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Syria: Crops Looted, Lands Seized in “Peace Spring” Territories

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In this joint report, 18 incidents of crop looting and land seizure are documented, as perpetrated by members of the opposition-affiliated Syrian National Army (SNA). These seizures occurred in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tal Abyad between April and August 2020

1. Hevdestî-Synergy Association

In the long run, these efforts are meant to help construct the Syrian inclusive narrative.



This the team does to establish the principle of inclusiveness; guarantee that STJ represents each and every group of the Syrian people; and ensure that all these groups have full access to their rights.

Executive Summary

This report documents 12 incidents of crop thefts and confiscations and six incidents of forcible expropriation/seizure of lands across the Operation Peace Spring territories. These incidents have occurred between April and August 2020.

Confiscated from over 2000 dunums of cultivated lands in Tal Abyad and more than 15,000 dunums in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, the crops included wheat, barley and corn. The confiscations were perpetrated by six of the chief armed groups operating under the opposition-affiliated Syrian National Army (SNA). These are:

1. The Sultan Murad Division
2. The al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division
3. The Northern Hawks Brigade
4. The Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East)
5. The Mu'tasim Division
6. The 20th Division of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham

These abuses affected landowners from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. In addition to the confiscation of crops cultivated by the area's Arab and Kurdish farmers, the expropriation of lands owned by Christian citizens, some of whom are Assyrians, and others belonging to individuals of the area's Yezidi minority, were documented. The people subjected to these property violations all belong to the area's indigenous population.

The testimonies and information obtained by STJ confirmed that large amounts of the confiscated crops were sold to Turkey through the [Turkish Grain Board/Toprak Mahsulleri Ofisi/TMO](#). The crop sales were unmediated, conducted directly by commanders of armed groups or the al-Sanable Company, run by al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front.

The Front maintains monopoly over the marketing and the sale of crops to Turkey, particularly those cultivated in Tal Abyad. In Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, it is the newly opened TMO office that is carrying out sale transactions.

Background

Following Operation Peace Spring in the area, from which the US-led coalition against the Islamic State (IS) withdrew, the territories stretching from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê to Tal Abyad were controlled by the Turkish army.

Armed groups of the SNA divided these territories among themselves. The al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front, the Faylaq al-Majd/Glory Corps, and Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East) took over Tal Abyad, while the Sultan Murad Division and the al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division predominated in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Other armed groups, including Jaysh al-Islam/Islam Army and Faylaq al-Rahman/al-Rahman Legion, as well as the Northern Hawks Brigade, Mu'tasim Division, and the 20th Division of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham,

operating under the 2nd Legion of the Syrian Interim Government’s SNA, were also stationed in the area in smaller numbers, however.

In the areas in question, the Turkey-backed armed opposition groups have committed several violations against residents. In addition to arbitrary arrests, home and shop seizures, the said groups either seized or looted public buildings and properties. The groups have even seized the areas’ strategic grain storage and sold parts of it to Turkey.

Covering the violations committed in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tal Abyad, STJ published a series of reports, including one on grain confiscations on 22 July 2020.¹



Image 1—Map of the areas were armed groups of the Turkey-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) spread.

¹ “Following Operation Peace Spring, Thousands of Tons of Grain Seized as ‘Spoils of War’,” STJ, 22 July 2020. <https://stj-sy.org/en/following-operation-peace-spring-thousands-of-tons-of-grain-seized-as-spoils-of-war/> (Last visited: 15 February 2021).

Introduction

A number of armed opposition groups confiscated 2020's yield of grains, harvested from early April to late May, which even took a few more days in other areas depending on the type of grain cultivated and the date of cultivation. The confiscations were carried out through the force of arms and/or under threats of death, arrest, eviction from the area. STJ documented 18 crop looting incidents, as well as seizure of agricultural lands and real estate annexed to them that are all owned by the area's farmers.

One farmer/owner at least has been coerced into signing/providing his thumbprint on cession documents and/or outright sale contracts. Other five farmers/owners were forced to abandon their properties without any of their belongings or equipment. The involved armed groups have also arrested one landowner and persons who worked in another land.

It ought to be mentioned that the above-reported violations were committed against landowners and workers from a number of the area's ethnic components; Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, and Yazidis. In some cases, the owners were residents of the targeted areas, particularly Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê; in others, the victims were internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Methodology

For the purposes of this report, STJ and Hevdestî-Synergy have conducted over 19 interviews either with affected landowners themselves or their close relatives, in addition to members of the SNA and local activists.

The report also draws on information collected and verified by STJ's and Synergy's field researchers.

Furthermore, the report includes an account delivered by an SNA commander, who neither denied nor confirmed the incidents recorded herein.

The interviews with the witnesses were conducted either online or in person between 20 April and late December 2020.

1. Violations in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê

STJ and Synergy documented nine incidents of crop looting, including wheat, barley, and corn. Additionally, three incidents of forced seizure/expropriation of agricultural lands were recorded, belonging to two Kurdish families and one Christian. These incidents took place over April, May and June 2020.

Other abuses against Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê's residents were documented. Property and crop owners were coerced to pay the controlling armed group bribes/fines/compensation in exchange for a permission allowing them to cultivate their own lands or harvest their own crops. Tenant farmers were not spared the violations, for the armed groups have forced these farmers to pay them the rent, instead of the original landowners, who are abroad.

A. Looted crops

According to testimonies obtained by STJ, crops planted over 15,000 dunums, mostly wheat, barely, corn, cotton, and watermelons were looted. These looting incidents were carried out in 16 different towns across Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.

1. STJ interviewed Hani Kamal, 27, Kurdish man displaced from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and currently a resident of al-Darbasiyah city. He said that SNA-affiliated armed groups looted his wheat, cultivated in [Bir Abu Julud](#), west of the city. He added:

"The farmer who I authorized to supervise harvesting the crops told me that the gunmen in control of the village— I am not certain with which faction or group they are working— have prevented him from collecting the crops. The armed group itself has harvested and confiscated the yield, claiming that I am dealing with the Autonomous Administration."

His crops in Bougha village, western countryside of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, were looted too, Ahmad Told STJ. In November 2019, a month after Operation Peace Spring, an armed group confiscated his cotton. He added:

"We cultivated 130 dunums of land in Bougha village with cotton. My partner returned there and hired workers to harvest the cotton, having obtained a permission from the Jaysh al-Islam which controlled the area. However, once harvesting work was done, and before we could transport the cotton, amounting to 170 bags, members of the 20th Division of Faylaq al-Sham confiscated the crops and expelled my partner."

The witness concluded:

"When Operation Peace Spring ended, Syrian armed opposition groups stole the watermelon crops from warehouses, I and a partner own, in the Bougha and Mukhtaleh villages, west of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. They looted the nearly 10 tons of recently harvested watermelons, in addition to 20 tons of wheat seeds, five tons of fertilizers, as well as 25,000 liters of mazut/fuel oil, fuel tanks, and a power generator."

2. STJ has also interviewed Majed Darwish, 40, Kurdish man displaced from Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and currently a resident of al-Hasakah city. The Mu'tasim Division has seized his family's land near the [al-Daoudiya](#) village, east of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, where the Turkish army has set up a military post. Darwish said:

"Following Operation Peace Spring, my brother went to Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê to check on our land and properties. But he failed to reach the plots east of the al-Daoudiya village because the road to the village passed by the Turkish military post. My brother was prevented from going there. On the way, he met a fighter of the Mu'tasim Division, who told him that the division had expropriated, ploughed, and cultivated our land. The fighter asked my brother not to show up again, threatening to arrest him should he ever think of returning there."

The Darwish family land's area is 1000 dunums, part of which was cultivated with cotton, almost ready for harvesting. The cotton was confiscated by the Mu'tasim Division, with equipment and other agricultural supplies, in addition to the grain and fertilizer storages, as well as fuel, Majed Darwish reported, who was displaced with his family, escaping a rain of mortar shells during the Turkish offensive into northeastern Syria.

"We were forcibly displaced. We heard from neighbors in nearby villages that the Mu'tasim Division has harvested the cotton crops, cultivated across an area of over 210 dunums. The division has also stolen an engine, used to pump well water, and a fuel tank, containing 7000 liters of fuel oil, as well as eight tons of fertilizers and 15 tons of seeds stored at warehouses annexed to the land. They have also looted a warehouse full of agricultural equipment and scarp."

A fighter of the Mu'tasim Division, nicknamed Abu Hassan, made his brother an offer to pay the division an annual rent in exchange for the permission to cultivate his own land again. My brother refused the offer and left the area disappointed, the witness added.

3. A third displaced man, 36, from the Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê's Yezidi population, who is currently based in Amuda city, told STJ's field researcher that armed groups of the SNA seized over 1000 hectares (10 dunums) of lands cultivated with wheat and barley. These lands belong to Yezidi farmers and are located in the villages of [Jan Tamer](#), [Shukriyeh](#), [Tall Sakher](#), and [al-Assdiyeh](#), all administratively affiliated with Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.

These farmers' private properties have also been looted and confiscated by members of the Northern Hawks Brigade, operating under the 2nd Legion of the SNA, the witness recounted, adding that:

"The militants of the armed group have stolen over 100 tons of wheat seeds from the Yezidi villages and agricultural lands, in addition to 200,000 liters of fuel and cotton cultivated over nearly 1000 dunums of land, which they harvested after we were displaced. Also, these militants have stolen all the agricultural equipment and machinery we were coerced to leave behind."

Before the Operation Peace Spring, 55 Yezidi families lived in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. These families had homes in the Zaradasht neighborhood in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city and its surrounding villages of Jan Tamer, Shukriyeh, Tall Sakher, and al-Assdiyeh. Most of these families are displaced today.

4. The Germany-based Syrian Kurdish journalist Muhyeddin Isso told STJ that his family's lands in the B'airer and Anik al-Hawa villages, east of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, were confiscated. The armed group regnant in these villages have granted the lands to loyalist persons asking them to cultivate the lands for the group's benefit. The journalist added:

"We own 200 dunums of agricultural lands in B'airir village, and another 250 dunums in Anik al-Hawa village. We were told that a person from Idlib has been cultivating these

lands under the directives of armed opposition groups. So, my brother reached out to this man, attempting to convince him into considering his use of our land as an investment or a lease transaction, in exchange of which he could offer us 20% of the crops. The man approved the deal at first. However, he later told us that the members of an armed group have ordered him to give the group this 20%, refusing to give us any of the lands' products."

It ought to be mentioned that the journalist's family house was seized by the Turkey-founded Ras al-Ayn City Local Council and was later turned into a Quran Institute by the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (IHH).²

5. In the villages of Bougha and Mukhtaleh, western countryside of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, Shuhadaa Bader/Bader Martyrs and the 20th Division confiscated crops belonging to farmer Abu Juwan. The farmer recounted the following to STJ:

"I owned 275 dunums of agricultural lands in Mukhtaleh village, 175 of which I cultivated with cotton, planting watermelons in the remaining 100 dunums. In Bougha village, I had 200 dunums, 125 of which I cultivated with cotton and 75 with sunflower seeds. The two villages were controlled by the Shuhadaa Bader/Bader Martyrs armed group. The group had a headquarters there, commanded by a person called Abu Hassan. At the harvest time, the group told us that we could do whatever we wanted. We harvested the crops and filled them into bags. Before we could transport the bags, personnel of the armed group, nearly 20 fighters, approached us and ordered us to leave immediately. We left without any of the crops."

The witness added:

"The Shuhadaa Bader left the area, succeeded by a new armed group. It was the 20th Division, led by a person called Abu Jammou. We told the group that we wished to cultivate the lands with barley. We were allowed to do so, the group never objected, nor gave us any trouble. At the harvest time, once again they prevented us from collecting the crops and expelled us from our land. We protested, but they arrested my friend, who was with me back then. They detained him at the Military Police Station in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and released him a few hours later. The whole arrest thing was supposed to terrorize us. We left the area and never returned there."

6. In Mabroukeh village, the countryside of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, the Sultan Murad Division, affiliated with the SNA, has arbitrarily seized nearly 300 tons of wheat from three agricultural lands in the village's suburbs. The division threatened the landowners and workers with arms and arrested them, local sources told STJ's field researcher.

"Memati Baş Battalion, affiliated with the Sultan Murad Division and headed by Abu al-Baraa al-Idlbi and Abu al-Walid, raided agricultural lands in Mabroukeh village, seeking

² "Ras al-Ayn: IHH Turns two Seized Houses into Quran Institutes," STJ, 11 August 2020, <https://stj-sy.org/en/ras-al-ayn-ihh-turns-two-seized-houses-into-quran-institutes/> (Last visited: 16 February 2021).

to confiscate crops that farmers started harvesting in May 2020. The battalion stormed lands belonging to Usama al-Hamad bin Abdullah and Nizar al-Tahri, seizing 300 tons of the wheat yield. The battalion threatened the two farmers with arms, for allegedly working with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The battalion also arrested Usama al-Muhammad, his brother As'ad, two of Nizar's sons, Audai and Yazan, in addition to three workers, who loaded the crops onto vehicles. They were all released after the battalion finished transporting the crops to the al-Sanable Company of the al-Jabah al-Shamiya—one of the SNA's affiliated armed groups."

7. STJ's field researcher also interviewed a direct relative of one of the affected people, whose lands in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê were seized by the SNA. On the condition of anonymity, the witness/source told STJ the following:

"My uncle owns 100 dunums of land, all cultivated with wheat on the outskirts of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Close to the land, he had a facility, where he warehoused mazut/oil fuel barrels and 6000 liters of fuel, as well as a four million Syrian pounds (SYP) worth power generator. All these belongings were seized by the Ahrar al-Sharqiya, which also harvested and confiscated the cultivated wheat."

The witness added:

"My uncle asked Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê dignitaries and clan sheikhs to play the intermediary. With these persons' help, he managed to buy his equipment stolen by the armed group. However, he never got his wheat back."

8. Furthermore, SNA-affiliated armed groups have looted crops belonging to a Christian family, STJ's field researcher reported. The larger plots of the Christian families' agricultural lands extend over the villages of Abbah, Tall Baydar, and Lothi, in the eastern countryside of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city.

According to information obtained by STJ from locals, only a few Christians cultivate their agricultural lands themselves, since the overwhelming majority tend to lease these lands to farmers in exchange for a portion of the crops.

In Abbah village, STJ recorded that armed groups of the Sultan Murad Division have looted the crops of several Christian farmers, east of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city. One local activist told STJ the following:

"The armed groups have seized agricultural lands belonging to the Assyrian Ibrahim Gerges, amounting to 600 dunums and half of which he cultivated with wheat, because the start of the Turkish military offensive prevented him from cultivating the second half. Later, a battalion of the Sultan Murad Division seized the farmer's land and his agricultural equipment, in addition to whatever seeds he left at the warehouse. The battalion has even harvested and confiscated the wheat."

9. The division's affiliated group has also seized agricultural lands belonging to Ilyas Gerges and Mousa Greges, both living abroad. The lands' area amounted to nearly

1000 dunums in Abbah village, east of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê city. Before it was seized the said land was leased to Kurdish farmers.

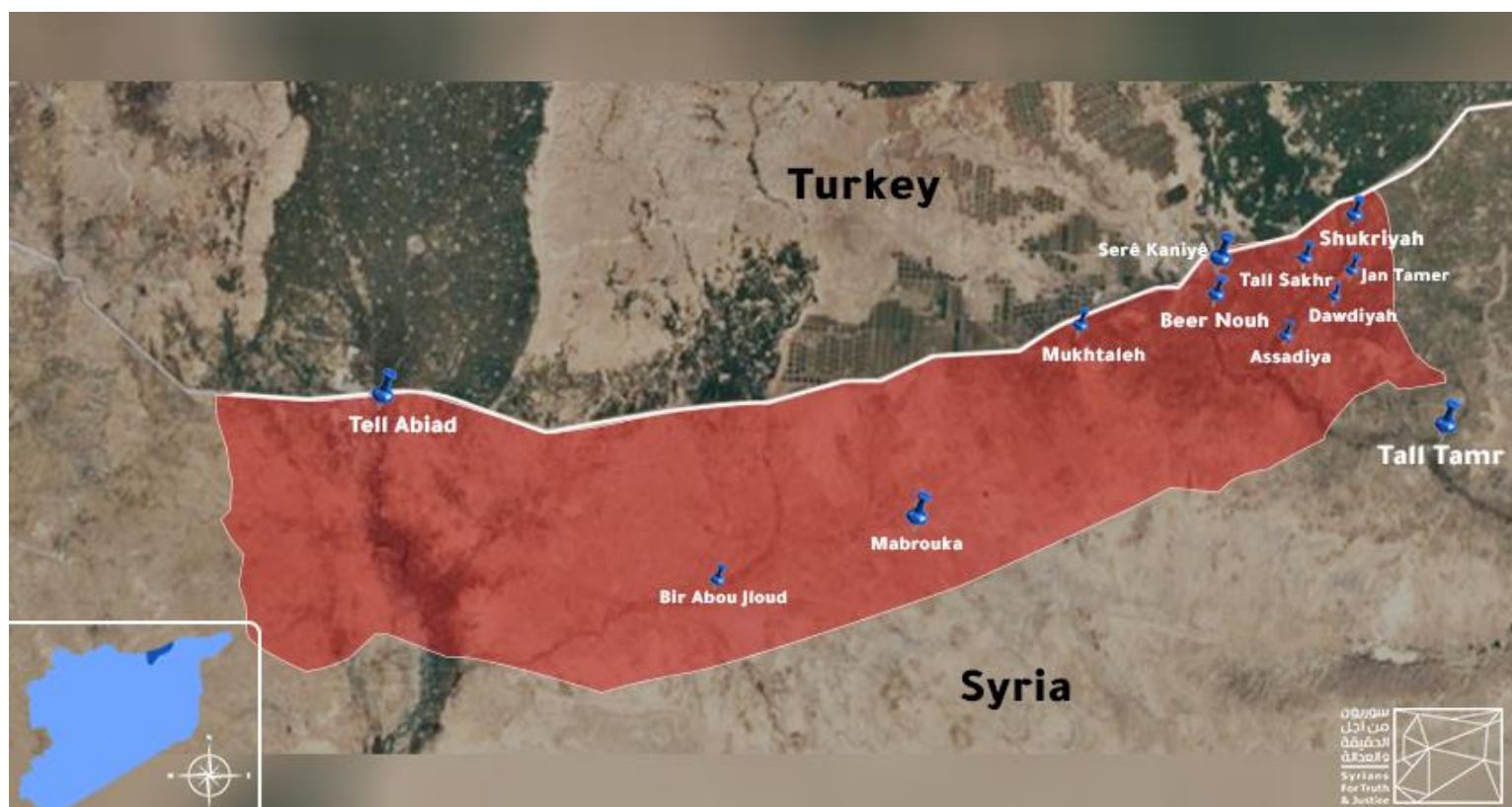


Image 2- Map locating the villages where crops had been confiscated.

B. Land seizures

1. An SNA-affiliated armed group seized agricultural land owned by the displaced man Ayman Daoud in the village of [Beer Nough](#), 7 km southeast of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. The armed group invested the land and stole the landowner's agricultural equipment and supplies. The group also leased the land to loyalist persons.

Ayman Daoud, 28, currently based in al-Qamishli/Qamishlou city, told STJ that an armed group of the Sultan Murad Division seized his agricultural land, amounting to 150 hectares (nearly 1,500 dunums). He added:

"The armed group's fighters have stolen our agricultural machinery, 460 bags of barley, eight tons of wheat seeds, three tons of fertilizers, as well as 100 barrels of mazut, tow water pumps fixed to the wells, electricity transformers and sprinklers, worth about 20,000 USD."

The armed group's fighters have prevented a farmer he hired from working in the land. They have invested and cultivated the land for their own benefit, alleging that the landowner is an Autonomous Administration loyalist, the displaced Kurdish farmer Daoud said. He added:

"My hired farmer, who was expelled from the land, told me that the Sultan Murad Division cultivated my land with rain fed wheat. The division then harvested the crops in May and sold it to the Turkish TMO, before it leased the land to its acquaintances. I am not familiar with the people who rented the land, but I was told that they too have cultivated it with rain fed crops in November 2020."

Daoud recounted that the farmer he hired, Muhammad al-Mousa, and two of the latter's sons, Abdulaziz and Alaaeddin were arrested by the SNA on 27 September 2020 on the charge of dealing with the SDF. The three men's fate remains unknown, Daoud added.



Image 3



Image 4-These two photos are of the agricultural land owned by the Kurdish displaced man Ayman Daoud, located in [Beer Nouh](#) village, seven KM south of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. These photos were taken prior to the Turkish-led Operation Peace Spring. Credit: The witness Ayman Daoud.

2. Kiwan, a pseudonym, told STJ’s field researcher that a number of fighters of the Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East) seized land and a house owned by one of his direct Kurdish relatives. Kiwan recounted to STJ the landowner’s story:

“The landowner headed to his land and house, located one km from the Turkish borders. When he entered his house, over 20 militants came in after him and asked him to leave the house. He told them it was his own and that he was there to harvest wheat crops cultivated in his land, amounting to 175 dunums. The militants did not allow him to bring in harvesters, and, instead, harvested the land using Turkish harvesters, after they asked him to pay money as a harvesting fee. A few days later, the harvesting was completed and the grains filled into bags. The militants then gave the landowner 320,000 SYP and asked him to leave the place, never to return. They have taken the crops.”

The landowner identified three of the said militants who were at his house but refused to provide further information as to who they were fearing prosecution and retaliation, the witness Kiwan added.

3. Witness Ismail Bouzan, 65, said that the SNA armed groups have repeatedly tried to seize his land, amounting to 1000 dunums in the al-Assdiyeh village, south of Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. Ultimately, militants of the 20th Division, of the Faylaq al-Sham/al-Sham Legion took it over. Bouzan added:

"In the beginning, it was the Sultan Murad Division that tried to seize my land; the division even stole amounts of barley, which they returned after clan dignitaries intervened. Later, militants of the Islam Army raided my land and left. Finally, the land was stormed by militants of the 20th Division, led by a person called Abu Jammou. This commander wanted to seize my house and the crops, but he too left. When I started harvesting the crops, the 2th Division showed up again and confiscated eight tons of seeds, worth eight million SYP, and 170 bags of cotton, worth seven million SYP."

He added:

"I went to their headquarters and asked for the stolen material. They told me that we have nothing that belongs to you. I borrowed some money and cultivated the land with wheat. The militants brought harvesters. They collected and confiscated the crops. They also looted two water pumps and fuel, worth 10,000 USD."

He said:

"I filed a complaint at the military and civil police, as well as the Ras al-Ayn Local councils, but none of the relevant authorities took action to restore my rights."

In this regard, STJ team interviewed the SNA spokesperson, Major Yousef Hammoud, whose following testimony stands at odds with the inaction on the part of the said authorities reported by the landowner above. Major Hamoud said:

"Under the adopted complaint mechanisms, wronged persons or rights holders address the Military Police and the Military Justice Departments, where they file a lawsuit. Then, the matter is overseen by the justice departments and Civil Police, which take the necessary measures. Locals can demand their rights and lands through the local council as well, or through addressing officials of the Syrian National Army. Other entities can also be approached should the previously mentioned departments fail to act."

2. Violations in Tal Abyad

In Tal Abyad, north of Raqqa, the SNA-affiliated armed groups seized three land plots, with the entire amount of the land yield. In one of these reported incidents, the Sultan Murad Division coerced the landowners into signing an outright sale contract, under which the plots' ownership was transferred to the brigade's commander.

1. In Qasas village, south of Tal Abyad, the Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East) looted and confiscated crops cultivated in a piece of land, amounting to 80 dunums. The witness A. J. recounted the following to STJ's field researcher:

"An armed group, affiliated with Ahrar al-Sharqiya and led by a person known as Ahmad al-Hayes, came to our land in the Qasas village, south of Tal Abyad. At the time, the land was cultivated with wheat. The group's personnel told us that the land was full of mines that needed to be removed. They said this even though we had already harvested corn after the National Army took over the area. No mines were planted there."

He added:

"The personnel returned the next day and demanded 300,000 in exchange for mine removal. However, we refused to pay them. They showed up the following day too. They asked us to stop working in our land. We were forced to pay them money to leave us alone. In May, as we started to harvest the wheat, the same armed group raided our agricultural land, saying that it was theirs now, so is the yield, and that we must leave. My brother started yelling at them, but they aimed their weapons at us. They arrested my brother and transferred him to their military post. When we asked them to release my brother, they asked us to put our thumbprints on some sort of a document, by which we gave up on our ownership rights to the land in return for the release of my brother. Once we provided them with our thumbprints, they released him."

2. In Suluk region, near Hamam al-Turkman village, the Sultan Murad Division forced two brothers, who have inherited a piece of land from their father, to sign an outright sale contract. At gunpoint and threatened with death, the two brothers were forced to give up on the ownership of their 140 dunums of agricultural land. One of the brothers said:

"As we harvested the crops, an armed group, affiliated to the Sultan Murad Division and commanded by Basheer al-Amouri and Arwa al-Da'fees, raided our land. The group's personnel measured the land's area. On the day we finished harvesting and filled the crops into bags, a 14-fighter force stormed our house and stole the land title deed. They arrested me and my brother on flimsy charges—dealing with the SDF and providing them with photos of military sites. They took us to their military post near the Suluk town and then to their headquarters, close to the Chicken Market in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. They added our thumbprint signature to documents without allowing us to know their contents. Once we returned home, we addressed the clan dignitaries to intervene, at least to help us know the content of the documents we were forced to sign. To our shock, by the document we had given up on our ownership entitlements. Several clan dignitaries played the mediator between us and the armed group that finally agreed to allow us to rent the land for an annual 500,000 SYP. The document we had signed was an outright sale contract."

3. In Ali Bajliyah village, in Tal Abyad's suburbs, members of the 122nd Brigade of the Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East) seized agricultural land and a house in April 2020, arresting the owner M. M. R., as well. At the time of reporting, the landowner was still held incommunicado.

F. S., one female family member, recounted the following to STJ:

"The so-called Abu Hassan Obama and Capitan Abu Youssef, of the 112nd Brigade, came to our home in Ali Bajliyah village, south of Tal Abyad, and asked me for my husband. When he rushed out, they demanded proof that he owns the land and for how long he has been the owner. However, my husband refused to show them these documents, saying he will do so either at the court or in the presence of the village's dignitaries, fearing that they might withhold the documents. Abu Hassan Obama then darted towards my husband, saying that you are the subordinates of the SDF and your sons work for the group. Later, the brigade's members asked my husband to evacuate our house and land, amounting to 230 dunumas, over 48 hours, or otherwise he will be arrested. They forced him out of his land and home."

She added:

"My husband sought Sheikh Muhammad al-Khalil in Tal Abyad. Together, they referred to the court affiliated with the al-Jabha al-Shamiya. The latter promised us it will address the matter. Three days later, Abu Hassan Obama reappeared at our door, with 10 fighters in tow vehicles. They fired in the air and led my husband to a detention facility in Suluk town. They asked me to evacuate the house on the spot."

3. Destiny of looted crops

According to the preliminary estimates of the Syrian Interim Government of the Syrian National Coalition, the season's grain yield amounted to a million tons in territories of Operation Peace Spring alone. Interviewed in July 2020, a government official told STJ the following:

"Preliminary collected statistics demonstrate that wheat and barley yield in the Peace Spring territories amounted to nearly a million tons, priced at 200 USD per ton. The Turkish government has pledged to buy the grains, while private companies have sent harvesters from Turkey to Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê. The companies made deals with landowners, sent 36 harvesters, collected and bought the crops."

Regarding the crops looted/confiscated by members of the SNA, these crops end up with the Turkish TMO, after the armed opposition groups sell them to the al-Jabha al-Shamiya/Levant Front, which, in turn, resells them to Turkey through its al-Sanable Company. The official added:

"The al-Jabha al-Shamiya still maintains a monopoly over the selling process. The front tends to sell the looted crops to al-Sanable Company for less than the market prices. The company is the front's economic façade and is run by it. The company then sells the same crops to the TMO."

Before the company procures these crops, the looted grains are transported from the fields to structures, warehouses, or silos that armed groups use as storage places and military posts at the same time.

Commenting on the grain transport and storage operations, an eyewitness, a truck driver who carried out several of these transports, told STJ's field researcher the following:

"After they loot the farmers' crops, the armed groups transport the grains to separate warehouses, each run by one or the other faction. For instance, I have been to two storage places belonging to the Sultan Murad Division in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, one run by the Hamza Division in Tell Halaf, another operated by Ahrar al-Sharqiya in Suluk town, and three run by the al-Jabha al-Shamiya in Tal Abyad. All the collected crops, however, are ultimately sold to the al-Jabha al-Shamiya. Persons are sent to the said warehouses, playing civilian merchants. They buy and transport the crops to the al-Sanable Company's warehouses in Tal Abyad. Buy-sell contracts are signed by the two parties, who claim to be civilians. Then, the company sells these looted crops to the Turkish TMO, based on the aforementioned contract."

A second witness, a fighter of the Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East) who recently left the group, told STJ's field researcher the following:

"The al-Jabha al-Shamiya sends civilians to buy the crops looted by other armed groups and transport them to the al-Sanable Company's warehouses. I am familiar with two such civilians, Abu Hamza al-Shami and Abu Ya'roub. Other civilians are registered with the al-Sanable Company as merchants. In other rare cases, the Hamza Division sold the looted crops immediately to the Turkish Grain Board/TMO, without resorting to a middleman or a merchant."

It ought to be mentioned that the Turkish government continues to import crops from the SNA-held areas. Imports have increased notably after the SNA took over Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tal Abyad, where the TMO has already opened branches.

In Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê, the Turkish Grain Board/TMO became more operative after it signed an agreement/memorandum with the city's [local council](#). The latter has even posted onto its official social media accounts the steps farmers have to follow to register with and sell their crops for prices set up by the TMO. Similar grain sales are conducted through the TMO office in Tal Abyad, which actually preceded those in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.



Image 5- An ad marketing grain selling processes through the Turkish Grain Board/TMO, taken from the Ras al-Ayn Local Council's official Twitter account.

Also on its official social media accounts, Ras al-Ayn Local Council had on 1 September 2020 posted that it was hiring employees to work at the Ras al-Ayn Grain Center, established on 1 July 2020. Earlier, on 20 June 2020, the local council reported that Turkey is planning to establish a customs portal in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê.

The Turkish Grain Board/TMO and the Ras al-Ayn Local Council have signed an agreement, providing that the TMO will purchase all the area's grain yield and that the Turkish Postal and Cargo Office will handle transports of and pay for the procured grains, an official of the Grain Foundation of the Syrian Interim Government told STJ's field researcher.

4. Legal consequences of expropriation/seizure/ looting of agricultural lands

The looting or robbery of an individual's property by force on the part of the SNA's personnel is a violation of both International Humanitarian Law and Syrian Law. Several similar property violations were previously documented across different Syrian areas, but this is the first time that affected owners are coerced to sign or provide thumbprints on ownership transfer documents and sale contracts, which sounds the alarm that the involved properties are not only subjected to precautionary seizure, but are most likely to undergo a transfer of ownership rights to persons other than their original owners.

To clarify the legal consequences of forcing owners into signing documents of sale or ownership transfer, STJ's legal expert has provided in the paragraphs below the legal dimensions of the matter and proposed a temporary procedure that might help protect properties from the said abuses.

The Syrian Penal Code defines incidents, whereby property owners are forced to provide thumbprints or sign sale contracts, as cases of "signing under duress." The signatures in such cases are considered invalid, should victims be capable of proving coercion. In response, abused property owners, or holders of powers of attorney, should first approach the Syrian State courts to file a lawsuit of "signature collected under duress." The suit is sufficient to stop the actual transfer or transfer proceedings of the usurped property, until a ruling is made by the court, in line with Article 635 of the Syrian Penal Code No. 148 of 1949.

Even though the property violations, documented in this report, have been committed in areas outside the control of the Syrian government, all official transactions, including those relating to property, are still handled by the Syrian government's relevant authorities, which up to this point preserves "legal" international recognition and is considered a legitimate government. Therefore, any transactions conducted by authorities other than the Syrian government are null.

Given the security chaos, due to which rights are easily lost, and the government's institutional corruption, property right usurpers, whether civilians or militants, can still carry on unlawful property transfers by paying bribes or providing forged documents as representing the victims.

In 2019, the President of the Syrian Republic, Bashar al-Assad, issued [Legislative Decree No. 11](#), stopping the registration of real property at real-estate departments that have been closed due to the emergency security situation—that is, transactions conducted in areas outside the control of the Syrian government. Under Articles 2 and 3, the Decree also stipulated that real property-related activities must be recorded in the "supplementary daily record" and defined the principles, procedures and conditions of keeping the aforementioned daily record, regarded as a reference and vital foundation, after real property registration was suspended. Property-related activities and transactions included in the daily supplement are

then documented in the real property’s cadastral records, after ensuring that the details and documents observe the due process and the law.

However, even under the said Decree, usurpers can initiate the property ownership transfer process, unless the victim/person deprived of ownership rights first files a “signature collected under duress” lawsuit against the usurper.

5. Perpetrator armed groups profiled

STJ’s team interviewed Major Yousef Hammoud, SNA spokesperson, regarding the SNA and its command’s responsibility for the affiliated armed group’s involvement in violations against people in Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê and Tal Abyad, particularly crop looting incidents and land seizures. Major Hammoud said:

“Such incidents are possible. Armed group’s commanders might have also coerced persons to sign/provide thumbprints on sale contracts or ownership transfer documents, but not in the manner reported here. Yes! Even forcible cultivation of agricultural lands, this too might have happened.”

Asked about the measures that the local authorities, affiliated with the SNA, should set forth to prevent such property right abuses, Major Hammoud said:

“Under the adopted complaint mechanisms, wronged persons or rights holders address the Military Police and the Military Justice Departments, where they file a lawsuit. Then, the matter is overseen by the justice departments and Civil Police, which take the necessary measures. Locals can demand their rights and lands through the local council as well, or through addressing officials of the Syrian National Army. Other entities can also be approached should the previously mentioned departments fail to act.”

Major Hammoud promised that the SNA will start an investigation against the commanders and militants involved in the reported abuses, and that the SNA will follow upon all lawsuits or complaints filed by civilians to restore their rights.

It ought to be mentioned that Turkey, as a belligerent state, is to be held accountable for the violations committed by the opposition’s SNA, as it is responsible for the individuals and groups operating on the ground based on its instructions, or its supervision and control; it is also responsible for safeguarding and protecting civilians’ legal status and rights, including their rights to life, ownership, continue living in their properties, protect their money from loss. In a 2019 report, Kumi Naidoo, Secretary General of Amnesty International, said:³

³ “Syria: Damning evidence of war crimes and other violations by Turkish forces and their allies,” Amnesty International, 18 October 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/10/syria-damning-evidence-of-war-crimes-and-other-violations-by-turkish-forces-and-their-allies/> (last visited: 20 February 2021).

"Turkey is responsible for the actions of the Syrian armed groups it supports, arms and directs. So far, Turkey has given these armed groups free rein to commit serious violations in Afrin and elsewhere."

1. Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East)

Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East) was founded in 2016 and is currently led by Major Abu Hatim Shaqra, whose full name is Ahmad Ihsan Fayyad al-Hayes, and his mother's name is Souria. Al-Hayes was born in 1987 and is originally from the al-Shaqra village, western rural Deir ez-Zor. The faction's statements acknowledge its affiliation to the 1st Legion – 12th Division– 123rd Brigade, which operates under the General Staff of the Ministry of Defense of the Syrian Interim Government, an offshoot of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

Sources, contacted by STJ, said that Ahrar al-Sharqiya encompasses several smaller armed groups, such as the al-Qadisiyah, the Ahl al-Athar, the Ahrar al-Tabqa/ Free Tabqa Brigade, Jaysh al-Ahfad/Army of the Grandsons, the 20th Division, and Tajammu al-Adel/Justice Gathering, that mainly consist of fighters from Raqqqa province. Ahrar al-Tabqa, for its part, is led by a person nicknamed al-Khal, also from Raqqqa province. The Jaysh al-Ahfad, however, is commanded by Abu Ahmad Muhana.

When the Ahrar al-Sharqiya was first founded, the names of several groups emerged, including al-Ahwaz Brigade, Dir' al-Ansar/Supporters' Shield, Jund Al-Tawhid/Soldiers of Oneness, and Liwa al-Baraa bin Malik/Barra bin Malik Brigade. A segment of the faction's fighters is from Raqqqa and al-Hasakah provinces, as well as Maskana and Manbij. The majority of the fighters operating under Ahrar al-Sharqiya, nonetheless, are from Deir ez-Zor province, the descendants of the Bakara/Baggara clan.

Abu Hatim Shaqra left Jordan, where he used to work, for Syria in July 2011, and commanded his first military operation, which aimed at a checkpoint of the Syrian regular forces in Harran al-'Awamid, rural Damascus, sometime in late 2011. He stayed in Eastern Ghouta region until 2013, where he joined the Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiya /Ahrar al-Sham, and then moved to Deir ez-Zor in 2014, where he continued to fight for Ahrar al-Sham. Next, he left Deir ez-Zor province when Jabhat al-Nusra/al-Nusra Front and later the Islamic State (IS) controlled the area, as they were at odds, which triggered the latter to expel him from the province.

The faction's fighters were stationed in Idlib province, especially in Sarmada, before their subsequent stationing in the city of al-Bab, northern rural Aleppo. There, the faction was fully funded and backed by Turkey, taking the al-Rai city as its headquarters, while having a large military post in the city of al-Bab.

Under the command of the Turkish army, Ahrar al-Sharqiya participated in Operation Euphrates Shield, launched by the Turkish forces on 24 August 2016, to control the cities of Jarabulus and al-Bab, among others. In early 2018, the faction participated again under the command of the Turkish army in Operation Olive Branch, waged on 20 January 2018, which

this time aimed at the Syrian Afrin district, where the population consists of a majority of Kurdish families. For the third time, also under the command of the Turkish army, the faction took part in the Operation Peace Spring on 9 October 2019 to take over the areas of Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn/Serê Kaniyê in the Syrian province of al-Hasakah.

2. Sultan Murad Division

The Sultan Murad Division was founded in mid-2012 near the city of Aleppo. It was established by Yusuf al-Saleh, born in Qarah Kubri village, 25 km east of Azaz, close to the Turkish border.

The division is led by three persons: Chief Officer, Yusef al-Saleh, Field Commander, Fahim Issa, and the Military Officer, Colonel Ahmed Othman. In 2015, the division was joined by the Sultan Muhammad al-Fateh Brigade, operating in rural Aleppo, the Martyr Zaki Turkmani Brigade, and Ashbal al-Aqeeda Brigade.

The division is provided significant support by Turkey, as it is the largest gathering of Turkmen fighters in Aleppo and its countryside in northern Syria.

The division has participated in battles against the Syrian regular forces and the Islamic State (IS). Additionally, when the direct Turkish military intervention in Syria began, the division fought alongside Turkish forces during operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch and Peace Spring.

3. The 20th Division of the Sham Legion/Faylaq al-Sham

The 20th Division was established in October 2018, and is led by Abu Barzan al-Sultani, former commander of the Lions of the East/Jaysh Usud al-Sharqiya. Some of the division's recruits are from eastern Syria reigns; others are fighters displaced from the Qalamoun region, rural Damascus. The division has been an ally of the Turkish forces in Syria. In a press interview in 2018, the division's commander said: **"We are now working within the Turkish project in the north, in line with the revolutionary and national frameworks and constants."**

The division participated in operations Peace Spring and Olive Branch.

4. Al-Hamza/al-Hamzat Division

On 24 April 2016, First Lieutenant Saif Abu Bakr announced the formation of the Hamza Division, under which five brigades, operating in the northern countryside of Aleppo, joined forces. These are the Hamza Brigade, Dhi Qar Brigade, Northern Thunder Brigade, and Liwa Marea Al-Sumoud/ Mare' Resistance Brigade, as well as Special Operations Brigade. The Samarkand Brigade also joined the division's ranks a few months later, but has subsequently split from it.

The Hamza Division/22nd Division is Turkey-backed, functioning as a part of the SNA's 2nd Legion.

5. Northern Hawks Brigade

The Northern Hawks Brigade was established in late 2012 in Mount Zāwiya, Idlib province. Today, it operates under the SNA's 2nd Legion/22nd Division/224th Brigade. The brigade was first founded by Ahmed Haj Ali, known as Ahmed Khayriyah, while currently led by Hassan Haj Ali, nicknamed Hassan Khayriyah. Hassan, born in 1977 in Kansafra, Idlib province, defected from the Syrian army in 2012.

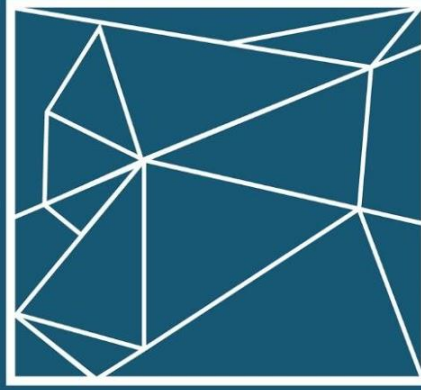
The brigade operates in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo and the countryside of Latakia, with an estimated manpower of 2,500 fighters. Other 500 of the brigade's fighters are in Libya led by Khalil Khayriyah (brother of the brigade commander).

The brigade participated in several battles against the Syrian regular forces, and also engaged alongside Turkish forces in Operations Olive Branch and Euphrates Shield.

6. Mu'tasim Division

The Mu'tasim Brigade was formed in August 2015, when the armed groups operating in Marea city, rural Aleppo, announced their merger. The brigade participated in many battles in the countryside of Aleppo and on the border strip with Turkey. Later, it engaged alongside Turkey in the military operations in northern and northeastern Syria, under the name of Mu'tasim Division, which today is a faction of the 2nd Legion of the SNA. The division is led by Mu'tasim Abbas.

سوريون
من أجل
الحقيقة
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Syrians
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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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