

Turkish Imperialism

When Will Turkey Annex Northern Syria?

by **Rauf Baker**

In its quest to fulfill its expansionist ambitions, Turkey is pursuing a systematic Turkification policy in areas under its control in northern Syria. This takes various forms—demographic, economic, educational—and even the orchestration of environmental extermination. Fundamental to this strategy is the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of indigenous Kurds and the resettling of Arabs and Turkmen in their place.

Ankara's Turkification package includes, among other things, historic claims and changing the names of villages and public squares. Turkey and its proxies provide various essential services for the locals with the eventual object of linking Syrian cities and towns to Turkish provinces and making their inhabitants completely dependent on Turkey.

Ultimately, Ankara seeks to impose a *fait accompli*, possibly aiming to redraw borders at some point in the future. How long will the international community shut its eyes to this creeping neo-Ottoman imperialism?

Exploiting the Syrian Civil War

Throughout a decade of war in Syria, the conflict between rival forces has focused on demographic change as a goal rather than an outcome. The battles have provided the

warring parties with rare opportunities to uproot local populations belonging to their opponents' sects or ethnicities.

The three current players in Syria—Russia, Turkey, and Iran—appear to have



Furthering its expansionist ambitions, Turkey launched four military operations into Syria and now controls four border zones. Here, Turkish troops patrol in northeastern Syria.

agreed to partition Syria into zones of influence that resemble demographically homogeneous, autonomous territories. This approach seems consistent with the fact that Sunni Arabs were displaced from southern and central Syria while Kurds and Christians were expelled from the north. Simultaneously, new inhabitants—affiliated with each side—were transferred from other areas in order to resettle in the occupied territories. This strategy was most apparent in the Turkish-controlled regions in northern and northeastern Syria, which have been subjected to an all-out, systematic identity change based on a gradual process of using “soft power” to solidify Ankara’s influence.¹

During the past five years, Turkish forces launched four military operations that led to the establishment of four border zones under their control. The first was Euphrates Shield in August 2016, which targeted Aleppo’s northern countryside. The second, Olive Branch, took control of Aleppo’s northwestern countryside in January 2018. The third, Peace Spring, seized areas east of the Euphrates River in October 2019. These operations focused on Kurdish cities and towns under the pretext of pursuing Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) fighters, whom Ankara accuses of association with the Turkey-based PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey,² the United States, and the European Union.

Last year, the Turkish army launched Operation Spring Shield in the Idlib governorate following a military assault by the

Turkey controls nearly 4.9 percent of Syria with between 12,000 and 15,000 soldiers stationed there.

Syrian regime to regain control over vast areas in the northwest. That assault ended with a ceasefire agreement between Damascus’s ally Russia and Turkey in Idlib in March 2020.

As a result of these actions, Turkey now controls more than 8,000 square kilometers in Syria, or nearly 4.9 percent of the war-torn country. Between 12,000 and 15,000 Turkish soldiers are stationed there. The major cities under Turkish control are Azaz, Marea, al-Bab, Jarabulus, Afrin, Ras al-Ayn (Serê Kaniyê), and the town of ar-Ra’î.

Ankara has also formed affiliated Syrian militias of some 80,000 to 100,000 fighters. Most go by Turkish and Ottoman names, notably “Sultan Murad,” “Mehmed the Conqueror,” the “Samarkand Brigade,” and “Suleiman-Shah,” which yielded a group of youth fighters in April 2019 dubbed “Ertugrul’s Grandsons.”³

Demography and Identity

Turkey has various plans to achieve its scheme. Turkish military operations displaced between 300,000 and 350,000 Kurdish civilians from their towns⁴ and subsequently blocked them from returning.⁵

Concurrently, Turkish authorities brought hundreds of thousands of displaced Arab and Turkmen Syrian civilians from the countryside of Damascus, Homs, Hama, Daraa, and Idlib to settle in the Kurdish region. This measure was undertaken based on a Turkish-Russian understanding that had the approval of Iran

¹ *Al-Monitor* (Washington, D.C.), [May 2, 2021](#); Anadolu Agency (Ankara), [Dec. 14, 2020](#).

² “[PKK](#),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Ankara.

³ Suleyman-Shah Brigade, YouTube, [Apr. 29, 2019](#).

⁴ France 24 TV (Paris), [Oct. 10, 2019](#).

⁵ Syria Direct (Amman), [May 1, 2018](#).

and the Syrian regime.

The Turks settled dozens of Turkmen families in villages near the Kurdish city of Afrin, allowing them to seize lands in the Afrin countryside and building seven “model” villages to settle additional families of loyalist factions, particularly Turkmen.⁶ One of the projects, “Basma,” is sponsored by the Kuwaiti-backed White Hands association. It includes a mosque and a Qur’an memorization center with support from an Arab-Israeli association, Alaysh Bkrama (Living With Dignity).⁷ Meanwhile, the so-called Salvation Government, led by al-Qaeda’s formal affiliate in Syria, Hay’at Tahrir ash-Sha’m (the Levant Liberation Committee), is reportedly planning to create a civil registry department and local councils linked to Turkey and issue new ID cards in areas under its control in Idlib and its countryside.⁸

In a December 2020 circular, the Turkish-appointed local council in the Kurdish city of Ras al-Ayn in Hasakah governorate, near the Iraqi border, called on Iraqis who were said to be residing in the city and its countryside to apply for ID cards.⁹ As there are no records documenting the presence of Iraqi inhabitants in the area, it appears that these people settled



Turkistan Islamic Party fighters in Syria. Ankara has used the party, a Uighur Islamic group in Idlib, to fight the Kurds and has offered to settle members and their families in Syria.

there with Turkish backing. It is noteworthy that most of them are Iraqi Turkmen who fought with terrorist factions across the border and were given homes that had been confiscated from their displaced owners.¹⁰

Ankara has used the Turkistan Islamic Party, a Uighur Islamic faction grouped in Idlib and considered a terrorist movement, to fight the Kurds and offered to compensate its members by settling them and their families in Syria.¹¹ Turkey has also taken steps to wipe out the Syrian identity itself. Syrians in the Aleppo countryside were instructed to obtain new ID cards that have a special code linked to the civil registry departments in the provinces of Hatay, Kilis, and Gaziantep in southern Turkey.¹² Even vehicle registration plates and driver’s licenses are now linked to the Turkish system.¹³

⁶ Firat News Agency (ANF, Amsterdam), [Mar. 3, 2020](#).

⁷ *Afrin Post*, YouTube, [May 16, 2021](#); “[Demographic change in north Syria](#),” The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Coventry, U.K., June 17, 2021.

⁸ *Skynews Arabia* (Abu Dhabi), [June 9, 2021](#); *Kommersant* (Moscow), [June 7, 2021](#).

⁹ Kurdistan 24 TV (Erbil), [Dec. 31, 2020](#).

¹⁰ *Skynews Arabia*, [Jan. 3, 2021](#).

¹¹ North Press Agency (Qamishli), [Feb. 4, 2021](#).

¹² Reuters, [July 20, 2018](#).

¹³ Al-Bab Local Council, YouTube, [Aug. 19, 2018](#).

In addition, Turkey is using the Turkmen minority in Syria to implement its plans. In December 2012, the Syrian Turkmen Association was established in Istanbul with the aim of creating an organizational structure for them. In March 2013, it was re-named the Syrian Turkmen Assembly during a meeting attended by former Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, who stressed in a speech that his country “will continue to stand by the Syrian Turkmen under any circumstances.”¹⁴ In November 2018, through Ankara’s patronage, the assembly organized an event dubbed the “Nation Conference” in Ra’i, during which it adopted a flag to indicate that the Turkmen people now have their own symbol and are to be considered a nation.¹⁵

The assembly, which moved its headquarters to Syria in July 2019, usually falsifies the number of Turkmen in Syria. In the absence of official statistics, the figure of 100,000 is considered a reasonable estimate of the size of the Turkmen population there. The assembly bluntly inflates the figure to at least 1.5 million. The assembly is also thought to be linked to the ultranationalist Grey Wolves movement in Turkey¹⁶ and routinely coordinates with Hay’at Tahrir ash-Sha’m.¹⁷



Photo: Amr bin Kulthum

Olive trees flourish in Afrin district. The Kurdish region produces up to 70,000 tons of olive oil annually. But, Turkish-backed groups have seized \$150-200 million worth of the Kurdish crop.

Olives, Starvation, and Ransom

One demographic engineering weapon Turkey is using in the region is to cut off the livelihoods of the indigenous Kurdish population in an attempt to push them out. Olive crops constitute the main source of income for Kurds, the majority of whom are farmers, unlike the Arab and Turkmen settlers who are mostly small traders and craftsmen. Turkish-backed groups regularly uproot and sell olive trees as firewood in Turkey.

Although it is difficult to calculate the exact number of olive trees in the Kurdish region, most estimates place it at 12-18 million trees, which annually produce 60,000-70,000 tons of olive oil. A report issued by Human Rights Organization-Afrin documented the cutting down of more than

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Ankara, [Mar. 30, 2013](#).

¹⁵ Anadolu Agency (Ankara), [Nov. 22, 2018](#).

¹⁶ *The Irish Times* (Dublin), [Feb. 15, 2016](#).

¹⁷ Anadolu Agency, [Nov. 22, 2018](#); BBC (London), [Nov. 24, 2015](#).

314,400 olive trees for “firewood trading” and noted that more than a third of the area allocated for agriculture had been burned down over the past three years. Moreover, the Turkish-backed groups seize a large portion of the Kurds’ olive crop by force of arms and sell it to Turkish merchants. At the same time, they prevent Kurdish farmers from selling their oil outside the Turkish-controlled region without prior permission, causing prices to plummet.¹⁸

The value of the looted oil is \$150-200 million, a quarter of which goes to the armed groups and their civil administrations in the form of taxes ranging from 10-20 percent¹⁹ in exchange for allowing Kurdish farmers to harvest their olive orchards, which translates to earnings of roughly \$15-40 million per year.²⁰

In November 2018, Turkish agriculture minister Bekir Pakdemirli told parliament that 600 tons of olives had entered the country. He said, “We do not want revenues to fall into PKK hands. We want the revenues from Afrin to come to us. This region is under our hegemony.”²¹ Merchants who buy oil from Kurdish farmers operate under the supervision of the armed groups, who ensure that they buy it at half price and transport it by trucks directly to Turkey. The oil is even sold in European and U.S. markets branded as a Turkish product.²²

Corresponding reports reveal that the

Turkey has starved the region by reducing Syria’s share of water for drinking, agriculture, and electricity production.

Turks sell the olive oil to Spain through a number of intermediary companies.²³ It is mixed with Turkish oil before being exported under invented brand names. In November 2018, the Turkish

newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, known for its hardline support of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, reported that the Turkish Agricultural Credit Cooperatives was helping to sell Afrin’s olives internationally, and that the “Afrin olive market [is] worth \$200 million annually. It will be brought back to the Syrian people.”²⁴

A similar tool of demographic engineering is forced starvation. Since the beginning of 2021, the Turkish authorities have deliberately starved the region by reducing Syria’s share of the Euphrates River, which is a major source of drinking water and essential to agriculture and electricity production. A large number of irrigation stations on the banks of the Euphrates on the Syrian side are now out of service, and generating electricity is no longer possible due to the drop in water flow from Turkey from 500 to less than 200 cubic meters per second—a move that affects nearly 2.5 million Syrians.²⁵

These measures violate the agreement between the three riparian countries—Syria, Iraq, and Turkey²⁶—and will eventually lead to an environmental catastrophe and a

¹⁸ Human Rights Organization-Afrin-Syria, [Mar. 1, 2021](#).

¹⁹ *Enab Baladi* (Damascus), [Oct. 29, 2018](#).

²⁰ *Rudaw* (Erbil), YouTube, [Oct. 17, 2018](#).

²¹ Voice of America (VOA), [Dec. 16, 2020](#).

²² *The Daily Beast* (New York), [Nov. 24, 2020](#).

²³ *Público* (Madrid), [Jan. 29, 2019](#); *The Telegraph* (London), [Jan. 14, 2019](#).

²⁴ *Yeni Şafak* (Istanbul), [Nov. 11, 2018](#).

²⁵ “[Water](#): A source of conflict of cooperation [sic] in the Middle East?” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey, Ankara; “[Euphrates river’s crisis](#),” The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Coventry, U.K., Apr. 30, 2021.

²⁶ “[Water](#),” Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey.

humanitarian crisis that will threaten food security in the Kurdish communities.

At the same time, Turkey and its loyalist groups push the last remaining Kurds to flee by harassing them through kidnappings and ransom demands, tactics that force many to leave out of fear for their families. The Human Rights Organization-Afrin report disclosed that approximately 7,343 cases of kidnapping have been documented over the past three years, hundreds of which targeted women. Last year, 987 people were kidnapped, including 92 women. Civilians are often abducted and held hostage pending payment of thousands of dollars in ransom money.²⁷

Services and Economy

In terms of services and finance, Turkish-controlled regions have become totally dependent on Ankara. The General Directorate of Turkish Post (PTT) provides services in Azaz, Marea, al-Bab, Jarabulus, Afrin, and Ra'i for Turkish employees and Syrian citizens, as it handles banking, money transfers, shipping, and salaries of teachers, Syrian employees, Turkish soldiers, and local police in Turkish lira, which has become the de facto currency. The Turkish government has opened hospitals in Jarabulus, Azaz, al-Bab, Marea, and Ra'i, and erected cell towers owned by Turk Telekom in Aleppo and Idlib's countryside.²⁸ Turk Telekom also opened a service center in Azaz in July 2018

The appointment of judges and lawyers in Turkish zones requires the approval of Turkey's Ministry of Justice.

with a high-speed internet provider.²⁹

Simultaneously, the Turkish electricity giant Akenerji built a power plant in Azaz and set up another electricity grid in Jarabulus and al-Bab.

Governors of Turkey's provinces, who are the de facto rulers, appoint heads of local councils while projects are exclusively funded by the Turkish banks into which every council's funds are deposited. Even the appointment of judges and lawyers requires the approval of the Turkish Ministry of Justice while the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet) took it upon itself to renovate hundreds of mosques.³⁰

At the same time, Syrians in Turkish-controlled areas had to register thousands of companies in Turkey in order to distribute their products. Not doing so opens them up to the risk that they will be barred from operating.³¹ Turks have established free industrial zones linked with Turkey to facilitate import and export operations while opening a border crossing dubbed Olive Branch in March 2019 to transport goods in both directions.³²

The terms of the Idlib ceasefire agreement signed between Ankara and Moscow last year stipulate that Turkey will maintain a foothold in the governorate. In practice, this means that Ankara tightly controls the local economy, embarks on huge investment projects in Idlib, and keeps a military presence there.

²⁷ North Press Agency, [Jan. 3, 2021](#).

²⁸ France 24 TV, [Oct. 29, 2018](#).

²⁹ North Press Agency, [Jan. 3, 2021](#).

³⁰ *Al-Monitor*, [Sept. 28, 2018](#); BBC Arabic, [Mar. 7, 2019](#).

³¹ Anonymous source.

³² Reuters, [Mar. 20, 2018](#).

The Turkification of Education

In the education sector, Ankara is heavily investing in Turkifying the younger generation. The curriculum in the occupied Syrian territories was adjusted to replace the phrase “Ottoman occupation” of the region with “Ottoman rule.” It is now compulsory to learn Turkish in about five hundred schools encompassing hundreds of thousands of students on the primary and secondary levels.³³

To intensify their Turkification policy, the Turks opened a primary school in al-Bab dubbed Martyr Major Bülent Albayrak after an army officer who was killed in action in the city.³⁴ Another school in the town of Tell Abyad was named Peace Spring, and a third school named Ankara was opened in Ras al-Ayn. In Afrin, the Turks inaugurated an Islamic secondary school modeled on the controversial Turkish Imam Hatip schools, which train imams.³⁵ Another secondary school was opened in Jarabulus and named after Ahmet Turgay Imamgiller, the late sub-governor of the Turkish city of Gaziantep.³⁶ It did so with the help of the U.K.-based Pakistani nongovernmental organization



In Afrin, the Turks inaugurated an Islamic school modeled on the controversial Imam Hatip schools, which train imams. Here, an official from the Turkish Ministry of National Education greets students, Afrin, January 17, 2019.

Muslim Hands, a group that identifies itself as a “relief and development” organization.³⁷

Another move in the education field is that of the Pakistani organization Baitussalam. The Karachi-based Islamic agency, which says it focuses on education and preaching, is a member of the Union of NGOs of the Islamic World (IDSB), a proxy for Turkey’s ruling Justice and Development Party. In March, the group opened a school in Ras al-Ayn during a ceremony attended by Sanliurfa’s governor Abdullah Erin.³⁸ Last August, in cooperation with the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate, Baitussalam inaugurated a housing project in a town south of Idlib that includes a school and a mosque.³⁹ In December 2019, they jointly inaugurated a primary school

³³ *Turk Press* (Istanbul), [Oct. 5, 2016](#), [Sept. 21, 2017](#).

³⁴ Taze Haber EN, YouTube, [Oct. 12, 2017](#).

³⁵ Kurdistan 24 TV, [Feb. 3, 2019](#).

³⁶ “Cerablus Iyilik Kütüphaneleri,” YouTube, [Feb. 24, 2021](#).

³⁷ “Turkey sends Pakistani extremist organizations to northern Syria,” Documentation Violations Center in Northern Syria (Krefeld), [Mar. 24, 2021](#).

³⁸ Abdullah Erin, “Selam Evi Yardım Derneği,” Twitter, [Mar. 23, 2021](#).

³⁹ Step News Agency Report, YouTube, [Aug. 29, 2020](#).

in Idlib named Abdul Hamid II,⁴⁰ who was the thirty-fourth sultan of the Ottoman Empire. A year earlier, the organization opened nine schools in Azaz in cooperation with the Turkish government's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) agency. In total, more than two hundred religious schools now operate in the Turkish-controlled zones.⁴¹

In higher education, Gaziantep University opened three faculties: the Faculty of Education in Afrin, the Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences in al-Bab, and the Faculty of Shari'a Sciences in Azaz,⁴² in addition to higher institutes in Jarabulus, including a Turkish language institute and a vocational school. The faculties allow Syrian students who wish to continue their education in Turkey to take the Turkish language exam (YÖS) in centers across the Turkish-controlled zones. Harran University, headquartered in Sanliurfa, opened a branch in al-Bab in June 2018 to provide education in six departments based on a Turkish curriculum.⁴³

In Ra'i, a decree signed by Erdoğan established the Medical Faculty and Vocational School of Health Services, which is linked to the Istanbul-based University of Health Sciences. Through this decree, Erdoğan exerts power over areas that are not officially subject to Turkish sovereignty. In addition, Turkey's radical Islamic nongovernmental organization, the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (IHH), provides financial and logistical support to International Sham University in Azaz that has five faculties,

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including Shari'a and law.⁴⁴ Recently, Anatolia Culture Center—which claims to promote Anatolian and Turkish culture—was inaugurated in Afrin and Azaz. Three thousand

higher education students took last year's exams.⁴⁵

Changing Names, Rewriting History

Turkey's presence is unmistakable on the ground. Government and official departments raise the Turkish flag over their buildings, and walls are adorned with Erdoğan's portraits. While the names of departments and institutions are written in both Turkish and Arabic, the Turkish versions are in a larger font size than the Arabic.

Squares, parks, and schools have had their names Turkified. Thus, Saraya Square in Afrin has become Erdoğan Square; the Kawa al-Haddad roundabout has become the Olive Branch roundabout, and the public park in Azaz is now Ottoman Nation Park. Nor were the names of towns and villages spared. The village of Kastal Mekdad near Afrin is now called Souuldjouk Obasi, and the village of Kutana has been renamed Zafer Obasi. The Turkish official media refer to Ra'i as Cobanbey, its old Ottoman name.⁴⁶

Turkish officials stress that Turkey's current protectorate region was once part of the Ottoman Empire, paving the way for

⁴⁰ Anadolu News Agency, [Nov. 12, 2019](#).

⁴¹ *Daily Sabah* (Istanbul), [Dec. 15, 2018](#).

⁴² Reuters, [Oct. 4, 2019](#).

⁴³ Anadolu News Agency, [Aug. 4, 2018](#).

⁴⁴ "IHH's initiative International Sham University has started education in [#Azaz](#), [#Aleppo](#) with four faculties. [#Syria](#)," IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation, Twitter, Sept. 5, 2016.

⁴⁵ Anadolu News Agency, [Jan. 28, 2021](#); Fehim Tastekin, "Suriye kasabasına tıp fakültesi: Türkiye abartıyor mu?" *Al-Monitor* (Washington, D.C.), [Feb. 12, 2021](#).

⁴⁶ Anadolu News Agency, [Feb. 13, 2021](#).

more drastic measures. For example, Turkish political and media circles constantly repeat that al-Bab was once owned by Abdul Hamid II. In August 2017, his grandson, Orhan Osmanoğlu, said he had a deed that proves the areas in northern Aleppo and al-Bab belonged to his family.⁴⁷

In July 2018, Turkey announced its intention to turn a house in the town of Raju, northwest of Afrin, into a museum because it was used by the republic's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, during World War I.⁴⁸ Ankara asserted that Afrin itself was still under Turkish administration until the end of 1921 (a year after the formation of Mandate Syria) and that Turkmen tribes had settled in the city since the eleventh century.⁴⁹ Turkish interior minister Süleyman Soylu, who in May of last year paid an unprecedented visit to Ra'i, stated that northern Syria "is part of the Turkish homeland in accordance with the Milli Charter of 1920."⁵⁰

Over past decades, the Turks have similarly manipulated history and politics. A typical case is that of the Sanjak of Alexandretta, previously part of the French Mandate of Syria and now a part of Turkey called Hatay. In 1936, a French high com-



Many Syrian locations have had their names Turkified. One house northwest of Afrin will become a museum because it was used by Atatürk, the Turkish republic's founder, during World War I.

mission estimated the number of Turks in the Sanjak to be 39 percent of the total population (85,800 out of 222,000).⁵¹

Turkey tirelessly sought to annex Alexandretta, and France hoped that by encouraging the annexation, it would drive the Turks away from a possible alliance with Nazi Germany. Atatürk was head of the armed forces that controlled the region as World War I was nearing its end, and Ankara claimed that it should have remained within Turkish borders.

In 1937, the Sanjak held the status of a distinct region from Syria, only to be proclaimed "Hatay State" in 1938 under joint French and Turkish supervision. In 1939, following a highly contested referendum, the Hatay legislature voted to dissolve the state and join Turkey. During those years, systematic ethnic cleansing of Arabs and

⁴⁷ Haber 7 TV (Istanbul), [Aug. 27, 2017](#).

⁴⁸ Anadolu News Agency, [July 7, 2018](#).

⁴⁹ Ibid., [Jan. 27, 2019](#).

⁵⁰ "Suriye'den bize gelenlerin yüzde 62'si Mısâk-ı Millî sınırları içerisinde," Süleyman Soylu, Twitter, Jan. 7, 2019.

⁵¹ Inga Brandell, *State Frontiers: Borders and Boundaries in the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2006), p. 144.

Armenians in the Sanjak took place in parallel with the trucking in of tens of thousands of Turks to register them as citizens and voters.⁵²

Another example is the Turkish invasion of northern Cyprus, alleged to protect the Turkish minority on the island. Three months after the invasion in July 1974, a de facto administration was established in the northern area as the “Autonomous Turkish Cypriot Administration.” The following year, Ankara began a phase-by-phase strategy and proclaimed the region the “Turkish Federated State of North Cyprus,” and then finally, in November 1983, the so-called “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.” The West turned a blind eye to the occupation of a European territory on the grounds that Ankara was vital in combating the spread of communism in the region. This left the island with the last divided capital in the world.

Conclusion

So far, the Turkish-controlled areas in Syria have functioned as a “line of demarcation” between Turkey and the territories controlled by the Assad regime. They are not yet officially considered Turkish territory, but at the same time, they are no longer affiliated with Damascus.

The ultimate target of Ankara’s demographic-change strategy could be to make the Turkish-controlled areas a natural extension of southern Turkey. Its future plan could be to naturalize hundreds of thousands of settlers and use their votes in a referendum

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in which the local population is purportedly given the choice to decide if it wants to become part of Turkey.

The Turkish president could cement this project by transferring Syrian refugees in southern Turkey to northern Syria. About 1.5 million of those refugees, who are predominantly Sunni Arab, reside just across the border, and more than 100,000 of them have become naturalized citizens in recent years. Intelligence reports also indicate that Ankara may consider settling Turkic expatriates from Central Asian countries, Chinese Uighurs, Afghani refugees in Turkey and Pakistan, and possibly Turkish citizens in Syria.

If Turkey’s objective is achieved, it will get two for the price of one. As a long-term goal, the new citizens, who would be Sunni Arabs and Turkic, would create a demographic balance with the Kurds, who are the predominant ethnic group in Turkey’s southeast. During its decades-long campaign against the PKK, the Turkish army displaced millions of Kurdish civilians and depopulated thousands of Kurdish villages. Turkey has long feared that the aspiration for autonomy among Syria’s Kurds might trigger similar tendencies among their counterparts in Turkey.

For many years, the West granted the Turks a diplomatic umbrella for their actions. It gave them a green light to occupy the Sanjak of Alexandretta and northern Cyprus as incentives to counter Nazism and communism. Today, Ankara may solve the problems it has itself created by supposedly curbing Islamic extremism while stemming the influx of refugees into Europe through a buffer zone in northern Syria—a zone that is likely, sooner or later, to melt into Turkey.

⁵² Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation: The Conquest of the Middle East* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005), p. 335.

On walls across the Turkish protectorate in Syria, the phrase “Brotherhood has no limits” is painted in Arabic and Turkish. The question is not whether the Turkish state is seeking to annex northern Syria, but rather when.

Rauf Baker is a journalist and researcher with expertise on Europe and the Middle East.

