

Years On, Displaced Madaya Residents See Their Property Ownership Slip Away

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Three years after regime forces recaptured the formerly rebel-held town of Madaya in the western Damascus Countryside, the seizure of absentee properties continues. Those seizing these properties are mostly local townspeople affiliated with regime forces.

A former mountain resort town, Madaya sits along the Syrian-Lebanese border. Regime forces, backed by the Lebanese group Hezbollah, held the town under a suffocating siege from 2015 to 2017. Madaya returned to regime control under the so-called “Four Towns Agreement,” which saw more than 1,000 rebel fighters removed from the town. The agreement also included neighbouring Zabadani, as well as the majority-Shia sister towns of Al-Fuaa and Kafraya in rural Idlib, which had been surrounded by rebel forces. The fates of the four towns were tied together by the agreement, which stipulated evacuations and other measures in each pair of towns in exchange for similar actions in the other pair. Final evacuations were completed in stages, negotiated by opposition forces and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, and included Turkish and Qatari sponsorship.

Today, Madaya is home to 6,000 people. Control of the town is split between Hezbollah, Military Security, and the elite Fourth Armoured Division, commanded by Maher al-Assad.

Mohammad, a 45-year-old man from Madaya, told *The Syria Report* that a Fourth Division volunteer from the town had seized his house and refused to give it up. Mohammad has been living in Turkey for several years. He requested a pseudonym for safety reasons.

According to Mohammad, the man first contacted him via WhatsApp in early 2020 to inform him that he would take up residence in the house and that he would repair damages wrought by artillery shelling in 2015. The man did not ask permission to take the house, Mohammad said.

Then, in June 2020, Mohammad’s brother, who had recently returned to Madaya, asked the Fourth Division volunteer to leave the house so that he could live in it. The volunteer refused and threatened to blow up the house if the brother attempted to involve any local mediators in settling the dispute. Mohammad said he decided to cut off communications with the volunteer, to protect his brother from retaliation.

Mohammad’s story is one of dozens of similar cases in Madaya, where well-connected residents are seizing the properties of those who have fled. Most people who left the town fled Syria for Turkey and Lebanon, or went north to Idlib Governorate, and are not necessarily affiliated with the opposition. There are no precise statistics on the number of homes in Madaya that have been seized by regime personnel, as most of the victims have preferred to remain silent about their stories to protect their property, and to prevent retribution against relatives still living in Syria.

The property seizures are not limited to homes. People connected to regime forces are also taking over farmland belonging to displaced residents and then cultivating, harvesting, and selling crops without compensating the owners. In some cases, these same people were renting out the land through verbal agreements without informing or consulting the original owners, according to *The Syria Report*’s correspondent.

Rabab, a woman from Madaya, told *The Syria Report* that she lost ownership of a multi-storey building in Madaya in July after the leader of a local militia affiliated with Military Security scammed her. The commander, who is also from Madaya, pressured Rabab to allow him to invest in her

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property and transform it into a shopping mall.

He then pushed her to fingerprint papers that she could not read — Rabab is illiterate, she says, and did not realise that the contract was to sell the property in the militia leader's name. He threatened her to prove the contract in court and to say falsely that she accepted the sale at SYP 50 million. Days later, police arrived at Rabab's home and ordered her to leave.

A human rights source from Madaya told *The Syria Report* that these types of property takeovers are not legally valid, as the original owners were coerced into handing over their properties due to threats and intimidation. The source added that it would be difficult to take measures against these property seizures due to ongoing security chaos, as well as the support that “buyers” receive from their commanders.

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