

Arab Syrian IDPs of Tal Rifaat also Want to Go Home

by [Rena Netjes \(/experts/rena-netjes\)](/experts/rena-netjes)

Aug 12, 2022

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alswrywn-alrb-alnazhwn-dakhlyana-mn-tl-rft-yrghbwn-hm-aydana-fy-alwdt-aly-dyarhm\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alswrywn-alrb-alnazhwn-dakhlyana-mn-tl-rft-yrghbwn-hm-aydana-fy-alwdt-aly-dyarhm)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Rena Netjes \(/experts/rena-netjes\)](/experts/rena-netjes)

Rena Netjes is an Arabist and independent researcher. She focuses mainly on northern Syria, SDF-held northeast Syria and opposition-held northwest Syria. She has been to the different parts of northern Syria three times in recent years for field research, and has co-authored 'Henchman, Rebel



Brief Analysis

The involvement of Turkish military forces in Northern Syria could allow thousands of Syrians to return to their homes after being forced out by the YPG, the SDF, and other entities for many years.

In the West, there has been strong opposition to a newly planned Turkish/Syrian National Army (SNA) military operation in northern Syria. Yet for many displaced Arabs from Tal Rifaat, Manbij, and the surrounding villages, they are welcoming the idea of the liberation of their towns and villages. In fact, they have been asking the Turkish-backed SNA to liberate their area for years.

Outside articles often focus exclusively on the Kurdish residents of northern Syria and emphasize that another military operation will automatically mean displacement of the Kurdish population. Yet the area constitutes a mix of Arab and Kurd-dominated towns, and Arab residents have their own history of displacement. In 2016, the entire Arab population was displaced in Tal Rifaat, a (historically) majority Arab town on the west side of the Euphrates, in a [coordinated military operation \(https://twitter.com/Liveuamap/status/839221279244824577?t=Z1FqIS-d0WTIxdRk9KbtPQ&s=19\)](https://twitter.com/Liveuamap/status/839221279244824577?t=Z1FqIS-d0WTIxdRk9KbtPQ&s=19) by Russia, the Syrian regime, and militants from the People's Defense Units (YPG) from Afrin. The YPG also attempted to connect the majority Kurdish enclaves of Kobani and Afrin through majority Arab areas, triggering a refugee flow of Arabs mainly from the two towns and surrounding villages to the Turkish border.

In March 2016, the author met several Syrians who were refugees from Tal Rifaat and the surrounding area and were crossing the border at the Bab al-Salama border crossing, a few kilometers north of Azaz. Initially assuming that they were fleeing the Russian and regime bombing of eastern Aleppo, it was surprising to learn that they were leaving because "YPG-fighters had taken over their houses." Later at the border and in Kilis and Gaziantep, other Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) shared many similar stories.

Last year, in Azaz, the author interviewed Abdallah al-Hafi, the Kurdish-Arab Azaz director of the Syrian Local Councils Unit (LACU). According to him, the expulsion of the residents of Tal Rifaat was a premeditated and well-

organized affair that was coordinated between Russia, the Syrian regime, and the YPG. “The battle for Tal Rifaat saw Russia and the regime bombing the area using airplanes, whereas on the ground, YPG fighters from Afrin were in control. The bombing caused people to flee, and there was war in the area.”

Back in 2016, Tal Rifaat was controlled by the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Christopher Reuter, a German journalist from Der Spiegel, reported that in the beginning there was coordination between the FSA and YPG until the latter captured Tal Rifaat, with Russian air support, causing their relations to deteriorate drastically. Reports that emerged from the city in early 2016 depicted the YPG no better than the Assad regime at the time, with myriad reports of looting and murdered civilians.

Bachir Aleito Abu al-Kheir, head of the Tal Rifaat political office, told al-Monitor in 2019 that over [100,000 people had been displaced](https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/11/displaced-tell-rifaat-protest-against-turkey-russia-deal-oct.html%2523ixzz72bbgdlrp) (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/11/displaced-tell-rifaat-protest-against-turkey-russia-deal-oct.html>) from the area. These Arabs were mainly in the Azaz region, in the town, or in makeshift camps (called the ‘People of Tal Rifaat’ camps) in the village of Sijjo, near the Turkish border. They have been there for over six years now.

The story of Manbij is a bit different. The largest influx of refugees from Manbij to Turkey and Europe occurred in 2014 when ISIS took over the city. When the YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) liberated the city from the eastern-moving ISIS forces and captured it, another wave of refugees occurred. 400-500 families from the city and 1000-1500 families from the surrounding villages are still in neighboring areas while much larger numbers fled to Turkey and Europe. The biggest problem is SDF's military service for young men, especially outside the city, according to Jasem Al-Sayyid, a journalist who fled Manbij in 2014 and now lives in Azaz. “Now a group arrives every day in the SNA area, afraid of conscription by SDF and especially of the regime's conscription, for fear that SDF would hand over Manbij to the regime,” he says.

According to Abdelaziz Tammo, the chairman of the Association of Independent Syrian Kurds (KKS), “the percentage of Kurds in Manbij is between 1 – 3%, not more than 3%.” In the beginning of 2018, before and during the Turkish/SNA military operation, Kurds fled en masse from Afrin. [An estimated 151,000 had fled](https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-factsheet-january-november-2018) (<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-factsheet-january-november-2018>), according to the UN in 2018. They fled mostly to Tal Rifaat and the so-called Shahba area, the villages around Tal Rifaat. [According to the KKS](https://twitter.com/kombendakurd?t=qZSCL9k0wHqyflb7q1900A&s=08) (<https://twitter.com/kombendakurd?t=qZSCL9k0wHqyflb7q1900A&s=08>), more than half of the Kurds who had fled from Afrin to Tal Rifaat, Aleppo, Duhok, and Erbil in 2018 have returned to Afrin and most of them did so within four months of fleeing.

That does not mean that all is well, of course. “It depends from brigade to brigade; in some areas it is good, in other areas it is average, and in some areas, it is still bad,” a KKS-member told the author in Afrin. “The ones who fled together with the YPG to the Shahba region have to pay a bribe now to be able to return, as the Democratic Union Party (PYD) does not let them. Of course, the bad behavior of some SNA groups isn't encouraging either, but the situation has improved from the chaos in 2018, since the local Kurdish councils have been installed here.”

“From the moment that talk of an impending military operation started, Kurdish families came back whether it was from Shahba or Aleppo. The numbers aren't huge, but families come back every day. And the good thing is that there is alignment; even the SNA supports this return,” the head of the KKS and a member of the local council in Afrin, Azad Osman, told the author. “They come through different places, according to the smugglers, but especially where Failaq al-Sham or Levant Front is present. So in general there is coordination, and they want people to return.” Notably, the SNA Levant Front also has Kurds in its ranks.

Providing the context of Tal Rifaat is neither meant to justify nor diminish the looting and displacement in Afrin.

Rather, it helps explain why many fighters from Tal Rifaat and the surrounding area were willing to fight under the Turkish banner; many were fighting for the return of their town. However, after the takeover of Afrin, the Russians went to Tal Rifaat and provided a safe haven to the remaining YPG people.

Last October, while waiting on the frontline with the SDF and regime forces near the village of Kafr Khashir, just two miles south of Azaz, the author conducted interviews with rebels (Levant Front) that were present there. Four out of the five who were on this post were from Tal Rifaat or some nearby village. All of them wanted to go back home. They could see their respective villages—as from there one could see the area below, including the villages of Ayn Daqna, Maaranaz, Menagh, Menagh Military Airbase, and beyond—but they could not return.

Currently, around 90% of the former inhabitants of Tal Rifaat and the more than 40 villages around Tal Rifaat that fell under SDF control in 2016 are IDPs. Azaz now hosts more than 250,000 Syrians, according to estimates of the Independent Doctors Association (IDA) and the UN Office for the Coordination of Human Affairs (OCHA), and 80% of those are IDPs. Around the city there are IDP camps, both makeshift camps and ones with facilities. Other towns in the Turkish/SNA-held areas are more or less in the same situation. Koran Ahmad, chairman of Syrian NGO Bahar, told me that, “95% of the population of Tal Rifaat fled due to the military operation and only a few families could return.” He said that some IDPs from Tal Rifaat are present in Afrin.

These people—who are either in camps, Azaz, or somewhere else in the area, and also in Turkey—just want to return to their areas, according to Abdel Qader Osman who is the director of the media center in Azaz. Moreover, he also mentioned that the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) opened a front only three kilometers south of Azaz in the village of Maaranaz which it uses for shelling the people of Azaz.

It is these two towns, Tal Rifaat and Manbij, that are the focus of the military operation announced by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on June 1. Likewise, one Syrian political opposition official told the author that “a Turkish military operation will be small and only for Tal Rifaat.” Recently, regime flags and posters of Bashar al-Assad have been raised in Tal Rifaat, and an Iranian flag has been raised on a communication tower. According to the local media, Iranian militias from Shia pockets, Nubl and Zahraa (south of Tal Rifaat) have spread to the frontlines with SNA rebels Regime troops also spread

(https://twitter.com/syr_television/status/1549140704869265408?t=iXj3G6dmCGdgeAQJvZxmlA&s=19) to the frontlines near Manbij.

Because of this history, and these conditions, the IDPs of Tal Rifaat, the surrounding areas, and beyond are supportive of a Turkish military operation. Even in other Arab-majority towns in the northern Aleppo province, where inhabitants face attacks (<https://youtu.be/g8jMT8BgkIQ>) from the SDF in areas like al-Bab

(<https://www.almodon.com//arabworld/2022/2/15/%D8%AD%D9%84%D8%A8-%D9%82%D8%AA%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%AE%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%AA-%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%8A%D8%AF%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%B7%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%82%D8%B3%D8%AF>), Marea (<https://twitter.com/OrientNews/status/1555204597974810624>), and even in Deraa, southern Syria (<https://aawsat.com/home/article/3811281/%D9%82%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B9-%D9%84%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A9-%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A7>), demonstrations welcoming a new Turkish/SNA military operation have occurred.

It's not a surprise that Syrian IDPs, displaced from their homes, would welcome 'the liberation' of their towns and villages. With dwindling western aid and the sword of Damocles—Russian veto of the UN aid to these areas—above their heads, these people, often farmers without another profession and depending on aid, only want to return to their homes. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[How Turkey Views Russian Naval Access to the Black Sea](#)

Sep 2, 2022



Soner Cagaptay

[\(/policy-analysis/how-turkey-views-russian-naval-access-black-sea\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Consequences of Turkey's Shifting Position on the Syrian Crisis](#)

Sep 2, 2022



Salahuddin Hawa

[\(/policy-analysis/consequences-turkeys-shifting-position-syrian-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Responding to the PA's Mounting Fiscal Crisis](#)

Sep 1, 2022



Jonah Shrock,
Gabriel Epstein,
David Makovsky

(/policy-analysis/responding-pas-mounting-fiscal-crisis)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Syria (/policy-
analysis/syria)

Turkey (/policy-
analysis/turkey)