

IDP Housing Complexes in North-Western Syria: Actors, Processes and Consequences

Bana Bitar

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IDP Housing Complexes in North-Western Syria: Actors, Processes and Consequences

Bana Bitar*

* Bana Bitar is a Syrian researcher for the Syria Initiative at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. Her research interests include ethnic and political violence, urban politics and internal displacement, and civil-military relations, with a primary focus on Syria.

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Executive Summary

Camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) are temporary solutions and their inhabitants depend on external assistance to survive. Transitioning to more permanent housing solutions has the potential to upgrade IDPs' living standards, ease their access to job markets and decrease their dependence on aid.

In rebel-held parts of northern Aleppo and Idlib governorates, the cessation of massive aerial bombing campaigns, a continual influx of IDPs into the region, harsh climate conditions during the rainy and dry seasons and the relatively secure environment since 2020 have boosted the construction and delivery of new housing units. Under the supervision of Turkish authorities, Syrian, Turkish and Arab organisations have accelerated the construction of IDP housing projects. These projects aim to transform the existing camps into sustainable shelters and accommodate the potential return of refugees to the area.

Nearly two-thirds of the new housing projects are built in new locations but they remain isolated and primarily reserved for IDPs displaced by the war from de-escalation areas. Due to weaknesses in their design and planning and insufficient resources, the IDPs in these 'gated' communities are neither integrated with their host society nor capable of living autonomously.

Donors, implementers and regulators are the three main types of actors in the IDP housing sector. The donors are mainly Arab state actors, associated NGOs and individuals, and members of the Syrian diaspora. Syrian organisations are the main contractors. They raise funds, construct and manage the new housing complexes, or implement foreign Arab organisations' projects. Turkish entities are also heavily involved in implementation, but their interventions are mostly felt in regulating the sector.

An early assessment of the ongoing housing projects shows only partial success in upgrading shelter quality but no real effect on the livelihoods of IDPs. IDP housing complexes impact northern Aleppo's environment and demographic composition. With an absence of official state institutions and functions, ownership of the new housing units is a subject of legal concern, as both organisations and beneficiaries are liable for potential violations of housing, land and property (HLP) rights.

Introduction

Camps for internally displaced persons (IDP) are the most evident form of transitional housing in Syria. Despite the relatively small size of the rebel-held areas in Idlib and northern Aleppo governorates, they host a third of the overall IDP population in Syria – approximately 2.1 of 6.9 million IDPs, 1.5 million of whom reside in camps.¹ This has spurred several NGOs to provide shelter and promote the construction of affordable housing units. Since 2015, Syrian NGOs have launched dozens of cheap IDP housing projects near Idlib, Azaz, Afrin and Jarablus. The cessation of massive aerial bombing campaigns, a continual influx of IDPs into the region, harsh climate conditions during the rainy and dry seasons and the relatively secure environment prevailing since 2020 have accelerated the construction and delivery of new housing units.

NGOs became even more active after Turkey announced in 2022 that it would return a million refugees to Syria by the end of the year,² which created more urgency in building quick and affordable housing units in the region, and most importantly in inviting Turkish state institutions and organisations to be active in the sector. Whether the main objective behind the implementation of new housing plans is to improve people's living conditions, accelerate the execution of Turkey's plans or make a financial profit by building and selling properties on the market, new housing complexes have sprouted up in northern Syria, but in a total absence of strategic urban planning.

A considerable body of studies have investigated the evolution of refugee camps, their integration with host communities and their impacts on the local ecosystem and environment.³ Despite apparent similarities, IDP settlements in conflict settings face different challenges, most importantly an absence of a central accountable and capable authority responsible for the welfare and rehabilitation of their residents. Several reports have investigated the legal aspects of IDP housing complexes in northern Syria,⁴ yet the socio-economic evolution of this phenomenon has been overlooked, even though the Syrian Aid Coordination Unit has recently started doing field surveys on this issue.

This study fills this gap by shedding light on the phenomenon of IDP housing complexes in rebel-held areas in northern Syria. The study attempts to assess the lasting effects of IDP housing projects in rebel-held parts of northern Aleppo and Idlib governorates. Drawing on 29 interviews with NGO executives, local council administrators and contractors, the study has the following main aims. First, it attempts to define the phenomenon and investigates whether it is an evolution of IDP sheltering or a large demographic resettlement scheme. Second, it maps the actors involved in housing projects, namely donors, regulators and implementers. Finally, it investigates the legal, demographic and ecological impacts these housing complexes have on the host communities.⁵

1 According to the UNHCR, more than 6.8 million Syrians have been forced to flee their country since 2011 and another 6.9 million people remain internally displaced. See UNHCR, "Syria Refugee Crisis Explained," 8 July 2022, <https://bit.ly/3xcZnsa>; Statistics gathered by the Syrian Response Team reported by Mohamad Waleed Jabas in "Statement by the 'Syria Response Coordinators' Summarizing the Humanitarian Situation in Northern Syria," (in Arabic), *Baladi Media Network*, 31 December 2021, <https://bit.ly/3gteV6L>

2 Ben Hubbard and Elif Ince, "Turkey's Plan to Draw Refugees Back to Syria: Homes for One Million," *The New York Times*, 4 May 2022, <https://nyti.ms/3Dk00Ty>

3 Ayham Dallal, "A Socio-Economic Perspective on the Urbanisation of Zaatari Camp in Jordan." *Migration Letters*, Volume 12, No. 3, 2015, 263-278, <https://bit.ly/3uCuBIU>; Kamel Doraï, "From Camps to Cities? Forced Migration and the Urbanization in the Middle East.. Seminar Internationalizing cities: 'The City and its Migrants,'" (paper presented at LATTs, Université Paris-est, PUCA, March 2017, Paris, France), <https://bit.ly/3Ya6RZT>; Lucas Oesch, "The Refugee Camp as a Space of Multiple Ambiguities and Subjectivities." *Political Geography*, Volume 60, 2017, 110-120, <https://bit.ly/3uGCM6E>

4 Thomas McGee, "'Nothing Is Ours Anymore' – HLP Rights Violations in Afrin, Syria" in *Reclaiming Home: The struggle for Socially Just Housing, Land and Property Rights in Syria, Iraq and Libya*, Hannes Baumann (ed.), (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2019), <https://bit.ly/3VJsU8I>; Anthony Avicé Du Buisson, "A Blood-Soaked Olive: The Situation in Afrin Today," *Green Left Weekly*, No.1201, 2018, 23-24

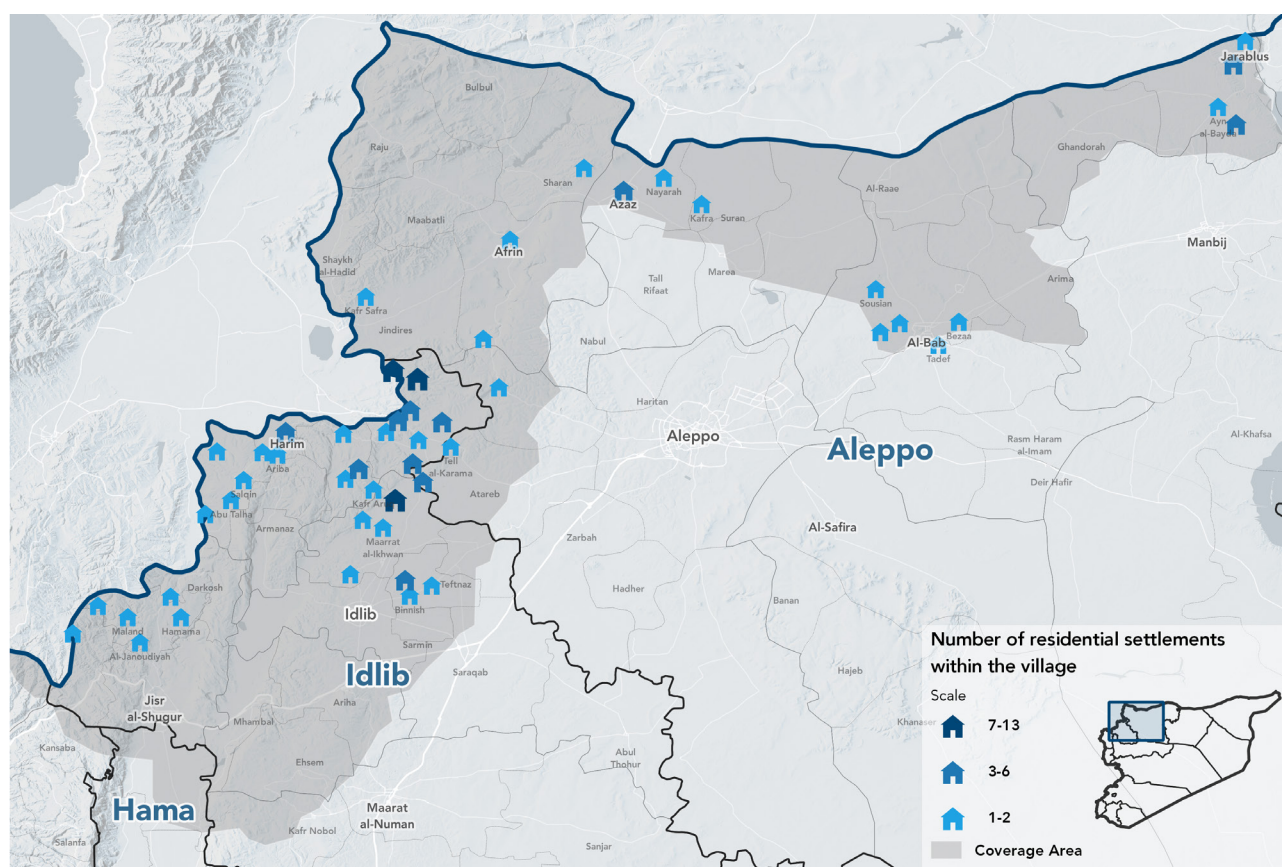
5 The study does not investigate construction activities financed by remittances or with investment capital.

1. The Location and Evolution of Infrastructure

The long period that IDPs have been resident in northern Syria, the unlikelihood of an imminent return to their hometowns and signs of donor fatigue are core factors that make sustainable solutions to lessen their dependence on foreign aid more pressing. The temporary nature of camps means that IDPs lack sufficient financial and political support to thrive. In theory, resettling IDPs in sustainable housing and communities is the first step to economically empowering them and a prerequisite for financial independence and autonomy.

According to the latest Aid Coordination Unit report, 30% of IDP housing projects are built on the sites of pre-existing camps.⁶ Organisations are building housing complexes and settlements in nearby locations instead of constructing new housing units within the administrative borders of towns. The locations of IDP housing projects demonstrate this tendency. They are mainly focused in north-eastern Idlib near Bab al-Hawa, where the majority of IDP camps are concentrated, and then to a much lesser degree in Azaz, Jarablus, al-Bab and Afrin (see Map 1).⁷

Map 1: Locations of Housing Units in North-Western Syria



Source: IMU. Visual produced by Ayoub Lahouioui.

There are several reasons why organisations choose to distance their construction projects from existing urban communities. First, the cost of building new housing units in towns is considerably higher as land is more expensive⁸ and significantly fewer large land parcels are available.⁹ The basic aim of these projects is to attract donations from Syrians living abroad by minimising the cost of housing

⁶ IMU, "Housing Complexes in North-Western Syria Edition 01," 3.

⁷ See Annex B for a list of Housing Projects.

⁸ The cost per square meter of land in towns averages between USD 40 and 50, whereas it is between USD 10 and 20 outside towns.

⁹ This considerably increases the cost of constructing a unit. When a larger parcel of land is available, hiring and using construction machinery are cheaper and more optimised.

units and hence maximising the number of beneficiaries per project.¹⁰ Second, in cooperation with the relevant Turkish authorities, local councils encourage organisations to build their complexes on state-owned land for free as long the ownership of the land remains public. This preference for construction on state-owned land is partially so local authorities can maintain more legal control over the complexes and also to prevent agricultural land being transformed into housing. Public land in northern Aleppo and Idlib is primarily in remote locations and on high ground. Third, depending on the cultural and social background of the beneficiaries, some IDPs prefer to live on land that they can partially cultivate or where they can raise small livestock. This is precisely the case of Arab tribesmen from northern Hama, southern and eastern Idlib, and eastern Syria. Their numbers are not more significant in comparison with other areas but they form the backbone of Syrian National Army (SNA) factions.¹¹ Fourth, many of these projects target existing camps, and organisations choose to relocate their inhabitants to nearby locations or upgrade their current housing units.

Despite the physical proximity between most IDP housing complexes and towns, the complexes' inhabitants are effectively isolated from their larger host communities. This social isolation is a product of complex dynamics including pre-existing exclusive behaviour observed in host communities and also the scarce economic opportunities available in the region. As a result, humanitarian actors remain obliged to maintain their engagement with this population by providing food baskets, healthcare and education. When IDPs seek these services outside their communities, they often meet discrimination.¹²

Due to weaknesses in the design and planning of housing projects and insufficient resources, the IDP population in 'gated' communities is neither integrated with the host society nor capable of living autonomously. The transformation of IDP camps mainly leads to upgrading their inhabitants' living conditions but produces no considerable change in their livelihoods or the services they previously received in their primitive tent camps. Not enough effort has been made to enhance social harmony between IDPs and host communities or to make IDP families and individuals financially independent.

There are four types of IDP shelters: tents, caravans, prefabricated units and brick houses. In IDP camps in north-western Syria tents are usually provided during emergency phases before they are upgraded during the post-emergency phase, when additional funds are allocated. Since none of the four types fully satisfy the needs of IDPs, constructing more permanent housing solutions becomes crucial. As the communities seek to upgrade their living conditions, they move as a single block, either by benefiting from the same assistance provided by external donors or by transferring into new housing complexes reserved for them. In this regard, interventions by humanitarian actors in the housing sector are better described as transformations of IDP shelters rather than a large-scale resettlement scheme.

Two earlier forms of transformation can be observed in the lifetime of an IDP camp in north-western Syria. The first is upgrading shelter units in terms of their capacity and construction material. Initially, each family is granted a simple unit of 26 sqm. More space is slowly added by providing extensions or allowing families to form larger clusters. The second form of camp transformation is the introduction of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities and other vital services. Initially, international donors provided funds for the construction of public WASH services. However, the IDPs preferred to replace them with private bathrooms and kitchens inside their units, which caused considerable sanitation problems due to a lack of suitable infrastructure. This led to a second phase of NGO interventions creating more sustainable infrastructure, including the construction of roads, sewage systems, cesspits and soak pits, shared and individual water tanks, and terraces to raise shelter units above ground level.

10 The Molham Volunteering Team promoted their first project, 'Molham Village,' as providing cheap housing units for IDP families for only USD 500.

11 The Turkish authorities have encouraged the construction of housing projects for these fighters and their families.

12 IDP school students are often bullied by the children of local communities and are regularly discriminated against by the teaching staff. Interview with a worker in an education NGO, 1 July 2022, Gazi Antep.

A potential third form of evolution is the development of production and commercial activities in these complexes, but this path remains unexplored. Indeed, 15% of IDP housing complexes have designated marketplaces and 61% have small shops, but no notable development of workshops or small and micro businesses has been reported.¹³ Establishing informal markets could create thousands of job opportunities and generate substantial revenue, which would provide a source of income for many IDP families in the complexes. Instead, male inhabitants seek job opportunities in nearby towns and primarily work in day jobs with low and interrupted compensation. Female employment rates in the area are relatively low due to cultural reasons, and they are considerably lower among the IDP population because of the lack of public transport and the associated physical risk involved in travelling between cities and nearby camps.

2. Mapping Actors and Unpacking Processes

The first reported housing project was initiated by Ataa Relief in summer 2015 near Atmeh town in northern Idlib governorate,¹⁴ but cheap housing construction projects began to rapidly sprout up in 2020. This was mainly due to the relative de-escalation, the cessation of massive aerial bombing campaigns and perceptions of a safe zone created in northern Syria following the Turkish-Russian security arrangement reached in Astana between December 2016 and March 2020. This paved the way for a multitude of actors to engage in new housing construction projects under the watchful eyes of Turkey, which remains responsible for authorising construction, channelling funds, approving project locations and even vetting potential IDP beneficiaries. While the relationships between the actors involved in IDP housing projects is difficult to illustrate, especially since their roles overlap and the boundaries of their responsibilities are fluid and blurry, one can still broadly categorise them as donors, regulators and implementers.

1.2. Donors: State and Non-State Actors

Donors can be sub-categorised as state actors and their affiliated organisations, and individual donors in the diaspora. To date, the biggest donors to housing projects in northern Syria are Kuwaitis, Palestinians and Qataris.¹⁵ While Qatari funds are effectively provided by the state and channelled through charities, Kuwaiti funds are a mix of state and private contributions.¹⁶ The involvement of these donors can be viewed as part of their broader humanitarian interventions in northern Syria, which are essentially facilitated and encouraged by their governments' good entente with Ankara.¹⁷

In contrast, Saudi organisations and individuals only participated in a limited way in early housing projects after 2017 due to Riyadh's crackdown on informal charity networks at home and the political tension between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Turkey between 2017 and 2022. Only one Saudi relief organisation was involved in the construction of villages.¹⁸ However, since the recent détente

13 IMU, "Housing Complexes in North-Western Syria Edition 01," 19-20.

14 Muhammad Ameen, "Muhammad Ameen on Instagram: 'Who Does not Thank God. Who Does not Thank People – Ataa Residential Village – North Idlib,'" *Instagram*, 19 September 2015, <https://bit.ly/3EL5w4D>

15 See Appendix A for a list of NGOs operating in the sector. Turkish NGOs are also active, but their funds are mainly provided by Qatari and Kuwaiti donations. Interview with an NGO shelter project worker in Azaz, 12 April 2022.

16 On 12 December 2022, the Kuwaiti government issued a decree to cease all donations for new housing projects in northern Syria. The reason behind this decision are not clear. Georges Atef, "Cease of Charitable Construction Projects Inside Syria," (In Arabic), *Jarideh*, 12 December 2022, <https://bit.ly/3h1Bawk>.

17 It is widely believed that their continual engagement with the Syrian population in opposition-held areas is not only motivated by their governments' hostile relations with Damascus, especially since Kuwait appears to take a more conciliatory stance. Their intervention seems to subscribe to a wider regional alignment with Turkey and the latter's need for its allies to assist it in managing the humanitarian crisis on its borders.

18 Hamad al-Ammar Saudi Foundation was the primary donor for the first villages constructed by Ataa Relief in Atmeh. See Appendix B for more details on the complex.

between Riyad and Abu Dhabi and Ankara, the chairmen of Turkey-based Syrian NGOs are hopeful of a renewal of Saudi and Emirati participation in relief and IDP shelter programmes in northern Syria, while Turkish officials seem less optimistic about this prospect. So far, no recent revivals of Saudi and Emirati contributions to relief programmes have been reported in northern Syria.

Turkey, for its part, has effectively pushed active Turkish humanitarian actors to increase their involvement in the housing sector in northern Syria, especially after shifts in Turkey's refugee policy. Under the auspices of the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (*Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı* (AFAD)), Turkish NGOs have enhanced their efforts to incentivise Syrian IDPs to remain in the area and refugees to return.¹⁹ Although there are no accessible public data on their sources of funding, and while many have sought to collect private donations through publicity campaigns, it is widely believed that their primary source of funding is provided by Qatari and Kuwaiti state institutions and NGOs, as they often operate in partnerships.²⁰

The Syrian diaspora and Arab individuals are another sub-category of donors. Actors in this category are primarily driven by requests from IDPs and are encouraged by the perceived high impact of their modest donations. Several NGOs have recognised the importance of diaspora and private individuals and have launched large-scale micro-financing campaigns with 'shares' as low as USD 100 in the total cost of USD 500 to build a single housing unit.²¹ This fund-raising tactic is increasingly being adopted by both Syrian and non-Syrian organisations since it grants them a margin of freedom to realise their visions and projects without the conditions imposed by state donors.²² In addition, small-scale initiatives have been observed, such as social housing collaboratives with mixed social investment and donations.²³

2.2. Regulators: Local Authorities and Turkish Agencies

In rebel-held northern Syria, opposition administrative structures have assumed the responsibility of overseeing the implementation of housing projects. There is, however, a spatial variation in the process, actors and modes of Turkish involvement. In northern Aleppo, local councils and AFAD oversee housing project construction, with no clear role for the Syrian Interim Government (SIG). In practice, an NGO submits a proposed plan to a local council, which in turn invites an AFAD official to validate the process. The process is a formality in cases in which the new housing projects are to be built on private land. In cases in which an organisation requests public land to be allocated by the local council, a delegate from the Turkish official supervising the administrative unit chooses the construction lot. Once the necessary permits are issued, local councils become solely responsible for monitoring the progress of the project and imposing building codes on the contractors. The exact process is only loosely applied to Turkish organisations, and Syrian local council participation is only a formality.

In rebel-held parts of Idlib, the Ministry of Local Administration and Public Services of the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) has developed urban planning in several cities in the territory it controls.²⁴ Its mandate covers issuing the necessary construction authorisations, enforcing building codes,

19 See Appendix A for a list of NGOs operating in the housing sector in northern Syria.

20 See Appendix B.

21 The Molham Volunteering Team is a prime example. On the basis of social media campaigns and easy financing models, the organisation has constructed a wide network of small and micro Syrian donors and backers. Its founder, Atef Na'anou', has recently announced that the Team has reached USD 45 million in donations for all its humanitarian programmes since the establishment of the NGO in 2012.

22 See Appendix A for a list of NGOs operating in the housing sector in northern Syria. The Syrian American community has also on several occasions independently raised a budget specifically to finance the construction of housing complexes and then contracted construction companies in northern Syria to execute the projects. Interview with the Head of Shelter Programme in Northern Aleppo Ihsan Branch, 13 April 2022, Azaz.

23 Sakan Housing Communities, founded in the UK by Syrian Architects, is a notable example. See <https://bit.ly/3iJlCmc>

24 Salvation Government, "The Ministry of Local Administration Launches the New Urban Plan for the City of Sarmada," (in Arabic), 11 September 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Vz7zP2>

approving construction plans and overseeing service provision for the new complexes.²⁵ Additionally, the Ministry of Development and Humanitarian Affairs vets the beneficiaries and performs regular monitoring and evaluation of the execution of projects.²⁶ Unlike northern Aleppo, the supervisory role of Turkish authorities in Idlib is less apparent. However, in coordination with AFAD and the Turkish Red Crescent (*Türk Kızılay* – TZ), Turkish organisations operate freely with no restrictions and enjoy an SSG laissez-faire policy implicitly reserved for them.

The models of Turkish NGO intervention vary significantly. While some NGOs are involved in construction, others only intervene in managing projects, sub-contracting local companies or NGOs, or procuring building materials such as cement, pipes, interlock bricks and steel for projects. The most significant contribution of Turkish NGOs, however, remains identification of beneficiaries and the vetting process before IDPs move into newly built complexes.

2.3. Implementers: Supervisors and Constructors

Given the social capital IDP housing projects provide their sponsors with, whether among the communities of beneficiaries or the Syrian diaspora and donor community, many Syrian humanitarian actors are tempted to participate. However, the way they participate is mainly dependent on the volume of their funding and its sources. In other words, NGOs that enjoy access to private donations or funding from Arab Gulf states generally finance, execute and manage their independent projects. Others primarily partner with UN agencies, either participating as sub-contractors or financing and conducting WASH, education and power projects inside housing complexes.

Organisations engaged in the housing sector can be divided into developers and contractors. Developer organisations are typically the supervisors of projects. They have the task of hiring several other construction companies and ensuring they get paid. On the other hand, contractors are the boots on the ground. They oversee every aspect of housing projects, including design, accounting, staffing with project managers, hiring subcontractors and managing compounds after delivery. This categorisation relates to the size of the organisation and its financial capacity.

Developers are limited to finding funds, choosing the land where the project will be implemented, proposing a design and blueprint with an internal or external engineer consulting, and then announcing the tender for the project. During implementation, their role is limited to monitoring the work done by the constructor and ensuring the requirements are met. Once the construction process is over, developers allocate the new housing units to beneficiaries. This is precisely the case of the Turkish Humanitarian Relief Foundation (*İnsani Yardım Vakfı* – IHH), which mainly operates by contracting local subcontractors and NGOs. The same tendency applies to Kuwaiti, Palestinian and Qatari organisations.

Contractors have larger shelter-dedicated teams, including engineers, supervisors, workers, electricians and plumbers, most of whom are IDPs. The organisations lead in designing projects, meeting donor requirements, choosing the land and constructing the units. Additionally, the shelter team is responsible for purchasing building materials and testing construction samples. Some contractor organisations also have a fund-raising capacity, which allows them to take credit for the delivery of housing units, which is crucial for them to maintain their social credibility and upgrade their credentials vis-à-vis donors. Indeed, the majority of Syrian NGOs operate as contractors as they are slowly shifting their dependence for funding on international Western funds to Arab and Syrian individual donors. This is the case of the Molham Volunteering Team, Ataa, al-Bonian and Ihsan for Relief and Development.

25 Personal interview with the owner of a construction company in Kafar Takharim town in Idlib governorate, 19 September 2022.

26 Skype interview with an administrator in the Turkish IDDEF Organisation, 30 August 2022.

Until very recently, implementers were granted much room for manoeuvre in the execution of projects as long as they met the target in terms of the number of units. Only loose criteria related to the size of units and construction material were imposed, privileging quantity over quality. To make the most of the budget allocated, many economies were made in the quality of the units delivered. Additionally, the lack of control and the emphasis on quick delivery created a propitious environment for local sub-contractors to cheat, especially in the composition of concrete and cement.

Indeed, the lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and the scarcity of testing labs meant donors and developers could not ensure minimum safety and building code requirements. Increasingly, donors are imposing criteria and designs on developer and contractor organisations. Moreover, AFAD is conducting more regular inspection visits to monitor execution and code violations. Nevertheless, local councils remain powerless and unable to enforce their regulations. In cases in which they have intervened to halt faulty execution, local administrations have faced backlashes from the beneficiaries protesting against delays in the delivery of their promised houses.

Besides these concerns and challenges, most organisations are only able to raise funds for the construction of housing units but fall short of financing the underlying infrastructure, including WASH facilities and electricity, and also sustaining the inhabitants' livelihoods after delivery. In this regard, AFAD provides essential coordination between all the humanitarian organisations to provide the missing services. To end these practices, authorisations to build new housing projects now include plans and the necessary infrastructure for building a market, a mosque, a school, a civil defence station and a medical clinic, depending on the capacity of the complex.

3. The Invisible and Evident Consequences

Despite their temporary nature, settlements have the potential to irreversibly transform urban landscapes and have long-lasting legal, demographic and ecological impacts on the host communities in northern Syria.

3.1. Legal Implications

Housing complexes are built mostly on state-owned and private agricultural land and only a few on forested and tree-planted lands. Local councils in northern Aleppo and the SSG in Idlib give no property deeds for units built on state-owned land. Instead, they provide organisations or the inhabitants of complexes with one of two contracts, an allocation contract called *Takhssiss* or a usufruct contract for a pre-determined period, both of which accord a temporary legal right to live in the property yet prohibit its transfer to a third party and its use for commercial ends.²⁷ The ownership of housing units in the case of a political resolution of the Syrian conflict is a potential point of contention for their inhabitants, who could face forceful evacuation or being fined by the Syrian authorities.

By contrast, projects built on private land face a different set of legal complications. While only a few organisations transfer the ownership of housing units to their inhabitants,²⁸ the vast majority offer either a time-bounded usufruct or rental contract while the building organisation maintains ownership of the land. Some organisations register purchased lands as public endowments, but since public accountability is absent, transparency is rarely observed and the risk of corruption is considerably high. Nevertheless, NGOs active in the sector are increasingly favouring this model to circumvent possible legal liability in the future.

²⁷ According to an Aid Coordination Information Management Unit report, nearly half of the housing complexes and IDP camps are built on state-owned land. See IMU, "Housing Complexes in North-Western Syria," 42.

²⁸ IMU, "Housing Complexes in North-Western Syria," 43. Note that 16% of the inhabitants of housing complexes have ownership papers (sale and purchase contracts) registered with the local authorities.

3.2. Demographic Consequences

When warning of systematic demographic change in Afrin, Kurdish human rights organisations often cite IDP housing projects as evidence.²⁹ Four projects in Afrin, near Kerzayhel, Ghazzawiya, Jindires and Kafar Safra with an approximate population of 600 families have been identified.³⁰ Unlike the Idlib and Euphrates Shield areas, Syrian-run NGOs generally avoid playing an implicit role in housing projects in Kurdish areas. In the interviews, executives often mentioned a fear of being labelled actors of demographic change, their exclusion from international funds and their sensitivity to the injustice (*haram*) imposed on Kurds.³¹ On the other hand, foreign donors, mainly Palestinians, Kuwaitis and Islamic relief organisations, have not shunned from financing these projects. As for Turkish organisations, only the IHH has operated in Afrin, but indirectly by offering free building materials for individuals who present a construction license provided by a local council.³²

The inhabitants of the complexes are IDP arrivals from other regions, especially from other de-escalation zones where reconciliation agreements have led to the population being evacuated to northern Syria, together with the families of Turkish-backed SNA militants. If the construction of new housing complexes has not considerably amplified the ongoing demographic re-engineering of historical Kurdish communities, the settlement of SNA fighters, especially in northern Aleppo, is quite alarming. In addition to fully or partially SNA-financed projects intended to benefit their fighters,³³ there have been cases in which the leaders of factions have demanded a share of the allocation lots from local councils they control.³⁴ In other cases, they have exploited their relationship with Turkish authorities or organisations to settle individuals and families loyal to them in complexes. The predicament caused by the settlement of armed factions among civilians is the risk of violence civilians could endure either directly at the hands of the militants or caused by their foes targeting them. For instance, the Kuwait al-Rahma complex in Afrin was shelled on multiple occasions by PYD militants stationed in Tall Rifaat.³⁵

3.3. Ecological Impacts

The most sustainable damage that cheap IDP housing projects could inflict on local communities is potentially on the environment. There are three apparent effects: water scarcity, food insecurity and deforestation. Construction requires much water. Adding this to the inhabitants' daily drinking and sanitation needs, this creates a compound effect in a water-stressed region. Projects near Azaz, Jarablus and Afrin theoretically have access to nearby surface water. However, people rely on groundwater due to the poor water distribution infrastructure. In areas near al-Bab and Idlib, the local population has to dig wells as deep as 300 meters to extract the water they need. Moreover, the widespread use of cesspits and soak pits also threatens water reserves and contaminates soil as they are not equipped with layers of stones and sand to filter the wastewater.

29 Syrians for Truth and Justice, "Housing Settlements in Afrin: Demographic Engineering or IDP Housing Projects?" 8 June 2022, <https://bit.ly/3s5AIE1>; John Ahmad, "Turkey Builds New Palestinian-Funded Settlement in Syria's Afrin," *North Press Agency*, 2 September 2022, <https://bit.ly/3CltsD3>

30 See Appendix B for a list of housing projects in northern Aleppo.

31 Interview with a Shelter Program Director of a Syrian NGO operating in Idlib, 30 August 2022, Jindires.

32 IHH offers up to USD 2,000 worth of bricks and cement per family. Interview with a worker for a Syrian NGO operating in Jindires, 30 August 2022.

33 This is specifically the cases of Eastern Ghouta factions, Jaysh al-Islam and al-Rahman Corps. Interview with a contractor from Douma, 28 September 2022, al-Bab.

34 Interview with an administrator for Afrin local council, Afrin, 22 April 2022.

35 Abdullah Basheer, "Residents of the 'Kuwait Rahma' Camp in Northern Syria Fear Repeated Bombing," (in Arabic), *al-Araby*, 3 October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3VAuoCc>

As for the impact on food security, the most evident effect is the transformation of agricultural land into housing complexes. The ever-decreasing revenue from farming and the continual rises in the cost of production due to the loss of state subsidies, deconstruction and disconnection from traditional consumer markets have forced landowners to sell their lands or lease them to cut their losses and generate more revenue. Moreover, the main typology of houses constructed is single-story units, creating a horizontal stretch and taking up a larger surface area, thus causing uprooting of a substantial number of olive and pistachio trees. The increasing number of inhabitants and decreasing agricultural output deepen the region's dependence on foreign aid and assistance.

Similarly, the inadequate quality of the housing units constructed and the unavailability and prohibitive cost of heating fuel are causing significant deforestation in the area. Hundreds of hectares of forests in Afrin and Idlib are being cut down each winter, feeding a vicious cycle and causing irreversible environmental damage. Recent satellite pictures of Maydanki Lake near Afrin show a devastating loss of green areas, accelerating the process of ecological degradation.³⁶

Conclusion

Providing more sustainable and dignified housing solutions for IDPs, some of the most vulnerable victims of the conflict, is a valiant effort. Beneficiaries are initially grateful for these more permanent solutions when they arrive but are quickly brought back to the harsh reality of a lack of opportunities and continual dependence on external assistance. Organisations intervening in this sector have so far not planned beyond the immediate need to provide shelter. Nevertheless, they can still create opportunities with available resources and materials if they deliver a macro-vision for these new communities. Such a vision should entail particular care for the development of livelihoods and jobs, avoiding legal liability for all the actors concerned and preserving the surrounding environment as much as possible.

With proper urban planning, authorities could even use these low-cost buildings to provide decent housing and accommodation for local communities when the IDPs eventually return to their homes, thereby ensuring the value of the investment for the country. Similarly, developing sustainable productive economic activity would empower IDPs to rediscover a sense of ownership and positively impact the overall region, thus enhancing social interaction with host communities.

Finally, keeping a watchful eye on the environment is not easy. Ecological solutions are expensive and require advanced technology and, most importantly, central administration. Even though political negotiations are stalling, there may be a chance of starting technical discussions on a nationwide or broader regional scale on topics viewed as vital for all the communities involved. The perpetuation of the misuse of natural resources only feeds the ongoing conflict and further complicates its resolution. Attempts to find reciprocal arrangements, such as electricity for water or water for food, are possible if technical aid is provided. This is an intervention area that has so far been neglected and unexplored.

36 Lyse Mauvais, "Crimes Against Nature: Forest Clearing Around Afrin's Maydanki Lake Sparks Anger and Shock," *Syria Direct*, 5 September 2022, <https://bit.ly/3EOXFD9>

Appendices

Appendix A: List of Organisations Active in IDP Housing Complexes

1. IHH and AFAD often claim ownership of projects they supervise or partially fund.
2. Many organisations do not provide public information on their source of funding.
3. Many organisations do not maintain a public profile and are mostly active on social media.

Name of Organisation	Country	Disclosed Source of Funding	Activities in Syria	Housing Areas	Units	Total Units
Al-Falah Benevolent Society	Palestine	Private Individuals	Shelter	Euphrates Shield	204	
Al-Bonian	Syrian (Turkey)	Undisclosed	Shelter, Healthcare, WASH, Education, Food Security	Euphrates Shield	1354	
Merciful Souls	Palestine	Private Individuals	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Euphrates Shield	1500	5000
The International Committee for Relief and Development (Onsur)	Arabs (Turkey)	Undisclosed	Shelter, Education, WASH, Food	Idlib, Euphrates Shield	1494	
Stand for Humanity (SKT)	UK	Private Individuals	Food, Water, Healthcare, Education, Orphan Care, Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib	1100	
Molham Volunteering Team	Syrian (Turkey, EU)	Private Individuals	Food, Water, Healthcare, Education, Orphan Care, Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib, Euphrates Shield	2100	3000
Wafaa al-Mohsenin Charity	Palestinian (Turkey)	Private Individuals	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Afrin	75	
IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation	Turkey	Private Individuals, Qatar Charity, Turkish Red Crescent	Shelter, Education, Food Security, Protection, WASH, Culture, Non-Food Aid	Idlib, Euphrates Shield	18500	25000
Qatari Red Crescent	Qatar	State	Shelter, Education, Food Security, Protection, WASH	Idlib, Euphrates Shield	5724	10000
Ataa Relief	Syrian (Turkey)	UN Agencies, Private individuals	Shelter, Education, Food Security, WASH	Idlib, Euphrates Shield	2168	6750
Qatar Charity	Qatar	State	Food, Water, Healthcare, Education, Orphan Care, Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib, Euphrates Shield	1800	
This is My Life Volunteering Team	Syrian (Turkey)	Private Individuals	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib	680	
Beyaz Eller	Turkey	Undisclosed	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Afrin	236	
Deniz Feneri	Turkey	Undisclosed	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib	1500	
Ighatha 48	Palestine	Private Individuals	Shelter	Idlib	440	1500
IDDEF	Turkey	Undisclosed	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib	610	

Sadaka Taşı	Turkey	Undisclosed	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib	250
Beşir Association	Turkey	Undisclosed	Shelter	Idlib	
Ghirass al-Nahdah		Private Individuals	Shelter, Seasonal Aid, Education, Protection	Idlib	50
SOS Volunteering Team		Private Individuals	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Afrin	
Mercy International	Kuwait	Undisclosed	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Afrin	80
Al-Rahma Cover Volunteering Team	Kuwait	Private Individuals	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib	96
Salam Foundation	Kuwait	Undisclosed	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib	96
Ahel al-Hadith	Kuwait	Kuwait	Shelter, Seasonal Aid	Idlib	
Islamic Heritage Preservation Organisation	Kuwait	Undisclosed	Shelter, Education, Food Security, Protection, WASH	Idlib	
Kuwait al-Kheir	Kuwait	Kuwait	Shelter, Education, Food Security, Protection, WASH	Idlib	100
Al-Imdaad Foundation	South Africa	South Africa		Euphrates Shield	527
Rahma International Society	Kuwait	Kuwait		Afrin	380
Aitam al-Sham for Orphans Care	Syrian (Turkey)			Euphrates Shield	270
Humanitarian Relief Committee	Syrian (Turkey)			Idlib	110
Türk Kızılay	Turkey			Idlib, Euphrates Shield	2461
Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı	Turkey			Idlib, Euphrates Shield	710

Appendix B: Housing Complexes in Northern Syria

1. The list of complexes is not exhaustive. ACU reports that 117 housing complexes have been built since the outbreak of the conflict in Idlib and northern Aleppo.
2. Many complexes have multiple names given by the local population and organisations that participated in their construction.

Project Name	# Units	Location	Date	Organisation
Hamad al-Amar Village	100	Atmeh - Idlib	Jan.15	Ataa Relief
Ataa Housing Complex Village I	520	Atmeh - Idlib	Jun.16	Ataa Relief
Ataa Housing Complex Village II	748	Atmeh - Idlib	Jan.18	Ataa Relief
Aridiya Orphan and Widows Complex		Harem	Sep.19	Ahel al-Hadith, Islamic Heritage Preservation Organisation
Amal Village	247	Afrin	Dec.19	Ihsan
Hilal Village	116	al-Bab	Apr.20	Qatari Red Crescent
Molham Village I	342	Azaz	Apr.20	Molham Volunteering Team
Omran Village	150	al-Bab	Aug.20	Qatari Red Crescent
Al-Rahma Complex	80	Harem	Sep.20	Mercy International
Aziz Village	472	Azaz	Jan.21	Molham Volunteering Team
Ahel al-Nakhwa	120	Kafar Loussine	Mar.21	Faz'a Ahel al-Nakwa
Ataa Housing Complex	800	Jarablus	Apr.21	Ataa Relief
Awtad Molham	300	Azaz	Apr.21	Molham Volunteering Team
Al-Bonian Village	1042	Jarablus	Apr.21	Al-Bonian
Hope Village	1400	Souran	Jul.21	Qatar Charity
Kuwait al-Rahma	380	Afrin	Sep.21	Mercy International
Basma Village	236	Afrin	Oct.21	Beyaz Eller
Nasr Village	100	Jarablus	Feb.22	Qatari Red Crescent
Al-Salam Village	312	Jarablus	Feb.22	Al-Bonian
Rama Complex	50	Dana	Feb.22	Ghiras al-Nahda, Binaa
Baza'a Complex	300	al-Bab	Feb.22	AFAD
Kammouneh	1500	Sarmada	Mar.22	AFAD
Kuwait al-Kheir Village	100	Sarmada	Jun.22	Kuwait al-Kheir, Ghiras Alkheir Humanitarian
Dana Village	400	al-Dana	Jul.22	Qatar Charity
Molham Village II	500	Azaz	Aug.22	Molham Volunteering Team
Nawwaf al-kheir	200	Afrin	Oct.22	Sham al-Kheir, Mercy International

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