

The Muslim treasury and minorities

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Introduction

Al-Ghanayem office “The Muslim treasury, or Bayt Almal¹”, an office of the Syrian Salvation Government that is administratively affiliated with Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham² “formerly al-Nusra”, and its mission is to seize all real estate and lands belonging to figures loyal to the regime, or any non-resident figure in Idlib governorate. This office was established in 2016 under the supervision of the preacher Abdullah Al-Muhaysn³. This office provided high revenues for the Salvation Government, affiliated with Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, to become a financial resource in addition to the rest of this government’s sources.

However, the properties of many dissident Sunni Muslims who do not reside in Idlib, have not been affected. Their properties are now managed by their relatives, having power of attorney from the owner of the property. On the other hand, such arrangement was forbidden to Christians, Druze, and Alawites, as their properties were confiscated. The properties were distributed to the displaced Sunni families, on the condition that the latter provide 40% of their agricultural production to the Muslim treasury as a kind of tax.

Of course, the empty homes of Christians and Druze were also handed over to displaced Muslims, and the original owners did not receive any rent. Luxurious houses became properties of the princes and leaders of the Islamic battalions.

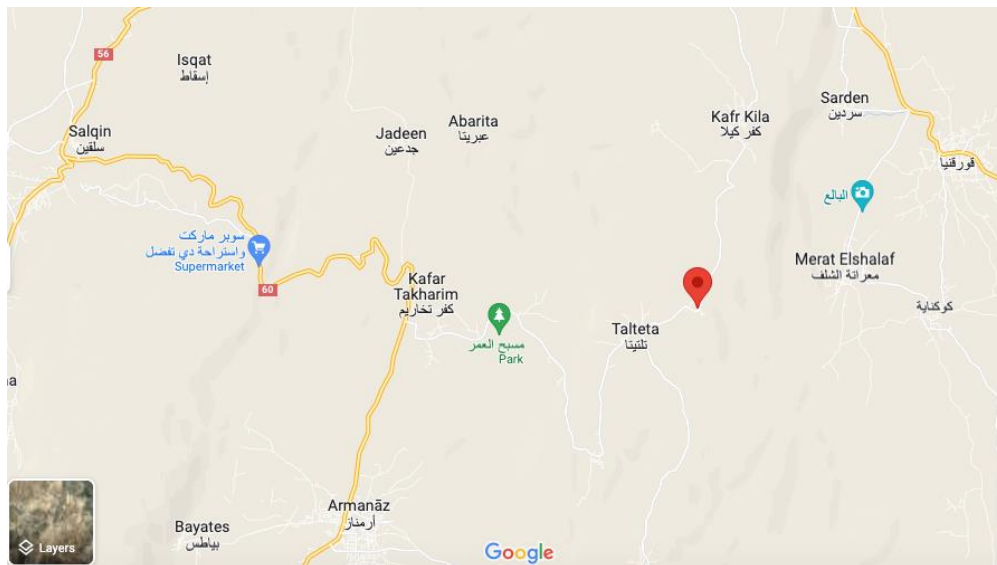
¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bayt_al-mal

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tahrir_al-Sham

³ <https://www.facebook.com/114977619885802/photos/jihadist-abdullah-al-muhaysni-visits-afirin-the-saudi-jihadist-abdullah-al-muhais/419998772717017/>

The Druze:

The Druze ⁴ population lives in the Idlib governorate in an area called Jabal al-Summaq “Mount Summaq” ⁵, and the most prominent Druze villages are Nabeul, Qalb Loza, Bashandalenti, Kfar Kila, Kfar Mars, Halleh and Talita, Koko and Bashandalaya.



The number of Druze there, according to the administrative records in Idlib Governorate, is estimated at 15,000, and after the wave of persecution and continuous wars in Idlib and the subsequent emergence of extremism, the number decreased to nearly 9,000 people. All the homes that became empty of Druze fleeing from Idlib, were occupied by Sunni Muslim families of Chinese origin “Uighurs” ⁶, who are members of the Turkistan Islamic Party ⁷ who brought their families and settled in the homes of the indigenous people, so that the Jabal Summaq area became the most important stronghold of the well-known Turkistan Islamic Party, known for the skills of its members in the planning of war, and the use and production of drones.

⁴ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Druze>

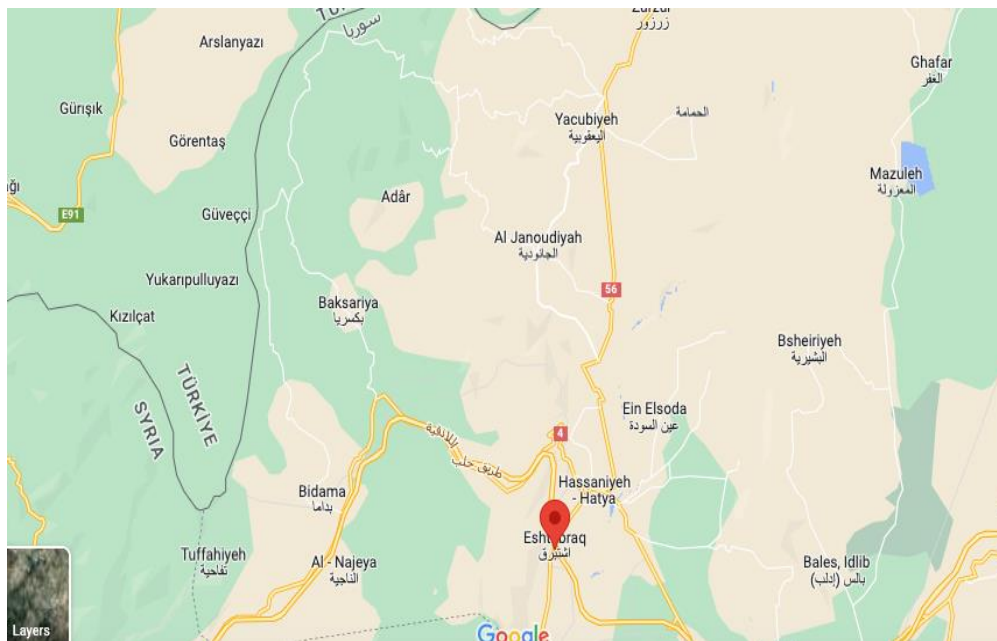
⁵ The second massif is Mount A'la (Arabic: جبل الأعلى) (also called Mount Summaq, (Arabic: جبل السماق). This mountain is separated from Mount Barisha by the Shalf plain. The highest point in Mount A'la reaches 819 m. This mountain has a predominantly Druze population. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harim_Mountains

⁶ Uighurs (also spelled Uyghurs) are an ethnic group who are predominantly Muslim, speak a Turkic language, and live mainly in what is now the Xinjiang province in northwestern China

⁷ The Turkistan Islamic Party or the Turkistan Islamic Movement, formerly known as the East Turkestan Islamic Movement and other names, is a Uyghur Islamic extremist organization founded in Western China. Its stated goals are to establish an independent state called East Turkestan replacing Xinjiang.

Alawites:

The Alawite presence in Idlib was limited to the village of Kaurko at the Turkish-Syrian border, and the village of Eshtabraq near Jisr al-Shughur city. Virtually no Alawite remained in these two villages, and all of them fled from them due to the clear sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and the Alawites. This escape process already started after the massacre of the Military Security Division in 2011.



The village of Kourko is inhabited by Syrian immigrants from the Qalamoun area, while the Alawites houses in the village of Ishtabraq are inhabited by displaced Sunnis from the Palestinian Ramel area in Lattakia.

Shia:

Shiites are concentrated in the villages of Al-Zahraa and Nubl. Their number has decreased due to the civil war, from 50,000 in 2011 to 7,000 in 2018, when the process of transferring them from their villages towards the areas of the Syrian regime took place within the framework of a Russian-Iranian-Turkish agreement. Thus, their areas became purely Sunni areas, and the Shiites of these villages were known for their permanent armament and their ability to confront all Sunni militias due to the government and Iranian permanent support for them.



After leaving Idlib the residents of these villages were resettled in the Zabadani area and its environs, which is an area adjacent to the Lebanese - Syrian border and is one of the most important secret crossings that Hezbollah used to transport weapons from Syria to the Lebanese Beqaa Valley during the July 2006 war.

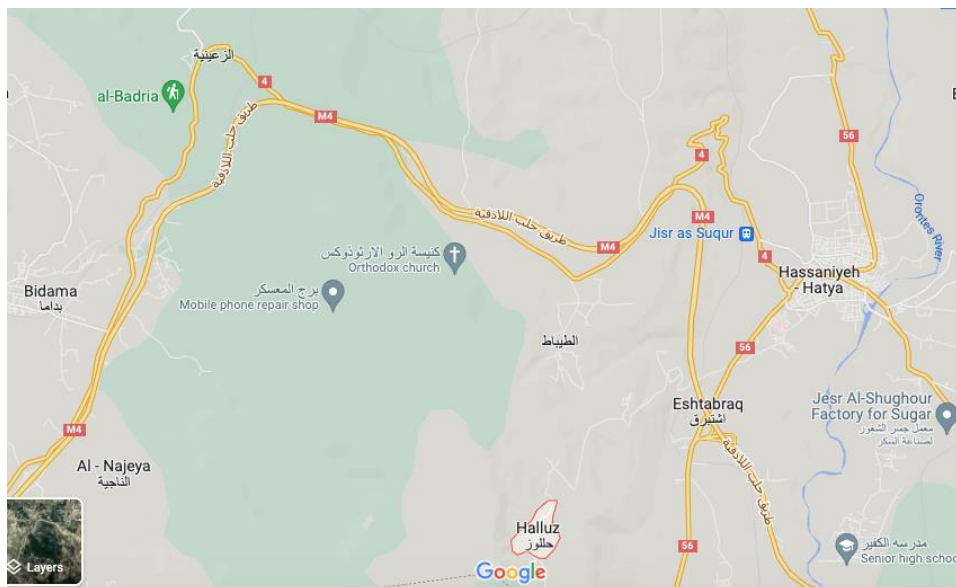
Christians:

Christians are divided into three main groups:

1. *The Christians of the cities:* they were always present in the cities of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur, but they left during the civil war. Only two families remained, and the Christians of both cities were not subjected to direct harassment or intimidation, but the entire population environment became unsuitable for them, so they left.

Christians of villages, and can be divided into two main parts:

2. *Christian-free villages:* villages that were looted and robbed by radical extremist militias in 2013, which are (Al-Ghassaniyah, Halouz). Both villages were subjected to heavy shelling by the Syrian regime, which made life almost impossible there, so these villages are similar to the neighbouring Christian villages that are administratively affiliated to Lattakia Governorate, mainly (Kinsaba, Al-Ghanimia, Al-Qasab).





3. *The inhabited villages*: three villages (Al-Qunia, Al-Ya'qubiyah, and Al-Jadida). In fact, these villages used to be known as summer resorts. The number of residents would not exceed 600 people during winter, but during the summer period, the number would reach nearly ten thousand. Due to the civil war the number of residents of the three villages decreased to approximately 200 people only, and none of the Christian vacationers visited them since 2013, after this region became an area of military conflict between the opposition and the regime. The Office of Spoils also confiscated all the properties of Christian vacationers, on the pretext that they did not manage these properties and considered them as war spoils.





Political hegemony in Idlib:

The political and administrative hegemony in the Syrian opposition areas is divided between two main poles:

- **The Interim Government:** It is the administrative wing of the Syrian National Coalition, and the influential force in it is the Muslim Brotherhood movement⁸. This group is hostile to both Shiites and Alawites and does not have a hateful attitude toward Christians and Druze. In fact, the interim government does not have power in Idlib governorate, but it has an impact by passing some services, most notably education, health, by virtue of having official offices in Turkey.
- **The Salvation Government:** It is the government that is administratively affiliated with Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham "which is a Salafi movement". It is led by "Abu Muhammad al-Jolani".

This government has absolute powers with regard to administrative and security affairs, and it supervises all the services provided by the Interim Government in Idlib Governorate. In fact, the Salafist movement views Christians as dhimmis⁹, "meaning People of the Book." but it does not accept their equality with Muslims, and it is obligatory according to Islamic law to take a tax from them. As for the Druze, they are a misguided group of Muslims, and it is necessary to bring them back to the Straight path¹⁰, just like the Shiites. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham did not initiate a sweeping attack on the Shiite villages in Idlib but contented themselves with the process of siege.

What is common between the two governments is that both of them work under a Turkish security cover, with a clear difference, which is that all the offices of the interim government hold Turkish flag beside the flag of the Syrian revolution, while the offices of the Salvation Government hold the flag of the Hayat alone, and in some In the offices we see the flag of Hayat and next to it the flag of the Syrian revolution.

⁸ The Muslim Brotherhood movement sought the re-establishment of a World Islamic Caliphate which was envisaged to come through several Islamic national states, united in a league, and appointing a single leader to rule over them after Shura (consultation).

⁹ A dhimmi refers to a non-Muslim subject of the Ottoman Empire. Derived from Islamic legal conceptions of membership to society, non-Muslims 'dhimmis' were afforded protection by the state and did not serve in the military, in return for specific taxes.

¹⁰ According to Quranic standard above, to follow The Straight Path is to avoid crimes against equality, family, humanity, fairness and integrity. These moral criteria, also known as "The Ten Commandments" are shared among the three monotheistic religions; Judaism, Christianity and Islam.



Pressure to support minorities:

The World Council of Churches, a Geneva-based non-profit organization, has sought since 2012 to promote dialogues between leaders of Syrian Islamists, and some Syrian Christian activists with the aim of creating the kind of understanding to ensure the security and continuity of Christians presence. However, the promises of those Islamic leaders did not bear fruit on the ground, as the properties of many Christians were confiscated and became attached to the booty office, crosses were removed from churches, bells were prevented from ringing, and women were forced to wear veil.

Nevertheless, activists of Christian origins continued, "Most notably: Jamil Diyarbakri, Najib Awad, Ayman Abdel Nour, Issam Khoury" to promote channels of communication with an aim of pushing for the protection of Christians, whether through the United Nations, or through all civil organizations working in the field relief in Idlib and its environs such as Goal, and other organizations that receive funds from the United States of America or The European Union, and a number of Syrian intellectuals of Christian and Druze origin insisted on appearing in media channels Opposition to the Syrian regime, which gave the impression among Sunni Syrians, that both minorities are not completely with the Syrian regime, and this certainly eased the sectarian tension towards them.

From a second angle, the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood outside Syria were clearly aware of the need to protect minorities, so they did not create rhetoric hostile to both sects. On the contrary, they sought to polish some names of both sects, such as George Sabra "as a Christian," opposition, although he is a Marxist", and Maher Sharaf al-Din "a Druze", and they were handed formal positions in order to avoid the stereotype about Islamic opposition leadership.

All these matters played a role in breaking the hostile view of al-Julani's supporters towards both minorities. A Turkish directive also came since the beginning of 2022, urging the Al-Julani government to open up towards the two minorities in the aforementioned villages. This prompted Al-Julani to take the following actions:

1. Isolating the extremist legalists against both minorities, namely:

- a. *Abu al-Fateh al-Fazali*: An Egyptian jihadist, he was a member of the Sharia Council.
- b. *Abu Al-Harith Al-Masry*: He is considered one of the legal hawks in the Al-Nusra Organization and was imprisoned in Egypt for 26 years on charges of assassinating Sadat. He was released in 2004, and in 2013 he joined the Ansar al-Sharia movement in Libya, ending up in 2018 in Idlib.
- c. *Judge Abu Muhammad Al-Badrawi*: He is a Sharia judge, and he has always been known to reject any complaints submitted by Christians, or Druze.



2. Coordination with notables from the villages of those minorities, and a visit to Al-Julani:

Abu Muhammad al-Julani, the Sharia lawmaker of the Nusra organization who is close to Turkish intelligence, assigned Mazhar Al-Ways to review the conditions and issues of the Christian and Druze minorities, and to examine the claims submitted by the people of both sects to the Sharia courts. He knew the names of the active personalities among them, arranged a meeting with them, and asked them to choose additional notables to hear their views. At the beginning of June 2022, the date of the meeting was with the notables of the Druze community in the "Jabal Al-Summaq" area. The surprise was that "Alois" did not attend the meeting, but it was "Abu Muhammad al-Julani" who attended it.

In mid-June 2022, the same thing happened with the notables of the Christian community, and the meeting was in the village of al-Qunaya¹¹. Al-Julani promised to study all the demands of both sects, until reaching a solution to all of them.

3. Results of the visit:

The visit gave a high degree of reassurance to both sects, as he asked them to organize an "office concerned with the affairs of each sect separately." The mission of this office is to communicate directly with the Salvation Government, so that this office is responsible for organizing the following:

- a. Providing a list of all Christian or Druze real estate properties, indicating the place of residence of the owner, and the name of the relative of the first and second rank in charge of managing his property.
- b. A list of the properties of Christians or Druze who do not have first- and second-degree relatives, to place their properties under the supervision of the "sect office". who will receive 20% of the revenues of those properties.
- c. Follow up on any violations committed against either of the two sects and try to solve them with the Legislative Council.
- d. Promoting the necessity of the return of minorities to their villages, to benefit directly from their properties.

¹¹ Al-Qunyah is a village in northwestern Syria, administratively belonging to the Idlib Governorate, located northwest of Idlib, 35 km north of Jisr ash-Shugur, and is in between Lattakia and Aleppo



Of course, if these measures take place as promised by al-Julani, they will mean an end to the influence of the Office of Spoils on the properties of Christians and Druze and it will be replaced with an office to manage the affair of each of these two sects, so that this office coordinates its activities with the institutions of the Salvation Government, which will have to implement the decisions to evict Muslims from the properties of Christian origin.

This will certainly be an attractive factor for the minorities who left their villages and were forced to return back with formulas that guarantee their dignity, and this will certainly improve the image of Al Julani in front of those international parties involved in the Syrian profile