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The Salvation Government Continues to Stifle Informal Camps North of Idlib

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In the informal camps of al-Dana, within Idlib's countryside, thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) are being threatened with eviction or denial of relief unless they pay annual rents for their tents and temporary shelters.

The Salvation Government (SG)—the administrative façade of the military faction Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)—continues to financially stifle thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) in Idlib province. The SG forced displaced families to pay it annual sums of money in exchange for allowing them to dwell in camps, particularly those set up in the areas of al-Dana, Sarmada, and Harem. The SG imposed other unfair restrictions on charities and relief organizations operating in the areas, coercing them into providing it with a part of monthly relief allocations designated to IDPs, or else it will prevent them from doing their job.

The HTS also placed similar constraints on IDPs. Notably, HTS fighters established a monopoly on the use of the areas' water resources, exploiting and depriving IDPs of water resources unless they pay them money. While influential HTS fighters block IDPs access to water resources in the areas where the camps are located, the SG-run Agricultural Office¹ and IDPs Administration² continue to propagate wider restrictive policies aimed at IDPs and relief organizations and charities.

1. Stifled IDPs

A field researcher with Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) interviewed eight displaced families dwelling in the areas where IDP camps are located, specifically near the village of [Deir Hassan](#) and the region of [al-Dana](#) in the countryside of Idlib province. The camps include tents and makeshift shelters for about 50 displaced families. Interviewees claimed that the SG's Agricultural Office demanded an annual rent of about 20 Turkish Liras (TL) for each 70 meters, upon which a tent or a temporary shelter—a unit without a cement roof—is set up. Furthermore, the HTS imposed a monthly rent of 50 to 100 TL on each of the shop owners in and near the camps, determined by the type of goods sold.

In both cases, IDPs were threatened with eviction, the denial of monthly relief aid, or the closure of their shops if they refused to pay the demanded money.

A number of the displaced people that STJ interviewed recounted that the areas adjacent to Deir Hassan consist of informal camps set up on lands belonging to the Syrian state which the HTS expropriated and divided among its commanders. The HTS commanders later sold their shares, separate plots of a few meters each, to IDPs who built roofless rooms, houses, and shops there.

Displaced families interviewed by STJ added that employees from the Agricultural Office divided the camps into sectors, surveyed shelters and shops, and gave them numbers to identify property and owners. These employees informed IDPs of the necessity to pay annual rents for shelters and monthly rents for shops.

¹ The Agricultural Office is operated by the SG's Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, headquartered in Idlib city. The ministry has an agricultural office in every area/district. For more: <https://syriansg.org/tag/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A/>

² The IDPs Administration is operated by the SG's Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs. The administration's offices oversee the affairs of formal and informal IDPs camps across Idlib province.

The Agricultural Office sends delegates to collect monthly rents. If payment is delayed, IDPs and/or shop owners are evicted from the camps, their shops or temporary shelters closed, and they are also denied monthly relief allocations. Commenting on this, a displaced man told STJ's field researcher:

“The monthly food basket is worth about 170 TL. These baskets are the sole livelihood to most families here. So, we choose to pay the 20 TL annual-house-rent as not to be deprived of the basket, even though it often lacks the usual items. Some of the things in the basket that we are supposed to get is being stolen.”

2. Restrictions on Charities and Relief Organizations

While IDPs are subjected to this unjust monetary policy, some of the charities working in the camps grapple with extortion. HTS-affiliated offices, entities, and committees forced charities and relief organizations to pay them money or give them some in-kind donations in return for the permission to continue providing relief assistance to IDPs in the areas of al-Dana and Harem.

In al-Dana area, the IDPs Administration imposed its control over a section of the camp and has been withholding a part of the monthly relief aid meant for IDPs. Wishing to speak anonymously for security reasons, an employee of one charity told STJ's field researcher the following:

“The camp is set up on a state-owned piece of land, with an area of 50 dunams. The camp consists of 500 shelters, a mosque, a school, and a park. The IDPs Administration granted the charity the permit to build the camp only after it claimed a share of 20 percent of the shelters, 100 housing units. The administration housed HTS fighters in some of these units and offered the rest for rent. In addition to the seizure of units, the administration continues to confiscate 20 percent of the monthly aid entering the camp, including food baskets, water, and fuel.”

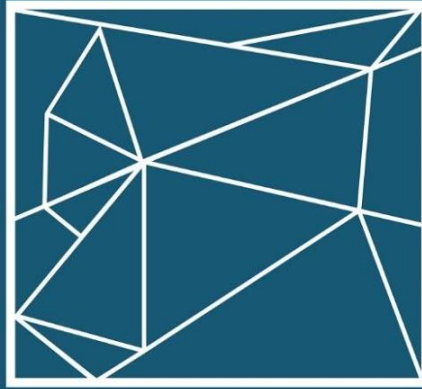
In a similar incident, HTS fighters blackmailed a charity in Harem's camp. The charity was forced to buy the camp water from a water well owned by an HTS commander. The charity was also prevented from operating a well it dug to escape extortion. One of the charity's employees told STJ's field researcher the following:

“The charity bought a piece of land from its direct owner to build a camp in Harem. The charity paid a fortune for that piece because the owner had it documented at the real property registry. The charity opted for this expensive option to avoid dealing with the HTS by buying one of the confiscated state-owned lands and to prevent the HTS from withholding any of the IDPs' monthly relief shares. The camp is built to accommodate about 700 families, with a mosque, a school, and a medical post. However, the charity had another difficulty to overcome - providing water supplies. It was forced to buy water from a well owned by a HTS commander, who demanded about 200 USD per day.”

The employee added:

“Water is costing the charity a monthly 6000 USD that all goes into the pockets of that HTS commander. To save these costs, the charity applied to the SG’s Agricultural Lands Directorate, asking for permission to dig a well. The directorate denied the charity the permit several times on the pretext that there is a well in the area. The charity ultimately resorted to intermediaries and obtained the permit. However, it was not allowed to operate it. It still pays the commander to secure the camp’s water supplies.”

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History

Syrians for Truth and Justice was conceived during the participation of its co-founder in the Middle-East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program, who was driven by a will to contribute to Syria's future. Starting as a humble project to tell the stories of Syrians experiencing enforced disappearances and torture, it grew into an established organisation committed to unveiling human rights violations of all sorts.

Convinced that the diversity that has historically defined Syria is a wealth, our team of researchers and volunteers works with dedication at uncovering human rights violations committed in Syria, in order to promote inclusiveness and ensure that all Syrians are represented, and their rights fulfilled.

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