

Turkey's plan to draw refugees back to Syria: Homes for 1 million

BEIRUT — President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey this week announced a dramatic expansion of his country's plan to entice refugees from Syria's civil war to return to their home country by building homes for them in Syria near the Turkish border.

Speaking by video link at the inauguration of new cinder block homes in northern Syria intended for returning refugees who had been living in Turkey, Erdogan said that in addition to the tens of thousands already built, Turkey would construct enough new buildings to house 1 million more refugees.

But it is not clear that many Syrians will take him up on the offer.

The program, he said, was an extension of Turkey's initial welcome of millions of Syrians fleeing the war. Turkey is the host of more Syrian refugees, by far, than any other country.

"We didn't just open our doors to save the lives and the honor of the oppressed," Erdogan said. "But we made, and are making, every effort for them to return to their homes."

Erdogan's announcement Tuesday came amid a grave economic crisis that has hit the wallets of many Turks and fueled widespread anger toward the large number of people displaced from Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere who now live in Turkey.

As the anger has grown, Turkish social media has lit up with furious posts about foreigners flying their flags in Turkish cities, enjoying themselves while Turks struggle to make ends meet and changing the cultural fabric of Turkish communities.

"In the beginning, refugees from Syria were considered to be temporary, as guests, and Turkish citizens were in solidarity," said Murat Erdogan — no relation to the president — a fellow of the Center for Applied Turkey Studies at the German Institute for International and Security Studies, and the director of a

migration research center at Ankara University. "But I can say Turkish citizens don't want to share their future with Syrians. They are very clearly bothered and really want them to go back."

In recent years, calls to send Syrian refugees home have grown and been picked up by leaders across a growing swath of the political spectrum.

Since the civil war in Syria began in 2011, more than 5.7 million Syrians have sought refuge abroad, according to the United Nations, and about 3.7 million ended up in Turkey, whose long border with Syria for many years was easy to cross.

Turkey's economy was strong when the fighting was at its worst, the government in Ankara was sympathetic to the refugees' plight, and the European Union paid billions of dollars to Turkey to help shelter migrants, in return for President Erdogan stemming the flow of them into the bloc.

But as the war settled into a stalemate and Turkey's economy flagged, the government firmed up its southern border and launched a policy aimed at encouraging Syrians to go home.

Turkey's own interventions in the war have made it the de facto overseer of a long strip of territory inside Syria and along the Turkish border, and in recent years, Erdogan's government has fostered construction projects there aimed at providing homes for Syrian refugees in their own country.

Erdogan's announcement Tuesday provided an update on those efforts and expanded their scope. More than 57,000 out of 77,000 planned homes in Idlib province in Syria's northwest have been completed and now house 50,000 families, he said.

In the future, that number will grow to 100,000 homes, and a new project will be started, he said, to build enough homes for an additional 1 million Syrian refugees to move to other parts of northern Syria where Turkey holds sway.

In addition to homes, the project will provide schools, hospitals and "all the needs of daily life and self-sufficient economic infrastructure, from agriculture to industry," Erdogan said.

It is unclear how many refugees have returned to Syria. Turkey says 500,000 have

gone back since 2016. A spokesperson for the U.N. refugee agency said it had recorded about 130,000 voluntary returns in the same period, but that not all returns had been recorded.

Fighting in Syria has died down since 2019, but the total number of Syrian refugees abroad has not changed significantly, the U.N. figures show.

While large parts of Syria remain outside of President Bashar Assad's control, he has effectively quashed all threats to his rule and has begun restoring diplomatic ties with some of his Arab neighbors.

But years of violence and extensive sanctions on Assad's government have destroyed the economy, leaving refugees little to go home to. Many of them fear arrest by Assad's security service or simply lack the money to rebuild their lives inside the country, refugee experts say.

"Finding 1 million Syrians to voluntarily return doesn't seem very realistic at all," said Murat Erdogan, the refugee expert. "They don't see a future in Syria, the war there has become chronic, they don't trust Assad, Turkey is a better place, they set up a life here."

"Erdogan, let go of these stories. Fugitives are still flooding in from the border," Kemal Kilicdaroglu, the head of the Republican People's Party, or CHP, wrote on Twitter. "We have had enough of your lies."

Over time, rising Turkish anger at the refugees could increase the pressure on them to leave.

On Tuesday, a nine-minute video was posted on YouTube called "The Silent Occupation" that depicted a dystopian future where Istanbul is dilapidated and crime-ridden, Turks are being pushed out of their neighborhoods by Arab real estate agents and a Turkish surgeon works as a janitor in a hospital where the Turkish language is banned.

An actor playing a news anchor explains that the changes started with the Syrian war and uncontrolled immigration.

The video was commissioned by Umit Ozdag, a far-right member of Parliament known for his strident anti-refugee rhetoric.

By Wednesday night, the video had been viewed more than 2.6 million times.

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