against the area by the Turkish army and allied armed opposition groups over the course of Operation Olive Branch.



Image 65





Image 66



Images 65, 66, 67- Destruction caused to the Martyr Seydo Cemetery by the artillery shelling on 5 February 2018. Credit: Press Office of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

## 2. Excavations at Yezidi and Kurdish Shrines in Afrin region

After the Turkish forces and the factions of the SNA took control over the Afrin region in March 2018, excavation groups spread across various areas searching for antiquities. According to information obtained by STJ, these groups are either immediately affiliated to

the SNA factions or operate under these factions' protection. The looted antiquities are most likely sold by these groups through middlemen from the SNA and then smuggled into Turkey, sources confirmed to STJ. In the following section, STJ verifies information about the vandalism and robbery of Kurdish and Yezidi shrines.

### A. Two Yezidi shrines raided in Afrin

On 15 May, groups searching for antiquities raided the Yezidi Chail Khaneh Shrine, in Qibar village, rural Afrin. A cave within a rocky cliff, Yezidi families go to the shrine for “worship, blessings and quietism.”

The morning that day, the villagers woke up to news of the shrine’s raid, which was attacked by groups excavating in search of antiquities in the area. These groups rob cemeteries and shrines and are protected by the Sultan Suleiman Shah Brigade and the Hamza/Hamzat Division, a local source told STJ. The majority of these groups’ members are from Idlib, Daraa, and Eastern Ghouta.

On 28 May 2020, Rudaw News Agency posted a video of the Chail Khaneh Shrine in Qibar village,<sup>25</sup> rural Afrin after it was raided. The assault’s effects are particularly clear at minute 5:30 of the video.



Image 68-Screenshot from the above-mentioned video showing the destruction at Chail Khaneh Shrine after it was raided in May 2020.

The source added that the same groups raided another Yezidi shrine in May 2020, called al-Sheikh Hamid Shrine in the Yezidi village of al-Qastal/Qastal Jundou, administratively

<sup>25</sup> For more: <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/syria/28042020>



affiliated to the Sharran district, east of Afrin. This shrine was also robbed of its contents by the fighters of the Sultan Murad Division. The groups did not only raid the shrine seeking antiquities, but also razed a perennial tree that stood just outside the shrine.



Image 69



Images 69, 70- The al-Sheikh Hamid Shrine before it was raided by the excavation groups searching for antiquities. Source: Local Facebook pages.





Image 71- The Sheikh Hamid Shrine after it was raided by the excavation groups searching for antiquities. Credit: Hawar News Agency.

On 26 May 2020, media activists circulated a video of the Sheikh Hamid Shrine in the Yezidi village of al-Qastal,<sup>26</sup> affiliated with Sharran district, east of Afrin, after it was raided and subjected to excavation work in search for antiquities.

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<sup>26</sup> For more: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3nM\\_oTCBgo&ab\\_channel=afrinpost](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v3nM_oTCBgo&ab_channel=afrinpost)



Image 72- Screenshot from the [above-mentioned video](#), showing the Sheikh Hamid Shrine in the Yezidi village of al-Qastal after it was raided and excavated in search of antiquities.

## **B. Looting contents of Hannan Shrine in Masha'ala village, Afrin region**

In Masha'ala village, Afrin region, excavation groups also raided the Hannan Shrine and emptied it of antiquities on 25 August 2018, local sources told STJ.

The shrine houses the grave of the Kurdish icon Nuri Dersmi—a leader and a symbol of the Kurdish revolution in Dersim city, Turkey. He died in 1973 and was buried in the shrine's yard with his wife Farida, who died in 1994. The shrine also includes the graves of other renowned Kurdish figures, such as Ruşen Bedirxan, the wife of the acclaimed Kurdish linguist Celadet Alî Bedirxan.



Image 73 –Satellite image locating the Hannan Shrine in Masha'ala village.

The shrine had already been abused prior to its excavation in August. A video published by local Facebook pages in May 2018 showed the Hannan Shrine after it was first vandalized and looted.<sup>27</sup>



Image 74 –Screenshot from the [above-mentioned video](https://www.facebook.com/DeriPress/videos/224733574955816) showing the destruction at the Hannan Shrine's mosque, after it was vandalized and looted in May 2018.

<sup>27</sup> For more: <https://www.facebook.com/DeriPress/videos/224733574955816>





Image 75- Digging and excavation work at the Hannan Shrine in search of antiquities in August 2018.

Credit: Afrin Activists Network.

### **III. Religious shrine vandalized; its contents looted by the Turkistan Islamic Party**

Another party responsible for the vandalism and destruction of a religious site is the Turkistan Islamic Party after it seized the al-Zeyarah district in al-Ghab Plain, located in Hama's countryside, in late 2015. In March 2016, the armed group vandalized and looted the contents of a grave and a religious shrine, which locals believe belongs to Jabir ibn Abdullah al-Ansari, a companion of Prophet Muhammad. The group's fighters partially destroyed the shrine's interior and looted the contents they found within the room that protected the grave.



Image 76 – Satellite image locating the shrine in the al-Zeyarah district.

Commenting on the shrine's significance to locals, historian Naji al-Malah, from al-Ghab Plain, said that the shrine dates back over 250 years, back when the al-Ghab Plain region was still perched over a large body of water. Local and historic sources agree that the stones used to build the shrine were transported via boats. However, al-Malah added that there are no documents identifying the person buried there. Some sources say the grave belongs to Jabir ibn Abdullah al-Ansari, but this has not been corroborated by historic evidence, particularly since other evidence suggests that Companion al-Ansari was buried in Medina, Saudi Arabia.

Over 2017 and 2018, al-Malah added, the shrine was subjected to artillery and rocket attacks by the artillery weaponry of Syrian regular forces stationed in the Jurin Camp, which damaged the shrine's external room.

Commenting on the vandalization of the shrine, media activist Samer al-Ghabi told STJ that:

“The shrine is quite symbolic for the people of the al-Zeyarah district and adjacent areas. It was the destination they visited for blessings; to be cured from illnesses; and other similar purposes. Even the name of the al-Zeyarah/visit town has been derived from these activities, and it stands as proof for the historic value attributed to the shrine.”

Al-Ghabi said that on 24 March 2016 fighters of the Turkistan Islamic Party ordered the al-Zeyarah villagers to show up at the shrine in the morning on 25 March. He added:

“The people indeed went there the next morning, including me. A Syrian member of the Party then read a statement, saying that the Party's Anti-Heresy Committee has decided to demolish the grave due to the deviant traditions it gave rise to and the

activities practiced next to it. When we protested, the man who read the statement told us that we were there only to witness the grave being demolished and to report the incident to other people.”

One of the al-Zeyarah village’s residents, who witnessed the shrine being demolished, told STJ that Party fighters, including Syrians from the region, booby-trapped the upper part of the shrine using small explosives. When detonated, the explosives created a hole which subsequently collapsed the ceiling. The grave’s markers were obliterated. The Party fighters seized the contents they found in the room that contained the grave, including antiquities that recounted the shrine’s history, ancient Quranic drawings, and ancient embroidered clothes, the source added.

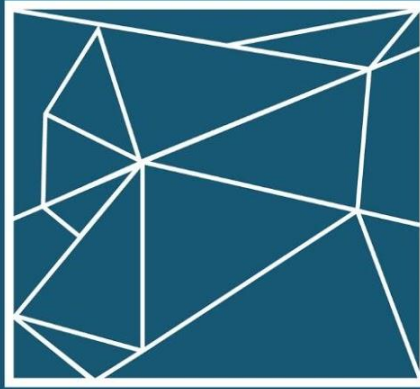
The source noted that the violations perpetrated by the fighters of the Turkistan Islamic Party deeply wounded the area’s people, who considered the shrine a religious site and sometimes buried their dead near it.



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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