IN 1365 a wave of religious persecution, directed against the Christians, swept Egypt and Syria. The persecutions were precipitated by a large-scale naval raid of Alexandria by the Frankish King of Cyprus. Among the Christians persecuted in Syria were the Maronites of Mount Lebanon; their patriarch, Gibra'il of Hağülä, was seized and burnt at the stake outside Tripoli in 1367. The events of these years appear to have disrupted whatever political organization had existed among the Maronites until then. Out of the resulting chaos there had emerged by 1382, in the high mountain village of Bšarri, a strong man by the name of Ya'qūb b. Ayyūb who succeeded in extending his sway over the whole of the Bšarri district.

This Bšarri district (or Ḡubbat Bšarri) is, roughly, a rectangular area to the south-east of Tripoli, some twenty kilometres long (west to east) and ten kilometres wide (north to south). It consists of a rugged ridge, the central part of which is shaped like a horseshoe with the villages of Kafarsgāb and Ḥadaṯ at its northern and southern tips, and Bšarri in the middle. The horseshoe, with villages ranged along either side, surrounds the sheer drop of the Qādišā canyon, some 800 metres deep. The cliffs on either side of the canyon abound in cave-monasteries and hermit retreats, of which the most venerable is Qannūbin (Greek: Coenobion), on the northern side. Beyond Ḥadaṯ, in the south, the Bšarri district extended along the ridge to the promontory (garn) of Ḥardin,