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'Illicit' deals squander Shiite endowments



Prominent figures within the Lebanese Shiite community are exploiting the Higher Islamic Shiite Council for personal benefit,

according to sources in the council and documents shown to NOW.

While the higher council is supposed to use its influence for the benefit of Lebanese Shiite religious institutions, officials are instead using exploitive contracts to grant themselves land and forgo payments. Deputy President of the Council Sheikh Abdel Amir Qabalan and the Council's former authorized representative Imad al-Harake were named as the guilty parties by sources within the Higher Islamic Shiite Council.

The sources, who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the subject, revealed that these contracts were prepared and signed by Harake in his capacity as the Council's authorized representative and in agreement with Sheikh Qabalan. The sources stressed to NOW that the selling of these endowments is against the law, but these dealings still took place, allowing the exploitation of public endowments by several powerful individuals.

The informed sources showed NOW copies of contracts and pieces of evidence, whereby several long-term agreements were made between the Higher Islamic Shiite Council, represented by its deputy president Sheikh Abdel Amir Qabalan and the *Kashafat al-Risala al-Islamiya*, a Muslim scouts association affiliated with the Amal Movement. The agreements granted the association, which is chaired by Speaker Nabih Berri, dozens of land plots belonging to the Shiite endowments.

The two parties drafted contracts based on illegitimate conditions that go against the Council's interests, including long-term permits to ensure the agreement is continued, even if an official is voted out of office. The sources showed NOW copies of two contracts proving these claims. Further, while the first contract stipulates that only 3,000 m² of surface area of land plot no. 66 in the region of Kfarsir is to be used, the *Kashafat al-Risala al-Islamiya* association uses the whole surface area, totaling 7,000 m².

The second contract was also signed by the *Kashafat al-Risala al-Islamiya* association and the Higher Islamic Shiite Council, over land plot no. 1361 in Shhrou, in the Tyr district. The agreement includes the following shadowy clause: "Whereas the second party [i.e. the association] wishes to exploit the public library on the aforementioned land plot according to a free usufruct contract based on a special wording, this agreement was concluded and wholly accepted." The same expression was used again in clause 6 of the agreement, which stipulates: "The two parties recognize that the present contract is a usufruct contract with a free administration, which is based on a specific duration and fee and which has absolutely nothing to do with the rent law." The specified annual usufruct fee amounts to 600,000 LL only.

Furthermore, this agreement was drafted for a renewable period of one year between 2008 and 2009, which means that the exploitation has been going on for more than three years without any invoice being sent by the second party, represented by the *Kashafat al-Risala al-Islamiya* association, to the first party, represented by the Higher Islamic Shiite Council.

Both contracts were signed by the Council's authorized representative Imad al-Harake and Hassan Hamdan, the deputy general leader of the *Kashafat al-Risala al-Islamiya* association.

The third contract was between the first party, i.e. the Higher Islamic Shiite Council, and the second party, namely the Lebanese Welfare Association for the Handicapped, chaired by [Speaker Berri's wife] Randa Assi Berri, in order to benefit from land plot no. 570 in the Bisariyyeh real estate region in return for an annual fee of \$10,000. This agreement contains the following clause: "Usufruct fees are paid in advance on an annual basis and the signing of the present contract is regarded as a receipt in lieu of three years of down payment for restoration purposes." This proves that said association did not pay any amount of money from 2008 to 2011. Even though the contract expired and has not been renewed, the association is still using the land plot in question without paying any fee to date, according to the same observers.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that these contracts between the Higher Islamic Shiite Council on the one hand and the *Kashafat al-Risala al-Islamiya* association and the Lebanese Welfare Association for the Handicapped on the other, in addition to other violations the sources promised to reveal later on, are being questioned in independent Shiite circles, which have expressed surprise at this "unchecked" administration of the community's endowments, thus preventing Shiites from benefiting from them.

This article is a translation of the original Arabic