



## **A Complaint to a UN Special Rapporteur on Syrian Crop and Land Seizures by Turkey and the Armed Groups it Supports in Northeast Syria**

*Four Syrian organizations call on the UN to pressure Turkey to cease buying crops from the armed groups responsible for looting civilian lands and stop the armed groups it supports from seizing lands*

In Qasas village, south of Tal Abyad, a Syrian family was forced to give up their rights to their land in return for the release of their brother from the custody of an armed Syrian opposition group. The witness, A.J. said fighters with Ahrar al-Sharqiya (Free Men of the East), an armed opposition group supported by Turkey, first confronted the family asking for money to demine their land. When the family refused, the fighters demanded they stop working their fields. The family paid them money, hoping the fighters would leave them alone.

However, in May, the group returned. A.J. said:

“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.”

The experience of A.J.’s family is not unique in Syria’s Peace Spring territories. At least 200 hectares of cultivated in Tal Abyad and more than 1,500 hectares in Ras al-Ayn (Serê Kaniyê) were seized by armed groups operating under the opposition affiliated Syrian National Army (SNA) between April and August 2020.

[Syrians for Truth and Justice](#) (STJ), the [Syria Justice and Accountability Centre](#) (SJAC), [PÊL – Civil Waves](#), and [Hevdestî – Synergy](#) highlighted 12 incidents of crop thefts and confiscations and 6 incidents of forcible expropriation of lands in Two Special Procedure Submissions to the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Izzadin Salih, the Executive Director of Hevdestî, said that “the seizure of land and property has significant and far-reaching consequences during the conflict and after, with real effects on the return of displaced Syrians to their places of origin. Drawing the United Nation’s attention to the importance of this issue can help to put pressure on the Turkish government and the armed Syrian factions it supports to stop these practices and hold both individual and group perpetrators accountable.”

The seizures we documented in our submissions, as well as others the organizations have monitored in previous [reports](#), began in 2019 after Turkey led a military operation, called “Peace Spring”, into northern parts of Syria and subsequently occupied the region with the support of the SNA. As the armed groups of the SNA divided the territories amongst themselves, widespread and systematic violations began against the civilian population, including [arbitrary arrests](#), [forced expulsions](#), and the [arbitrary execution of civilians](#).

These abuses affected landowners from across the region’s diverse Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, and Yazidi communities – all among the area’s indigenous population. Crops cultivated by Arab and Kurdish farmers were confiscated, lands belonging to Christian citizens were expropriated, and lands belonging to Syria’s Yazidi minority were seized. In the majority of

cases, owners were not only forcibly kept from accessing their land but were forced to transfer ownership of their property using deception, threats, violence, or detention.

Syrian organizations have uncovered that large amounts of the crops confiscated from Syrians like A.J.'s family 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). Despite reports of land thefts, the Turkish government continues to import crops from SNA-held areas.

The seizing of crops and lands violates the 1992 UN General Assembly's Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities, which states in article 10 that "[I]ndigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories." The seizing of lands and crops constitute, additionally, a violation of the human rights to property. By impeding farmers from cultivating, accessing, and harvesting their lands, the seizures also constitute a violation of the human right to food. *As a belligerent state, Turkey is accountable under international law for human rights violations committed by the opposition's SNA while it remains under their support and instruction, as well as for safeguarding and protecting civilians' legal status and rights, including their rights to life and property.*

In light of these violations, the four Syrian organizations have called on UN Special Rapporteurs to pressure Turkey to cease buying crops from the armed groups responsible for systemically looting civilian lands, as well as to pressure armed groups from stopping land seizures and return the lands they have already seized. As land and property seizure will have extensive and long-term consequences throughout Syria's conflict and post-conflict period, we urged the Special Rapporteurs to better study the extent of the ongoing land seizures occurring in areas occupied by Turkey, as well how vulnerable communities will particularly bear the cost of this practice.



## 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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  - ✉ [editor@stj-sy.org](mailto:editor@stj-sy.org)