

## Return Unlikely as Regime Forces Convert Maaret Al-Numan Homes, Civil Infrastructure into Military Bases

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Regime forces have seized a number of public and private properties in the city of Maaret Al-Numan in Idlib governorate, converting some into military bases and dashing displaced residents' hopes of returning home in the near future.

Maaret Al-Numan is located in Idlib's southern countryside, and is the second largest city in the governorate after Idlib city. It sits just west of the M5 highway that connects Damascus and Aleppo, which was reopened in May 2020 based on the Russian-Turkish agreement reached in March 2020.

Long held by rebel forces, Maaret Al-Numan was recaptured by the regime in January 2020 following a nearly year-long aerial bombing campaign that saw nearly all the city's residents flee for safety. The government has prevented displaced residents from returning, even if they now live in areas controlled by Damascus.

Only four families are thought to live in Maaret Al-Numan today, and are reportedly relatives of regime soldiers. The city's population in 2010 was about 90,000 people, dwindling to 60,000 in 2019, according to estimates by former local council members who spoke with *The Syria Report*.

The Syrian government's Airforce Intelligence agency in recent months seized 15 houses belonging to Maaret Al-Numan residents who had been forced to flee to the displacement camps in northern Idlib for safety during the fighting earlier this year and last year. Airforce Intelligence then made some of these homes into bases. Others were converted into housing for personnel.

It is unclear exactly why Airforce Intelligence chose these houses in particular, although all the seized homes are relatively large and undamaged, and are located in strategic areas of the city. The Syrian army's 11th Division also seized a privately-owned car repair shop in the center of Maaret Al-Numan, according to *The Syria Report's* correspondent in Idlib.

Although it has been months since Maaret Al-Numan's capture by regime forces, looters are still removing reusable materials from the city's abandoned homes—as well as in the nearby city of [Saraqib](#). Workshops contracted by regime forces are reportedly extracting metal cables from electrical and telephone installations.

In addition to private homes, regime forces have also seized six public buildings in Maaret Al-Numan. The 25th Special Mission Forces Division, better known as the "Tiger Forces", took over the Maaret National Museum, as well as the municipal water well in the city's northwest to build a parking area for its tanks and military vehicles.

Photos circulated on social media in September that appeared to show a group of Tiger Forces soldiers undergoing military training on the grounds of the AbdulFattah Qaziz School in Maaret Al-Numan. The elite military division is led by Brigadier General Suheil Hassan, who is close to Russian forces. In a picture dated 10 September and confirmed by *The Syria Report's* correspondent, the school appears to be empty of furniture and has no windows or doors (see picture below).

Maaret Al-Numan's National Hospital has also been converted into a military medical point for regime soldiers wounded while stationed at the perimeters of rebel-held Idlib governorate. The soldiers are treated in Maaret Al-Numan before transfer to hospitals in Hama and Aleppo.

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The Syrian army's 9th Tank Division also took over the city's Civil Defense headquarters, which had previously been the office of the Maaret Al-Numan's Agriculture Directorate. Meanwhile, the NDF militia seized the local Baath Party building.



*Source: Social media*

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