

Rebuilding a Society: the Key to Success for Turkey's New Syrian Resettlement Villages

by [Ammar Al-Musarea \(/experts/ammara-al-musarea\)](/experts/ammara-al-musarea)

May 26, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/aadt-amar-almjtm-mftah-alnjah-lmshrw-qry-aadt-altwtyn-alswryt-aljdydt-fy-trkya\)](/ar/policy-analysis/aadt-amar-almjtm-mftah-alnjah-lmshrw-qry-aadt-altwtyn-alswryt-aljdydt-fy-trkya)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ammar Al-Musarea \(/experts/ammara-al-musarea\)](/experts/ammara-al-musarea)

Ammar Al-Musarea is a Syrian journalist and a researcher.



Brief Analysis

Erdogan's plan to build residential villages in Syria is an important step for Syrian refugees. Relevant parties should help bring the project to fruition and ensure its longevity.

In early [May 2022 \(https://news.middleeast-24.com/world/188020.html\)](https://news.middleeast-24.com/world/188020.html), Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soylyu inaugurated two residential villages, one near the Syrian town of Sarmada close to the Turkish-Syrian border and another in the Killi region. These villages, in areas controlled by factions aligned with Turkey, are part of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's project to return Syrian refugees to Syria. He stated in a message during the inauguration of the villages that over 57,000 houses for Syrians have already been built within the Idlib governorate in coordination with local and international NGOs, while emphasizing that basic residential infrastructure will also be built in the area.

The villages are designed as an alternative to camps to house displaced Syrians, ensure adequate living conditions, and encourage Syrian refugees in Turkey to return to Syria. Erdogan recently revealed that Ankara is preparing a project in northern Syria that would allow for the voluntary return of [one million Syrian refugees \(https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkey-to-build-200000-homes-for-1m-syrians-to-resettle-voluntarily-erdogan/news\)](https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/turkey-to-build-200000-homes-for-1m-syrians-to-resettle-voluntarily-erdogan/news) from Turkey—a significant percentage of the 3.6 million Syrian refugees [currently \(https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey\)](https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey) residing there. Erdogan explained that the project will be established across thirteen areas of northern Syria, near the [border cities \(https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/syrian-opposition-wary-erdogans-plan-return-1-million-refugees\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/05/syrian-opposition-wary-erdogans-plan-return-1-million-refugees) of Azaz, Jarabulus, Al-Bab, and Tel Abyad, and that it will provide housing, schools, and hospitals.

The announcement of this project coincides with Europe's increasing rejection of Syrian refugees on the pretext that the situation in Syria has become safe and that Europe's capacity to take on refugees is limited due to refugee flows from Ukraine. In this vein, Czech president Milos Zeman recently [stressed \(https://cnn.iprima.cz/zeman-](https://cnn.iprima.cz/zeman-)

zastaveni-dodavek-plynu-rusove-by-byli-blazni-berte-me-vsak-s-rezervou-106770) that his country will continue to support Ukrainian refugees, saying that Ukrainian refugees are women and children while “Arab refugees were young and healthy men who, on the contrary, left women and children at home.”

Despite delays in the announcement and implementation of the Turkish project, new residential housing in Syria is a critical step to alleviate the suffering of more than seven million Syrians who have fled the country as a result of over a decade of war. Moreover, permanent housing can help solve another crisis: every winter, when snow covers refugee camps and torrents wash away tents, many suffer while children and elderly are killed because of winter conditions.

The project—and other future projects along this model—can also help ensure just distribution of humanitarian aid provided by the United Nations, other foreign countries, and international civil society groups. According to U.N. reports and international media sources, distribution of this aid is riddled by **corruption** (**<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/06/28/rigging-system/government-policies-co-opt-aid-and-reconstruction-funding-syria>**), as agents trade in relief materials rather than delivering them to intended recipients.

However, for Syrians to return to permanent residences inside Syria—and for this important project to be successful—several steps must be taken by key actors.

Using its active military presence in Syria, the United States should support binding agreements directed at all parties to the conflict so that construction can be successful and effective. Such agreements could include halting bombing campaigns, conducting military operations in areas where home construction is underway, and protecting rebuilt areas from becoming battlefields. Stabilizing the environment is key to incentivizing Syrians to return. It is also necessary to expand this effort so that it is not limited to areas under the control of Turkish-supported factions, but also includes areas under the control of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

There should also be a mechanism for facilitating the return of refugees from other countries. The situation of Syrians in **Lebanon, where a large percentage of Syrian refugee population resides,** (**<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2021/04/15/why-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-are-a-crisis-within-a-crisis/>**) is particularly dire. Aside from the major economic and food crises facing the country as a whole, Syrians suffer from persistent racism, labyrinthine politics, targeted crimes, and theft from UN aid programs.

With regard to the implementation process, it must be ensured that Syrians who move into these residential homes have access to key services already promised by Erdogan—including schools, clinics, hospitals, markets, sewers, electricity, and water refineries. International funding should focus on establishing vocational courses, as well as the provision of small and accessible loans, production workshops, rehabilitation and psychological support, educational activities, and the implementation of contemporary educational curricula that discourage extremism and racism. In addition, efforts must be made to encourage the return of tens of thousands of Syrian doctors, nurses, teachers, judges and lawyers who were displaced by the Assad regime. Support for all of these key features is indispensable for ensuring that any new residential areas in Syria are able to function as civil units.

Investing in these areas of Syria can have major returns for the Syrian people as a whole. Northern Syria is considered the “**Syrian breadbasket** (**<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/syrias-bread-basket-lies-empty>**),” yet the war has destroyed the infrastructure for agricultural production. A key step to implementing a sustainable way of life for returning Syrians is to maintain irrigation channels, provide seeds, farming machines and agricultural production materials, and ensure that farmers have access to domestic and foreign markets to sell products. This will allow Syria to begin once again to rely on its domestic agriculture, especially given the severe global grain shortage.

When it comes to governance, administration of these areas should be in the hands of local residents. It is critical that those bodies governing non-regime areas create conditions in which free and fair elections can take place and governing entities are insulated from interfering actors—such as opposition bodies, provisional governments, the Syrian Civil Council and its affiliated institutions, and rival military factions who aim to shift demographics in the region. Likewise, work must be done to form judicial bodies, adopt civil and penal systems based on rule-of-law guarantees, and develop a civilian police apparatus free from the tutelage of the de-facto forces controlling swaths of Syria.

At the same time, it must be stressed that these housing projects are not a substitute for the final political solution, which rejects the partition of Syria, helps create a democratic civil society, and ensures a safe return for refugees and displaced persons to the cities and homes from which they were displaced.

None of these steps are simple or easy, and none of these efforts will emerge overnight. Yet these are all indispensable building blocks for the reconstruction program put forth by Turkey, or any efforts to return Syrian refugees in the future. Only ensuring these basic foundations of civil life will ensure that these types of projects are implemented successfully and sustainably; this work is also vital and can provide a long-needed lifeline for Syrians. In contrast, if the project stops at building alone, with no follow up or broader programmatic initiative, the construction will become a futile exercise, failing to address the roots the Syrian refugee crisis. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Tishreeni Movement Continues: Change Is Inevitably Coming to Iraq](#)

Jun 28, 2022

◆
Munqith Dagher

[\(/policy-analysis/tishreeni-movement-continues-change-inevitably-coming-iraq\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The KRG Turns Thirty: The Future of U.S.-Kurdish Relations in Iraq \(Part 3\)](#)

Jun 28, 2022

◆

James Jeffrey,
Matthew Amtrano,
Bilal Wahab

(/policy-analysis/krq-turns-thirty-future-us-kurdish-relations-iraq-part-3)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

What Biden Faces with Erdogan at the NATO Summit

Jun 28, 2022



Soner Cagaptay

(/policy-analysis/what-biden-faces-erdogan-nato-summit)