



# SACD | Analysys

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of cementing displacement

## Regime's destruction of agricultural lands as a tactic of cementing displacement

In a disturbing trend, the Syrian regime and its allies have recently been burning agricultural lands belonging to displaced Syrians with a clear intent to cement their displacement by making it impossible for them to return and harvest the fields and orchards targeted by fires. The systematic nature of the targeting is evident from the fact that such fires have been instigated in different areas and governorates under the control of the regime. This text provides a closer look in such incidents in Palmyra, Harasta and Qussair.

The latest incident relates to the intentional fires started in the historic oases of Palmyra and the homes in the surrounding areas. These fires burned agricultural lands in the area near the Meridian Hotel, in the vicinity of the Temple of Antiquities. The sources of the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity in the region confirmed that the fires raged in the area for hours, with the Syrian regime not making a notable effort to control the blaze.

According to eyewitnesses, the deliberate failure to deal with these fires might be motivated by the desire to cover up the smuggling of antiquities the regime is carrying out in collusion with Iranian militias. The city of Palmyra is an oasis that adorns the Syrian desert, located northeast of Damascus. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site featuring Roman monuments that bear witness to a great city that was once one of the most important cultural centers of the ancient world.

Our sources reported seeing digging equipment and trucks moved to the area immediately before the fires were started. The displacement of the local residents is at the same time a tool and a long-term consequence of this criminal effort.

Sources from the ground told SACD that the militia controlling the area has been excavating for more than two years for the antiquities in the area where the fires occurred. The area where the digging is going on has been sealed off for "security reasons" to prevent civilians from accessing it, with burning of agricultural lands a frequent occurrence used to clear the lands for excavation.

June 2020

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Excavation and smuggling of antiquities from Palmyra is considered an important economic resource that the regime and Iranian militias use to finance the war in Syria. The practice was documented by Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, which reported that "Iranian militias, led by the militia of Al-Najaba and Fatimiyun, began a new exploration campaign on the antiquities in the ancient city of Palmyra and its eastern desert that extended towards Deir Al-Zour, where excavation mechanisms brought in by the militias have been monitored over the past three months." The area where these excavations started was blocked off to the people who live there, while there is also an intention to change the route of the motorway Deir Al-Zour-Damascus, which passes near Palmyra.

We have recently reported on the regime's demolitions of private property in the area of Harasta, in Eastern Ghouta. In the aftermath of that, the local sources reported massive fires in the same area which burned agricultural lands overlooking the Damascus-Homs International Highway during the month of May.

According to this information, members of regime's forces present in the area intentionally set fire to the surrounding lands in the Panorama area in the city of Harasta, on both sides of the international highway from the Qaboun side, as well as the agricultural lands separating the Assad suburb and the Harasta and Barzeh farms.

These recent fires caused great damage to the crops and the trees planted in those lands, especially in the orchards that extend between Harasta and Arabin from the governorate side.

This is not the first time fires have been used to devastate agricultural lands in this area. The eastern Ghouta groves, overlooking the Damascus-Homs international highway, witnessed major fires during May 2019. Thousands of olive trees, some hundreds of years old, were burned in the groves of the Karm Al-Ras area, separating the cities of Duma and Harasta, and the western area of the highway in Harasta. One of the engineers working in the Damascus countryside governorate suggested that the fires are aimed at emptying the agricultural areas and forcing the residents to sell or accept the regime's expropriation, as part of a plan to include it into the "re-organization" that covers the northern entrance to the capital.

June 2020

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Lastly, at the beginning of April 2020, a big fire broke out in some of the orchards in the villages of Qusair, a town in the Homs governorate on the border with Lebanon. The area is under control of Hezbollah and the information from the ground suggests that the fires were instigated to clear the land which the militia plans to use to expand its cannabis-growing operation in the area.

The area is of importance to Hezbollah as it has a number of crossings along the border between Lebanon and Syria from the Qusair side, which are used to transport the loot from Syria which is then sold in the Central Bekaa valley and the southern suburbs of Beirut. Hezbollah also uses the Qusair region as a training camp for the new recruits deployed in the operations in the Aleppo countryside and Daraa.

With the increasing pressure on Hezbollah in Lebanon as a result of the collapse of the Lebanese economy, Qusair with its vast green areas is increasingly important to the militia as a source of income and resources. It is for this reason that the southern countryside of Homs remains empty of residents despite several attempts at return of some of those who are displaced in the areas held by the regime, such as the city of Homs or the city of Damascus.

The described practice of burning of agricultural lands in Palmyra, Harasta and Qusair clearly aim to cement the displacement of the local population by depriving them of a source of livelihood and making their return more difficult. Initial displacement affected by brutal violence and destruction is made worse, with the goal of making it permanent, by the destruction of lands and oases, which then either become settled by members of militia families who live off trafficking (Palmyra), are exploited for cultivation of narcotics (Qusair) or designated for "re-organization" (Harasta).

The pattern of these actions reveals a systematic targeting of the displaced Syrians, which is one of the key causes for the imposition of sanctions by the EU and the US on the regime's officials and the individuals and entities involved in such criminal conduct. The reversal of these actions, restitution of property and lands to the rightful owners and safe and voluntary return of displaced people who lived on the harvests from the lands devastated by deliberate burning, will be among the basic pre-conditions for the lifting of the sanctions and the possibility of a political solution that guarantees the right to all Syrians.

