

Aleppo's Terra Sancta Returns to Its Owners, After 17 Years of Stalling by the Baath Party

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A nearly two-decade-old decision by the Supreme Administrative Court has finally been enacted to return the Terra Sancta school and monastery in Aleppo to its original owners, the Franciscan Order of the Latins community, giving the Syrian regime another opportunity to present itself as a defender of minorities.

A few weeks ago, it was announced that a decision by the court to return the Terra Sancta property to the order would finally be implemented following a meeting between representatives from the order and the Syrian president in late 2019. The announcement was followed by a rush of official statements and expressions of gratitude from bishops and priests from the monastic order.

The presence of Franciscan monks in Aleppo dates back to the Ayyubid dynasty. In accordance with a 1233 agreement between the Ayyubid prince of Aleppo, Al-Aziz Mohammad, and Pope Gregory IX, monks were sent to care for crusaders held captive in Aleppo's citadel. Afterwards, the monks settled down in Aleppo, moving from one location to another in the city, including in the Bab Antakya and Khan Al-Qasabiyeh districts.

The Terra Sancta school dates back to 1942, when the Franciscan order bought land in Aleppo, in the Al-Farqan area. There, they built a monastery, as well as the school, which opened its doors in 1948, and later became one of the city's most important secondary schools.

Two decades later, in 1968, the Minister of Education issued Decree No. 1625 to seize private schools across Syria, in step with the widespread nationalisation policy launched by the Baath Party after its coup in 1963. The policy impacted both Syrian and foreign companies, factories and educational institutions.

In Aleppo, authorities seized the Terra Sancta School, the Frères Maristes Champville Institute, the George Salem Industrial School and the Jeanne d'Arc School, as well as others. After the takeover, the Baath Party used the Terra Sancta school property as a party headquarters. In Syria's real estate registry, Terra Sancta, which had been listed as Property No. 11543 in Aleppo's fourth real estate area, was newly listed under "Treasury of the Syrian Arab Republic - Seizure".

The Franciscan order subsequently filed a lawsuit before the State Council and won with the issuance of the Supreme Administrative Court's Decree No. 307 for 2003, which annulled the state's seizure of the property.

The case then entered a maze of judicial complications, circulars issued by the Council of Ministers and various surprise actions by the Baath Party. Less than 10 years after the 2003 decision, the Baath Party's Aleppo branch raised a contract for sale of part of the property to the Agricultural Directorate. The Latin Bishop of Syria then intervened with the prime minister, who, for his part, requested that the Baath Party hand the property back over to the Franciscans.

However, in 2014, the party branch placed a sign prohibiting disposal of the property, then raised a complaint to the Agricultural Directorate in Aleppo to confirm its purchase of its share of the property. A committee of experts issued a decision, and in 2017, Aleppo's Civil Court of First Instance confirmed that the Baath Party had purchased a share of the property. The Aleppo branch of the Baath Party then suddenly called for the Franciscans to vacate both the monastery and the church, because they had become the party's property.

The Syria Report

At this point, Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop of Venezuela Isidore Battikha, originally from Aleppo, intervened, reaching out to elite Tiger Forces commander Suheil Hassan, a prominent figure in the Syrian regime, to stop the eviction. It is unclear why Battikha intervened, except for indications that personal relationships may have prompted the Franciscan monks to reach out to him, as he is known to have connections with Hassan.

Afterwards, the Franciscan order filed a new case with the Supreme Administrative Court, which then decided to prohibit the Baath Party from dealing in its share of the property.

The endless delays prompted the Franciscans to request Bashar Al-Assad, Secretary-General of the Baath Party, to intervene and solve the issue in 2019. In other words, Bashar Al-Assad intervened to enforce a court decision issued 17 years ago, which was itself delayed by the Baath Party that he heads.

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