

Winter Weather Reveals Corruption of Contractors in Idlib's IDP Camps

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Heavy winds toppled 18 temporary housing units in the Tarmala displacement camp in northern Idlib governorate this past winter, depriving dozens of people from safe housing. The cement-block homes had major structural defects, indicating possible corruption within the contractors constructing the camp.

Tarmala is a newly built camp located south of the town of Salweh. It consists of 200 housing units built of cement blocks and roofed with water-proof tarpaulins. Each dwelling is 48 square metres. The camp was set up with support and funding from the Turkish NGO IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation and implemented by a Syrian contractor who won the construction tender to build the housing units.

Displacement camps, funded by humanitarian aid organisations, are located across northern parts of Idlib governorate, most of them on mountainous properties technically still owned by the Syrian state. The camps are set up based on prior engineering plans that fit the topography of the land. Various humanitarian organisations are bidding for construction aiming to obtain the best technical and financial offers.

The Tarmala camp is part of a larger Turkish project launched in mid-2020 to construct 50,000 homes in the Idlib governorate. Various Turkish NGOs are funding the project, most notably IHH, the Turkish Red Crescent, the Religious Endowment, the Heday Endowment, the Besir Association, the Deniz Feneri Foundation and the Hayrat Foundation. There are other projects outside the Turkish effort, run by local Syrian organisations such as the Maram Foundation, the Molham Volunteering Team and the Ataa Association.

According to a correspondent of *The Syria Report* in Idlib who talked to several people from the camp, the contractor responsible for the Tarmala housing units had tampered with the specifications for the construction materials in order to rake in the highest possible profits. For example, each housing unit needed about 1,100 cement blocks, and each 50 cement blocks needed one 50-kg bag of cement. Some contractors, in agreement with the local cement block factories, reportedly reduced the amount of cement used in the construction of the blocks by nearly one half, such that each 90 blocks used one 50-kg bag of cement. This reduction weakened the structural integrity of the housing units.

Some of the housing units were built without proper foundations, while some construction pits did not reach deep enough to reach the bedrock beneath the soil. Other homes were simply built directly on top of the soil with no pit.

As a result of poor construction, the first wind storm this past winter destroyed some of the housing units, forcing their residents to take shelter in tents pending repair of the concrete structure by the contractor, under pressure from IHH. However, repair work was also poorly done, with cracks soon appearing in the cement homes. Residents faced two options: return to the tents or fix the houses at their own expense. Several camp residents living in the damaged homes told *The Syria Report* that the contractor and the Tarmala camp administration had pressured them not to communicate with IHH and the media.

Due to these scandals, all funding organisations stopped constructing housing units through the contractors, instead proposing a new project in early March to be implemented by the beneficiaries

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themselves, under the slogan: “Build your home with your hands.” Organisations are now relying on providing construction materials directly to the beneficiaries, in specific quantities and in accordance with technical specifications, estimated at \$600 per housing unit. The beneficiaries then build the home themselves at their own expense, a measure that has been welcomed even though construction fees are estimated to be around \$200. In this new setup, the role of the aid organisations is limited to overseeing construction, ensuring quantities and specifications of construction materials, and regulating their distribution to the beneficiaries.

Now the organisations funding the housing program have encouraged displaced people to purchase plots of land upon which they wish to build their housing units and determine their shares. *The Syria Report* was unable to determine how they would be able to buy the land and set its price, in cases where it is technically still owned by the Syrian state. After purchase and distribution of land, the new landowners must waive the property to a funding organisation in exchange for construction materials. Through this process, the new landowners actually lose their right to sell or invest in their properties, as the organisation administers and funds the construction project. Some displaced people have complained that this process is unfair and exploits their need for housing.

Housing Units at Tarmala Camp



A photo of the pledge to waive the property



Source: activists' accounts on social media