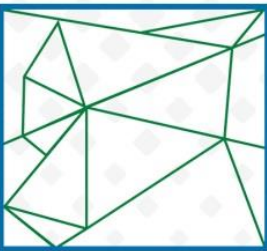


# Syria/Idlib: Arbitrary Arrest to Everyone who Refuses to Pay Royalties Under the Pretext of “Collecting Zakat Money”

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**Syria/Idlib: Arbitrary Arrest to Everyone who Refuses to Pay  
Royalties Under the Pretext of “Collecting Zakat Money”**

*To finance Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the General Authority of Zakat  
forces farmers to pay levies on the harvests*

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), through the [General Authority of Zakat](#), forces farmers in Idlib to pay levies and taxes on wheat harvest under the pretext of collecting “crops Zakat” money. These royalties were imposed by a [circular](#) issued in June 2019, and accordingly, farmers continued to be forced to pay these levies for years.

In July 2023, during the harvest season, the HTS deployed several checkpoints of the [General Authority of Zakat](#) in areas under its control in Idlib to force farmers to pay these royalties under the pretext of collecting Zakat money.

Last September, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) conducted interviews with four farmers and a vegetable merchant, in different areas controlled by HTS in northwestern Syria.<sup>1</sup> STJ documented that they were all threatened with arrest when they refused to pay “Zakat money”. Moreover, it documented that two farmers were arbitrarily arrested by HTS, because they refused to allow the [General Authority of Zakat](#) to take a share of their crops.

In order to understand the connection between HTS and the [General Authority of Zakat](#), and to learn the latter's working mechanisms, STJ conducted an interview with a former worker of the [General Authority of Zakat](#), and two other interviews with media activists who have good knowledge about this case.

In the interviews, the farmers explained that they had to pay a minimum of 5% of their crops despite the dire living conditions and the losses of wheat, barley, and olive cultivation, especially in the absence of any support provided by the Salvation Government affiliated with HTS.

## **Arbitrary Arrest of Everyone who Does not Pay Zakat Money:**

Ahmed, a farmer from the Jisr al-Shughur area, was detained for 19 days by HTS because he refused to pay a share of his wheat crop. He spoke to STJ about his experience:

**“I finished harvesting wheat by the beginning of July. However, due to the lack of rain this year, the yield was not good enough. The production of one dunum did not exceed 200 kg, which did not cover the costs... At the checkpoint of the General Authority of Zakat, the members of the Authority insisted on taking a share of my crops although I tried to explain my loss. When I refused to respond, they confiscated my tractor and the wheat and arrested me in the detention of the police station. I was interrogated several times because I did not pay Zakat money. I was also threatened with six months imprisonment. Finally, I was released after they took more than one hundred kilograms of the crops”.**

The witness added:

**“The lack of rain and the high temperature we witnessed from the beginning of February 2022 to the beginning of March 2022 had already led to a decline in the wheat production, and increased the number of field mice, which caused me a huge loss”.**

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<sup>1</sup> To protect the safety of sources, their real identity is not disclosed in this report.

STJ met Jamal, a farmer in the Sahl al-Ruj area in Idlib Governorate. Jamal was detained for 27 days by HTS after he refused to pay Zakat money to the General Authority of Zakat at a checkpoint located near Hlul town in Idlib. He narrated:

**“In July 2023, after I harvested the wheat, I was stopped by the General Authority of Zakat’s checkpoint while I was carrying about 1.5 tons of wheat. They asked me to pay 100 kilograms as Zakat money to distribute it to the poor. I refused because the production was very little, therefore, those in charge called the police officers who took me to Idlib prison... Since I had a fistfight with one of the checkpoint members, I was not released until I paid \$200 to the magistrates court. They also took 10% instead of 5% of the crop as a penalty”.**

The witness added:

**“The lack of rain caused a huge loss. Usually, one dunum produces 400 to 500 kg of wheat; This year, the production barely reached 220 kg. This is due to the lack of rain and the inability to water the crop with wells. Despite asking the Salvation Government of the HTS to support irrigation with wells, we have not received any help until this moment”.**

On the other hand, HTS, through the General Authority of Zakat, continued to confiscate 5% of olive crops, after publishing a [circular](#) forcing farmers to pay “Zakat of olive harvest”.

Majid is a farmer from Salqin city. He has 27 olive trees inherited from his grandfather. In mid-January 2023, HTS confiscated 17 kg (out of 352 kg) of olive oil that he produced after threatening him with arrest. He stated in his testimony to STJ:

**“In 2022, the rain did not fall in the autumn, which forced me to irrigate olive trees using the well and an electrical generator that runs on diesel for 10 hours a day, consuming five liters per hour, which is a huge cost for a farmer like me whose agriculture is the only source of income... At the beginning of 2023, I took the crop to the mill where an employee of the General Authority of Zakat stopped me to weigh the olive before pressing it. When I asked for an exemption, he said that his work was clear and non-negotiable and that they were collecting Zakat from the farmers to purify their money based on religious teachings. Then they confiscated 17 kg of olive oil... All this happened in the presence of police officers who threatened to arrest me if I did not pay Zakat”.**

## **Calculating the Payable Zakat Amount:**

Imad is a farmer in the Harem area. He informed STJ how the employees of the General Authority of Zakat work:

**“The employees of the General Authority of Zakat always stay in olive mills during the harvest period... Their task is to calculate the amount of oil produced by each farmer and to take 5% of it... especially that most farmers are forced to take the olive to mills to get the oil”.**

Moreover, since 2019, the General Authority of Zakat has permanent employees whose mission is to monitor vegetable markets to force merchants to pay Zakat money. According to Samir, a vegetable seller in the al-Hal market in Atma town in the Idlib countryside:

**“Employees of the General Authority of Zakat monitor every vegetable car that enters the market as it reaches a specific merchant. The latter must provide the Authority with information on the general weight of the car... He should pay a specific percentage in cash. The Authority collects money from the merchants after reviewing, calculating, and auditing the invoices for all the goods in the store... and the total money is calculated for each load”.**

Fahmi is one of the seasonal workers [contracted](#) by the General Authority of Zakat every year during the harvest season. He explained to STJ how he was trained to calculate the Zakat rate:

**“We received training for a week before working at the headquarters of the Central Directorate in Idlib city. It focused on how to deal with farmers, how to estimate the amount of crop, and finally, how to calculate Zakat rate of wheat and barley... We received a salary of \$200 per month”.**

Regarding the process of estimating the amount of crop and the rate of Zakat, the source said:

**“We measure the height of the crop packed in the truck, multiply it by the width and length of the truck, then we deduct a percentage of the crop by packing it – regardless of the quantity– into 50-kg plastic bags. We put all the bags at the checkpoint. The Authority’s truck comes daily to collect the bags”.**

The General Authority of Zakat deducts the percentage that must be paid from the total production without taking into account the costs of seeds, harvesting, and other expenses, which may sometimes exceed the value of the total production, especially in the fragile economic conditions that the country is experiencing. This increases the suffering of farmers and may prompt some of them to stop working in this important sector.

## **The Connection between HTS and the General Authority of Zakat:**

The General Authority of Zakat denies any connection with HTS. In April 2022, Abd al-Rahman al-Sabaa, director of the Public Relations Office of the General Authority of Zakat, [stated](#) to Syria TV that the Authority was initially established within the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) of the Salvation Government. He added that it was a public department concerned with Zakat, then a group of young people and students in the region decided to be responsible for this sector and thus, the General Authority of Zakat started its work independently.

However, all the testimonies documented by STJ confirm a close connection between the General Authority of Zakat and HTS contrary to the claims of the two bodies. This is also confirmed by the cases of arrests committed by HTS on behalf of the Authority.

In this context, the media activist Ahmad from Sarmada in the Idlib countryside stated in his interview with STJ:

**“The administration of the General Authority of Zakat consists of men from the second rank of HTS leadership. Moreover, the directors of its branches are appointed according to their affiliation with HTS and their scientific competence. Every year, as the harvest time in northwestern Syria approaches, the Authority**

opens registration for seasonal workers. The latter receive training courses for a week, then set up checkpoints at intersections in areas controlled by HTS, with the aim of stopping trucks and tractors loaded with crops and deducting 5% of the load, regardless of its size. These checkpoints block the roads 24 hours a day for 45 days and are in direct contact with the security services of the HTS to report anyone who refuses to pay. In this case, HTS confiscates the crops, puts the farmer in prison, and takes 10% instead of 5% from his crops as a fine”.

A media activist in Idlib reported that HTS, through the General Authority of Zakat, has been imposing taxes on farmers since 2019, noting that it confiscated this money for the benefit of the Economic Office affiliated with HTS. The source told STJ:

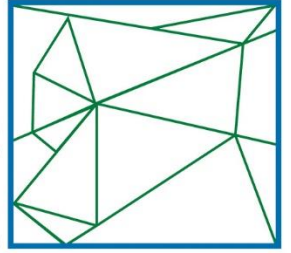
**“The Economic Office of HTS works to collect Zakat money, traffic fines, and taxes, such as those imposed on crops, cars, fuel companies, engineering construction, and other directorates created by HTS. All the money goes in one direction to the benefit of the first rank of HTS, represented by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, Abu Ahmad Zakur and other leaders. These figures are the primary controller of money, and there is no clear information about the method of using or disbursing it. This happens while more than 40% of the people in northwestern Syria are hungry and 90% are poor and unemployed”.**

The source added that the annual amounts confiscated in the name of Zakat and the profits earned by the Authority can be estimated by calculating the annual production of wheat and olives. He explained to STJ:

**“In 2023, the production of wheat in northwestern Syria exceeded 75,000 tons, from which HTS, through the General Authority of Zakat, deducted 5%, approximately 3,750 tons. After converting the wheat into flour in the Authority’s mills, it sold it to bread bakeries at a price of \$550 per ton. The profits were estimated at more than \$2 million in one season. Moreover, HTS took 5% of the olive crop. According to agricultural experts, more than 100,000 tons of olive oil were produced in 2023 and oil prices increased to more than \$5 per kilo”.**

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## About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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[EDITOR@STJ-SY.ORG](mailto:EDITOR@STJ-SY.ORG)