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THREE YEARS AFTER THE ANTAKYA EARTHQUAKES, DISPLACEMENT HAS NOT ENDED—IT IS EXPANDING

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Introduction

On December 27, 2025, as the third anniversary of the February 2023 earthquakes in Southern Turkey and Northern Syria approached, a grand ceremony was staged in Antakya, Turkey, the center of Hatay province. It was attended by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan alongside senior dignitaries including his key ally, Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli, and Minister of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change Murat Kurum.

As the president handed a young girl the keys to the 455,000th housing unit built by the Housing Development Administration of the Republic of Turkey (TOKİ) across the quake-ravaged region, the message conveyed was clear: reconstruction is advancing at scale and the government has delivered on its promises.[1] The backdrop to the ceremony, the city center and the Old Town along the route of the presidential convoy, had been hastily prepared to present the impression that life in Antakya and the wider earthquake region is "returning to normal."

Antakya—both the hardest-hit city and, according to many observers, one that has been largely left behind in recovery efforts[2]—was selected to showcase the state's reconstruction success story. The government and its aligned media have been broadly celebrating the state-led "recovery of the century (asrın ihyası)," in response to what they had framed as the "catastrophe of the century (asrın felaketi)."

While authorities celebrate the handing out of keys for flats that, in many cases, have yet to be built, much public critique has focused on the gap between official propaganda and realities on the ground. Local outlets, civil society groups, and opposition figures have pointed to continuing infrastructural shortages and largely incomplete construction, the poor quality of some new buildings, and the absence of amenities in emerging satellite neighborhoods.[3] The Potemkin facades, erected to conceal unfinished or still damaged buildings along the route of the presidential convoy, attracted widespread mockery and criticism on social media.[4]

The ceremony, titled "Reconstruction of the Century, a Success of Turkey" (Asrın İnşası, Türkiye'nin Başarısı), appeared to be designed more for a national audience that may be unaware of the shortcomings of government-led reconstruction rather than for the local population, who experienced the earthquake directly and continues to endure its long-term consequences. In Antakya, post-earthquake displacement is far from over and is instead taking new forms, transforming what was initially framed as temporary disruption into a more enduring condition.

Reconstruction as Displacement

What we observe in Antakya is "reconstruction as displacement," a destructive and top-down process that contradicts many of the commitments outlined in official declarations and policy documents by the Turkish government.

The state's 12th Development Plan, for instance, commits the government to rebuilding earthquake-affected cities in ways that are not only climate-friendly and disaster-resilient but also "taking into account their historical, social and cultural texture." The plan explicitly states that "the return of indigenous people to their settlements will be ensured" and that "the historic and cultural fabric will be restored in a holistic manner," while "connections between new urban settlements and old urban areas with historic fabric will be established and strongly sustained."[5]

Contrary to the government's narrative of successful reconstruction, evidence from the city and the everyday experiences of its inhabitants indicate that reconstruction itself has become a driver of displacement, prolonging it and expanding its meaning. This expanded form of displacement is not simply a temporary condition occurring despite reconstruction efforts that will eventually be resolved as recovery progresses. Rather, it is being engineered and amplified through the very form of reconstruction pursued by the government.

Three main axes illustrate how displacement is being prolonged and intensified through current reconstruction policies. First, displacement is being drawn out in time, lingering beyond promises of a swift return and compounded by repeated disruptions produced by government action and inaction, amid infrastructural collapse and hazardous everyday conditions. Second, displacement occurs within the city itself, as housing construction and allocation policies resettle residents across Antakya, with varying degrees of implicit or explicit coercion, disrupting their connections to communities, as well as the settlement patterns that have historically shaped urban life. Third, displacement unfolds through the remaking of place itself, as the built environment emerging from reconstruction fails to account for the ways of life, needs, and aspirations of Antakya's residents, effectively rendering them "out of place" in their own city.

Drawn-Out Housing Precariousness

In conventional accounts, displacement refers to the act of involuntary relocation of people from their places of residence and inhabitation due to factors such as conflict or disaster. In this sense, the destruction caused by the 2023 earthquakes—which led to the collapse or severe damage of hundreds of thousands of buildings—triggered mass displacement across the region. In Antakya alone, most of the urban area was rendered uninhabitable,[6] pushing residents into a variety of emergency shelter conditions. Tens of thousands left the province for other urban centers across the country, more or less temporarily.[7]

As of late 2025, approximately 148,000 people were still living in the archipelago of container cities that emerged across Hatay province. Living conditions in these settlements—built by the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) and the government with the involvement of numerous governmental and non-governmental actors—vary widely but have often been marked by overcrowding, poor infrastructure, and inadequate services.[8]

Many others, individually or collectively, constructed improvised shelter arrangements of their own, combining self-built shacks, tents, containers, prefabricated structures, and sometimes the damaged remains of their original homes. Despite receiving little support from state institutions, these structures continue to provide shelter for a significant number of people.[9] Many residents chose these solutions over state-run container settlements because they allowed them to remain close to their neighborhoods and communities while maintaining a degree of autonomy—conditions that externally managed and often remote shelters do not afford.

A three-year period of temporary shelter following a disaster of these proportions is not unusual by global standards. What is striking, however, is that as government rhetoric focused on speed and on the delivery of "permanent housing" (in the run-up to the 2023 elections, President Erdoğan promised housing within one year[10]), interim solutions that could gradually sustain urban recovery were largely neglected. Settlements likely to remain

inhabited for a prolonged period were conceived and built hastily, resulting in very poor living conditions.

The predicaments affecting many "container cities" are starkly visible in Büyükdalyan I, one of the earliest and largest temporary settlements built north of Antakya. Residents explain how precarious conditions are not only a result of government neglect and inaction but are also compounded by deliberate interventions. Recently, local management forced residents to dismantle some of the self-built adaptations they had made to improve living conditions in otherwise barren and poorly designed environments.

One example was the "bird tower" built by a resident along the main road inside the camp: a wooden structure that effectively added an extra level for feeding doves while shading the container below and reducing heat during the summer. Last month, the structure was forcibly torn down.



The bird tower built by a resident in Büyükdalyan I container city and later dismantled following an injunction from management authorities, May 2025 (Photo credit: Francesco Pasta).

Since 2025, authorities have also pursued an increasingly assertive drive to close container settlements, which are costly for public coffers. In late Summer 2025, residents of Büyükdalyan I were informed that they would need to vacate their containers within three months, even though alternative housing had not been secured for all. After being postponed three times, that deadline is currently set for June 2026. Yet even for those who qualify for government-built housing, doubts remain as to whether it will be delivered on time.

Across the earthquake region, many temporary settlements have already been dismantled, while announcements of imminent closures have been followed by repeated postponements as housing assignments continue to lag behind. As a result, tens of thousands of people now find themselves trapped between impending eviction deadlines and uncertain housing allocations—or, for those who do not qualify for government-built post-disaster housing, with no feasible alternative.

The Büyükdalyan I container city not only shows that housing precariousness continues three years after the earthquake but also something more troubling: that many of the conditions associated with displacement, such as ongoing disruptions, prolonged uncertainty, and limits on residents' ability to improve their living conditions or plan ahead, are not a result of the disaster itself but of the way recovery is being managed.

Moreover, beyond temporary settlements, the production and allocation of permanent housing do not necessarily mark the end of precarity or dislocation. On the contrary, as currently implemented, they are emerging as further drivers of displacement.

Exile at Home

A second crucial dimension of reconstruction as displacement concerns the characteristics of what is being planned, built, and allocated rather than the disjuncture between government promises and delivery. The spatial distribution of these housing units, together with the criteria according to which they are assigned, are producing new forms of internal displacement within the city, an "exile at home."

Those Antakya residents that were recognized as "right-holders" were assigned units in large-scale mass housing neighborhoods built by TOKİ on green and agricultural land, often many kilometers away from their former homes. Allocation happens through a public lottery according to criteria that often remain unclear, which largely do not follow pre-earthquake settlement patterns. This means that pre-existing communities are being scattered across different mass housing sites. What's more, the process disregards tenants, migrants, and people with no former land tenure, adding another layer of fragmentation within communities.

Because many households cannot afford to rebuild on their original plots, and state support for yerinde dönüşüm (on-site reconstruction) fails to match rapidly rising construction costs, many residents have little choice but to accept such offers.

For instance, Mahmut, who was born and raised in one of the neighborhoods of Old Antakya, recently moved to Dikmece—the largest TOKİ development in the area, some 12 kilometers north. After almost three years spent between tents and containers, living in a proper flat is an improvement. However, while he lacks the financial means to rebuild the family house, Mahmut remains determined not to sell the land. Yet many neighbors are now strug-

gling and beginning to sell their plots, diminishing the prospects of a future return and of reconstituting the neighborhood community.

Another resident, Kerem, whose former house stood in the historic Affan neighborhood, was also allocated a flat in Dikmece. He is currently paying maintenance fees and bills, even though he has no intention of ever living there—not only because of the distance from his neighborhood but also because, as an Arab Alawi, he would not feel comfortable there. Like many others, he considers the house offered by TOKİ as a burdensome fallback. He accepted it reluctantly, in the absence of any other option, but his ultimate aim while navigating the reconstruction process is to rebuild his pre-earthquake house where it stood.

These two examples, among many others, show how residents often grudgingly take up TOKİ units not because they address their housing needs but primarily because the state offers no viable alternatives. This post-disaster housing policy has greatly expanded Antakya's urban footprint while leaving entire inner-city neighborhoods in ruins and depopulated, potentially to be appropriated by developers when the occasion arises.[11]



Residents attempting to locate their assigned unit on the lottery lists exhibited in the TOKİ office in central Antakya, December 2025 (Photo credit: Francesco Pasta).

Residents are thus being displaced within Antakya itself, as reconstruction policies fragment and reshuffle communities. In effect, post-disaster displacement is being rendered permanent through the very housing policies purported to resolve it. This form of displacement differs from the conventional image of makeshift shelters or ephemeral settlements, yet its impact is no less profound, leading to people's long-term exile from their own communities.

For Antakya, with its heterogeneous ethno-religious composition, these policies carry particularly serious implications. Here, cultural diversity has long been sustained through carefully maintained socio-spatial arrangements, a fact often overlooked in celebratory narratives of local "tolerance" and "cosmopolitanism."[12] Uprooting residents from their neighborhoods and resettling them elsewhere, alongside new neighbors from different parts of the city, imposes an intermixture that may ultimately lead to absorption into the dominant state-sanctioned Turkish-Sunni identity.

Antiochians are acutely aware of this risk. From the early days following the earthquake, numerous local voices have emphasized the importance of preserving Antakya's demographic structure, meaning that pre-existing settlement patterns within the city should be respected.[13] Yet reconstruction is now disrupting precisely those arrangements that historically allowed Antakya to remain one of Turkey's most diverse cities despite decades of homogenizing state policies.

This reshuffling of populations, effectively producing forms of "exile at home," forms part of a broader process through which displacement unfolds through the dismantling of "place" itself, as the characteristics that made Antakya what it is are being actively undermined.

Making People Out of Place

It is this broader form of displacement, a process that erodes spatial intimacies and reconfigures attachments to place, that increasingly defines post-earthquake Antakya. For many residents, the city slowly re-emerging from vast construction sites is barely recognizable. Even when residents are assigned housing, the conditions under which these homes are provided often erode the sense of place and radically alter the ways in which people inhabit their city.

In his 2011 work Slow Violence, Robert Nixon expands the understanding of displacement as "a loss that leaves communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable."[14] In this perspective, displacement is disassociated from forced relocation: it may also occur through a remaking of "place" itself.

The built environment emerging in Antakya is one that curtails residents' ability to maintain the socio-cultural networks, practices, and relationships that historically sustained the city's living heritage—the ways of life of its inhabitants. Without necessarily changing geographical location, people feel "out of place" as the material and social attachments that structure belonging are dismantled. This sense of being out of place arises from the loss of affective spaces and unfolds through emotive and embodied dimensions, reshaping people's subjectivities.[15]

One illustrative example is the neighborhood of Mağaracık in Samandağ district. Here, a mix of low- and mid-rise buildings, often family apartments, are interspersed with olive groves, fruit trees, and orchards where many households grew food or kept animals. Numerous ziyaret (shrines) anchor community rituals in these Arab Alawi areas, creating spaces for collective gathering and social

life. Despite all the predicaments brought about by unregulated urbanization, faulty construction, and weak infrastructure, these environments reflected and supported the everyday needs and way of life of their inhabitants.

By contrast, the housing complexes being constructed by TOKİ on the hills above the neighborhood consist of serially replicated blocks in thousands of identical units and lack many of the private and shared spaces that previously supported community life. For many residents, it is difficult to imagine everyday life unfolding in this standardized environment. People wonder where and how they will be able to practice religious rituals, gather with relatives and neighbors, or maintain orchards and animals. They also question how basic daily needs—such as schooling, shopping, and transportation—will be met in these far-flung residential compounds.

At the same time, the cementification of fertile land—olive and mandarin groves long considered "the lungs of Samandağ"—ravages the livelihoods of these communities that remain partly agricultural while also destroying beautiful landscapes of historical and ecological significance. Notably, the scale of TOKİ construction appears to exceed post-



Mass housing being built by TOKİ on the hills overlooking Mağaracık, December 2025 (Photo credit: Francesco Pasta).

disaster housing needs, raising the possibility that surplus units may eventually be sold on the market.

What is occurring in Mağaracık reflects a broader process unfolding across Antakya's metropolitan area, as reconstruction is producing significant environmental damage and likely driving further urban expansion in the years ahead.[16]

These critiques could be made of standardized housing developments elsewhere in Turkey. However, the implications are particularly profound in regions inhabited by religious and ethnic minority populations, such as Antakya. In a context where state institutions already fail to support (and in fact often actively obstruct) the reproduction of local cultures, the transmission of cultural elements such as language, rituals, and everyday practices relies heavily on physical proximity, vernacular spatial arrangements, and place-based community relations. Disconnected from local ways of life as they are, mass-produced housing will likely accelerate processes of cultural assimilation. In this sense, current reconstruction policies risk further advancing a century-long trajectory of demographic engineering in the region.

It is this deeper form of displacement that may come to define the new Antakya emerging from reconstruction. Not one that necessarily forces people out of the city but rather one that reshapes who they are through the imposed transformation of the space they inhabit—a transformation carried out with virtually no input from the residents who will ultimately live in the city.

Conclusion

From Antakya, the government-promoted narrative of successful reconstruction and a rapid return to "normality" rings hollow. Ongoing recovery efforts fall far short of the commitments articulated in official policy documents.

Three years after the disaster, developments on the ground diverge sharply from these pledges. Displacement has not only persisted through prolonged uncertainty and precarious living conditions. Residents are also being relocated within the city itself, fragmenting communities and producing new forms of exile at home. The built environment emerging from reconstruction bears little relation to the layered socio-cultural landscapes that historically structured life in Antakya and will foreclose the continuation of residents' cultural practices and identity.

In this sense, reconstruction has not simply failed to respond to displacement: it has become one of its principal drivers. The carefully staged images of recovery, including the symbolic handing over of housing keys against the backdrop of hastily completed facades, stand in stark contrast to the lived realities on the ground. A key to an apartment does not in itself constitute a home: without the conditions for meaningful emplacement, for many in Antakya, reconstruction is producing forms of exile at home.

Notes

1 | Türkiye Cumhuriyeti İletişim Bakanlığı, "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, 455 Bininci Afet Konutu Kura Çekimi ve Anahtar Teslimi Töreni'nde konuştu," December 27, 2025, https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/turkce/haberler/detay/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-455-bininci-afet-konutu-kura-cekimi-ve-anahtar-teslimi-toreninde-konustu/.

2 | See, for instance, *Hatay Deprem 3. Yıl Raporu* (Hatay Depremzede Derneği, 2026); "6 Şubat'ın ardından Hatay: 'Kameralar gitti, yine yapayalnız kaldık,'" *BBC Türkçe*, February 10, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/c72gzn3nl47o.

3 | For a debunking of the "return to normal" narrative and a critical overview of the ongoing problems facing Antakya and the wider earthquake-affected region, see S. Mansuroğlu, "Üç yıldır 6 Şubat'a takılı hayat: Hiçbir yaramız kabuk bağlayamadı," *Birgün*, February 6, 2026, https://www.birgun.net/haber/uc-yildir-6-subata-takili-hayat-hicbir-yaramiz-kabuk-baglayamadi-690522.

4 | The term comes from the (likely apocryphal) story that Grigory Potemkin, Russian statesman under Catherine II, built fake villages to impress her during her 1787 Crimea tour. It is used to describe staged displays of order or prosperity that conceal underlying conditions. For examples of social media criticism, see the Instagram post of accounts such as hatay.olay on December 26, 2025, (https://www.instagram.com/hatay.olay/), haber.ani on December 27, 2025, (https://www.instagram.com/haber.ani/), and mustafadilektr on December 25, 2025, (https://www.instagram.com/mustafadilektr/).

5 | Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, Presidency of Strategy and Budget, "Twelfth Development Plan (2024–2028)."

6 | "Hatay deprem tespit raporu | En ağır yıkım Antakya'da," *Bianet*, April 8, 2023, https://bianet.org/haber/hatay-deprem-tespit-raporu-en-agir-yikim-antakya-da-277027.

7 | İ. Nacak and E. Kuday, "Şubat 2023 Depremleri Sonrası Hatay'dan Göç Eden Depremzedelerin Geri Dönüş Motivasyonları," *Journal of Humanity and Society (Insan & Toplum)* 15, no. 3 (2025): 10–39, https://doi.org/10.12658/M0768.

8 | *Hatay Deprem 3. Yıl Raporu* (Hatay Depremzede Derneği, 2026).

9 | Architecture Sans Frontières UK and Hatay Deprem Dayanışması, *Repairing Living Heritage in Çekmece: Pathways towards Community-led Reconstruction* (ASF-UK, 2024), https://www.asf-uk.org/articles/yeni-rapor-cekmece-de-yasayan-mirasin-onarilmasi-new-report-repairing-living-heritage-in-cekmece.

10 | "Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Amacımız bir yıl içinde 319 bin konut ve köy evini hak sahiplerine teslim etmektir," *Anadolu Ajansı,* April 2, 2023, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-amacimiz-bir-yil-icinde-319-bin-konut-ve-koy-evini-hak-sahiplerine-teslim-etmektir/2861619.

11 | This citywide socio-spatial restructuring reflects the broader direction in which urban transformation policies in Turkey are moving, and Antakya is effectively being treated as a site of policy experimentation. The 2023 revision of Law 6306 broadened the legal mechanisms through which property rights and urban space can be restructured. For reflections on how this may enable large-scale redistribution of property and populations driven from above, and how Antakya is being framed as a pilot, see C. Çılğın, "Yeni

bir imar rejimine doğru," 1+1 Express, July 10, 2024, https://birartibir.org/yeni-bir-imar-rejimine-dogru/ and B. Özgür, "İşte rezerv alan: Zarrab'ın enişte sine rant, Hataylının zeytinliğine gasp," *Gazete Duvar,* July 8, 2024, https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/iste-rezerv-alan-zarrabin-enistesine-rant-hatay-linin-zeytinligine-gasp-makale-1711142.

12 | See, for instance, Ş. Can, *Refugee encounters at the Turkish-Syrian border* (Routledge, 2020) and S. Dağtaş, *Under the Same Sky: Everyday Politics of Religious Difference in Southern Turkey* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025).

13 | See, for instance, L. Duman, "Antakya'dan Vazgeçmemek: Çok Kültürlülüğün Yeniden İnşası," Nehna, October 8, 2023, https://www.nehna.org/post/antakya-dan-vazgec-memek-cok-kulturlulugun-yeniden-insasi, and Ş. Süveydan, "Depremin 15. Ayında Antakya'da Ahval ve Şerait," Arkitera, May 15, 2024, https://www.arkitera.com/gorus/depremin-15-ayinda-antakyada-ahval-ve-serait/.

14 | R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

15 | See also J.D. Porteous and S.E. Smith, *Domicide: The Global Destruction of Home* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); P. Marcuse and D. Madden, *In Defense of Housing: The Politics of Crisis* (Verso, 2016); J. Schnelzer, "Becoming displaceable, feeling displacing, un/doing displacement – Conceptualizing urban residential displacements as dissimilar experiences amidst the global housing affordability crisis," *Urban Geography* 46, no. 4 (2025): 794–816, https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2024.2412919.

16 | In this regard, for a more detailed urban morphology analysis, see E. Bingöl, "The Influence of Post-earthquake Reconstruction on the Urban Continuity of Antakya: The Cases of Akevler and Gülderen Neighbourhoods," *Journal of Planning* (2025): 300–323, https://doi.org/10.14744/planlama.2025.04468en.

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The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

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Cover Photo: Mass housing rising over Mağaracık and Kurtderesi in Samandağ, on former agricultural land of olive and mandarin groves, March 2026 (photo: Francesco Pasta)

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