



# A Systematic Looting in Deir Ezzor Province

A report to highlight looting in the Syrian  
government held areas in Deir Ezzor

April / 2019

منظمة العدالة من أجل الحياة  
Justice For Life Organization



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## **First: Executive summary:**

In late 2017, the Syrian government forces captured the cities, towns, and villages located in the south of Euphrates River in Deir Ezzor province, these forces launched large-scale looting operations against houses and markets with support by the affiliated and supporting militias.

[JFL](#) interviewed a group of civilians whose houses were looted in different areas of the province, where the interviewees talked about the looting.

The testimonies that were collected by JFL suggest that widespread looting in the areas recaptured by the government forces along with the affiliated and supporting militias in Deir Ezzor province, where looting operations were and still are against most of the towns and villages.

Rule 52 of the [ICRC study on the International Customary Humanitarian Law](#) states that “Pillage is prohibited”. Accordingly, “ Pillaging a town or place, even when taken by assault “ , is considered as one of the blatant violations for the laws and customs applicable to the armed conflict not of an international character according to article 8, E, V of [the Rome Statute](#) of the International Criminal Court.

JFL demands to immediate halt of looting operations in the province, and returning back all looted property to their original owners along with allowing international investigation committees to enter the crimes scenes and start investigation.

## Second: Introduction

### 1- Summary

In late 2017, the Syrian government forces controlled the entire cities and towns located in the south of Euphrates river in Deir Ezzor province following three years of ISIS control. The Russian air force and foreign militias, such as Hezbollah, played a major role in recapturing these areas

Hundreds of civilians were killed and injured due to the military actions that took place as hundreds of thousands of people had to flee due to the indiscriminate aerial bombardment on areas populated by civilians.

As military actions ended, civilians returned to their areas as the Syrian government invited to the so-called [reconciliations](#), which means to reconcile the conditions of those who are wanted by the Syrian security apparatuses and returning them to their houses and works.

The Syrian security apparatuses arrested dozens of the returnees including those who completed all reconciliation procedures. This made the government held areas [unsafe](#), especially to young people as many of them refused to return fearing from being arrested, or being enrolled within the military service.

The government forces along with supporting and affiliated militias committed large-scale looting actions for houses and markets in the newly captured areas. Testimonies collected by JFL indicates that such action was made in all areas.

The government forces and the allied militias burned lot of houses, especially those that were difficult to be looted.

### 2- Current situation in Deir Ezzor:

The Syrian government forces control the three main cities in the province; Deir Ezzor, Al Mayadin, and Al Boukmal along with all towns and villages located in the south of the river. On the other hand, Syria Democratic Forces control the areas located in the north of the river.



The government held areas suffer from severe shortage of fuel and variety of militias and military factions that do not refer to one leadership. Additionally, the Syrian security apparatuses conduct indiscriminate detentions and request sometimes money to release on of the detainees. Moreover, these forces [confiscate](#) the houses of the IDPs and refugees who fled the area. On the other hand, SDF held areas has a security fragility as civilians' fear from sleeper cells for ISIS, in addition to indiscriminate arrests against civilians.

### **Third: Methodology and Challenges:**

JFL researchers interviewed eight people whose properties were looted by the government forces and allied militias. Some of those interviews were face-to-face, and others were via Skype and WhatsApp.

The report covers looting actions in government areas in Deir Ezzor province.

Many people refused to talk about this issue fearing from being arrested by the security apparatuses, especially that some of them is based in the government held areas, and others are visiting these areas.

All names stated in this report are pseudonyms based on the witnesses' request for security reasons.

## Fourth: Legal Frame:

Rule 52 of the [ICRC study on the International Customary Humanitarian Law](#) states that “Pillage is prohibited”. Accordingly, “ Pillaging a town or place, even when taken by assault “ , is considered as one of the blatant violations for the laws and customs applicable to the armed conflict not of an international character according to article 8, E, V of the [Rome Statue](#) of the International Criminal Court.

According to Rule 149 of the ICRC study on the International Customary Humanitarian Law, A State is responsible for violations of international humanitarian law attributable to it, including:

- (a) Violations committed by its organs, including its armed forces;
- (b) Violations committed by persons or entities it empowered to exercise elements of governmental authority;
- (c) Violations committed by persons or groups acting in fact on its instructions, or under its direction or control; and
- (d) Violations committed by private persons or groups which it acknowledges and adopts as its own conduct.

In addition to the foregoing, [Protocol Additional](#) to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 article 4 (2) the following acts against the persons referred to in paragraph 1 are and shall remain prohibited at any time and in any place whatsoever, including pillage.

According to the [Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#) article 21, Property and possessions left behind by internally displaced persons should be protected against destruction and arbitrary and illegal appropriation, occupation or use.

## Fifth: They Looted Everything:

### 1- Testimonies of civilians whose houses were looted

Following control on many towns and villages, the militias looted everything that can be transportable. The witness Abu Mohammad told JFL “As the military action was launched by the government forces, I fled with my family and took some of our belongings to the areas we headed towards. Three months later, I returned to my house and saw it stolen completely. I estimate the value of the stolen things about 500,000 SYP”.

According to Abu Mohammad, Liwa Al Qudus and National Defense are the responsible parties for looting operations. Nizar Al Khirfan, one of the militias’ leaders, has a major role in looting operations.

There is no clear mechanism for reporting a complaints related to looting houses, and in case that there is one, there is no response from the militias, security apparatuses, or military leaderships. Abu Mohammad continues “I tried to report a complaint for the leader of the National Defense<sup>1</sup>, but he told me “If ISIS is the party that stole, you would not talk”, and he avoided to give me a clear response, or even an apology”.

Hamid tried to stay at his house and not to leave, but the indiscriminate aerial bombardment forced him to flee towards the areas located in the north of the river in Deir Ezzor<sup>2</sup>. Hamid told JFL “I could not transport anything with me, even my official documents. On the next day, I returned but the village was completely empty, and the streets were full with unexploded shells. I closed my house’ door, and went back to Al Jazeera”. Hamid talked about the looting responsibility of Liwa Al Qudus, which was positioned in his village. “I was returning irregularly on daily basis to the village, and whenever I enter, I see that something missing from my house. Three months later, I returned with my family to the house, and we found that it was completely looted. I could not stay for long time due to the arrest campaigns that were launched by the government forces and allied militias. My family stayed in the village, whereas I left”.

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<sup>1</sup> A militia that subordinates to National Defense Administration in the Syrian Defense Ministry

<sup>2</sup> “Al Shameyya” name is for the areas located in the south of the river, and “Al Jazeera” for the areas located in the north of it.

The government forces militias confiscated many houses following stealing them and considering them under the state' ownership. Abu Ali says "I was accused for trading weapons and dealing with ISIS. One of my relatives tried to get back the house and anything stolen belongings, but the answer was that the house became a state's property".

Mahmoud cannot return to his house as he is wanted for reserve military service, and he knew from one of his relatives that he is accused for dealing with armed opposition groups.

Mahmoud says "One of my relatives sent me the pictures of my house as it was completely looted. Neither I nor any of my family members can report a complaint fearing from the reaction of the militias and army members. I estimate the value of the looted belongings at about 400,000 SYP".

Abu Ahmad returned to his house in Al Mayadin city and found it as bare walls and roof. Abu Ahmad says "There are no electricity wires, pipes, windows, water tanks. Of course, all of the neighboring houses were the same". Abu Ahmad bought new belongings for the house by 350,000 SYP, where it has the value of more than one million Syrian pounds, according to him. "I went to an area called the club square where the fourth division of the Syrian army was selling the stolen belongings. I bought everything we may need in a house such as furniture, carpets, etc. I travelled to bring my family. When I came back, I found my house just like I saw it at the first time. In the first time, army members looted it, whereas in the second time, national defense members did it".

Ismael, who returned to his work in of the public directorate in Deir Ezzor city says "I returned to my house in Al Mayadin city, and I found it empty. They stole two 42" monitors, a two-door fridge, laundry machine, microwave, five carpets, freezer, ventilators, and laptop in addition to tapes and electricity network. The total value of the looted belongings is about 5 million SYP".

Few days later, when Ismael was at his workplace, a group of the national defense looted the rest of his belongings from his house despite the attempts of his neighbors to prevent them as Ismael went back and will stay in his house, yet the militia members refused and told the neighbors "It is not your business".

After looting all of his belongings, they burned his house. Hassan says “I returned back to my house in Al Mayadin, I locked the doors and windows, then I left the city. Then, Syrian army and national defense members stormed the house, looted it, and then burned it completely”.

“The fourth division members collected the stolen property in one of their headquarters in St.16 in Al Mayadin city and re-sell them”, Hassan adds.

As Ali returned from Al Raqqa city, he found that all of his property in his house. He asked one of his relatives to keep visiting his house. He says “Members of the army and the national defense stormed my house and arrested my relative who objected their act by the charge of obstructing their work. They hit him strongly. They looted all property and took them to a fourth division headquarter”.

## 2- Systematic Looting:

Looting houses and shops started by the military campaign that was launched by the Syrian government forces on Deir Ezzor. In the first phase, which is called “Fateh Al Deir” or Deir Ezzor Conquest that aimed at defeating ISIS members who were laying the siege on Deir Ezzor neighborhoods. The operation was launched by “Tiger Forces”, which was led by Major-General Suheil Al Hasan.

According to JFL field researcher, these forces looted every transportable property following their control on the area including furniture and electronics. The second phase of looting was made by the fourth division.

The fourth division opens headquarters under the title of “Fourth Division Security Office” with the task of allowing their groups to loot.

These headquarters are based either in houses or shops. The division members do not loot directly, but they ask groups of young men to do so. These groups are divided as each group loot specific things such as iron, woods, and aluminum. Each group should wait for the other one to finish looting. Currently there are groups that are looting rocks and bricks from the buildings.

In the beginning, the stolen property were sold in Deir Ezzor city, except for the valuable things such as monitors, laundry machines, big generators, and new fridges that are sold out of Deir Ezzor city.

According to JFL researcher, some persons agree with the security part that is responsible for protecting specific area where the agreement states to sell this area to this person. In other words, to allow him to loot it completely. This person sell every looted property to the “Fourth Division Security Office”.

## **Sixth: Results:**

The testimonies that were collected by JFL suggest that widespread looting in the areas recaptured by the government forces along with the affiliated and supporting militias in Deir Ezzor province, where looting operations were and still are against most of the towns and villages.

Throughout observing the operations of selling the stolen property, the fourth division, Liwa Al Qudus, and national defense militias are mainly responsible to looting.

The fourth division offices for facilitating the selling and buying the stolen property for long run indicates that the operations are systematic. It also indicates that the state' highest leaderships in Deir Ezzor are aware of these operations.

The lack of response to the reported complaints by the leaderships of the security apparatuses and militias indicates that they do not care, or even approval of those leaderships on the looting operations.

In the light of the foregoing, and by applying rule 52, rule 149 of the ICRC study on the International Customary Humanitarian Law, article 8, E, V of the Rome Statue of the International Criminal Court, Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 article 4 (2), and Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement article 21, the Syrian government, supporting and affiliated militias are responsible for the looting operations in their held areas of Deir Ezzor province.

## **Seventh: Recommendations:**

**Justice for Life organization demands the following:**

### United Nations Security Council:

- 1- Pressure the Syrian government to halt all violations related to human rights that are committed by the government forces and affiliated militias.
- 2- Referring the Syrian file to the International Criminal Court.

The International Special Envoy to Syria:

- 1- Not to neglect Deir Ezzor in the current negotiations, either in Astana or in Geneva, and to prioritize the issue of protecting civilians in this province where they suffer from dire humanitarian conditions.
- 2- Pressure the Syrian government and its allies to preserve the property of the civilians and to prosecute those who are responsible for looting actions.
- 3- To work with all parties in order to reach to a comprehensive political solution under the supervision of United Nations and in accordance with the Security Council resolutions.

### The Syrian Government

- 1- To preserve the property of the refugees and IDPs who fled the province of Deir Ezzor.
- 2- To halt immediately looting actions in the province and to return the looted property to their original owners.
- 3- To open an office to follow up the reported complaint of those whose property was looted, and to prosecute those who are responsible.
- 4- To allow the international investigation committees to enter the crime scenes and starting investigating.

### States Related to the Syrian File

- 1- To move individually or jointly within a specific mechanism to prosecute Syrian officials based on credible allegations concerning grave violations against the International Humanitarian Law, and to work under the principle of universal jurisdiction and the judiciary and in accordance with the national laws in order to investigate with the Syrian army members and the civil leaderships who are suspected for having the responsibility for those violations, and to prosecute them judiciary, if necessary in absentia.
- 2- Calling up the Security Council to shoulder its responsibilities and to take real actions for ensuring accountability and zero impunity, along with taking the needed actions to refer the file of violations in Syria to judiciary, including the international criminal court, or special courts.
- 3- Keeping providing of humanitarian aid to the IDPs and refugees, which enables them to stay in the displacement and refuge areas until having a safe and secure conditions for returning to their areas and houses.

### Human Rights Organizations

- 1- Documenting all looting operations that are committed by the government forces, supporting and affiliated militias in Deir Ezzor province.
- 2- Observing the reconciliations mechanism that Syrian government is working through, and to document and publish all violations committed against the returnees.

### International Impartial and Independent Mechanism to Assist in the Investigation and Prosecution of Persons Responsible for the Most Serious Crimes under International Law Committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011

Not to neglect Deir Ezzor province in the investigations that might reveal much of committed crimes in the province and to reveal those who are responsible for the.



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