

## **Small Migrations of the Great Return: When Will the Drops Turn into a Flood?**

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Since 2020, the Azerbaijani government has unwaveringly declared the resettlement of the Karabakh territories, liberated from Armenian occupation, as one of its main priorities for the next 20 years. Several documents have been meticulously prepared in this direction, intended for public access and official use (programs, strategies, plans, etc.). The government's primary principle for the resettlement of Karabakh is that only the population registered in the districts located in the liberated areas will be resettled in Karabakh. For this reason, registration in these districts has been halted since November 2020.

Despite the discussion over the last four years of relocating Azerbaijani citizens not registered in these areas to Karabakh (e.g., the relocation of people who fled from Armenia to Hadrut or the opportunity for any Azerbaijani citizen to buy property in Khankendi), no concrete steps have been taken, and the efforts in this direction have remained incomplete.

The resettlement of Karabakh is being carried out based on the list of internally displaced persons registered in these areas as of 2020. Since the resettlement is funded by the state budget, the government is taking proactive measures to prevent potential misuse, ensuring the funds are used for their intended purpose. However, there is a significant discrepancy between official statistics and what could be called 'propaganda statistics.' Official statements since 1994 have claimed that 1 million people were displaced due to Armenian aggression. Yet, when the opportunity for real resettlement emerged after 2020, official statistics revealed significant falsifications concerning the number of people registered in the liberated areas, underscoring the need for accurate data.

A document prepared as part of the resettlement planning process (not available to the public, meant for official use) states: "According to the State Statistical Committee's official report, the total population registered in the districts and cities located in the territories of Karabakh liberated from Armenian occupation was 952.3 thousand people by the end of 2020. However, based on verifications with the relevant authorities, as of December 1, 2020, the actual population registered in the area was determined to be 880,194 people (8.7% of the country's population), or

approximately 230,000 families. Of these, 563.9 thousand people (64%) belong to the Karabakh economic region, and 316.3 thousand (36%) to the Eastern Zangezur economic region. Considering that the population registered in Karabakh includes those living in the liberated areas of Aghdam, Terter, and Fuzuli, the actual number becomes even smaller."

According to official statistics, 81.2% (714,456 people) of the population registered in the liberated areas of Karabakh are from districts and settlements that were under occupation, while the remaining 165,738 people are from the parts of Aghdam, Fuzuli, and Terter districts that were not occupied. This means that the government currently needs to work on resettling approximately 715,000 people, or 188,000 families, instead of the previously estimated 880,000 people and 230,000 families. Additionally, it is projected that the population in the liberated areas will increase by 29.14% to 1,136,740 people by the end of 2040.

On November 16, 2022, the "First State Program on the Great Return to the Liberated Territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan"[\[1\]](#) was adopted. The document outlines that the State Program should be monitored with consideration of the set targets, and preliminary, interim, and final results should be determined. The preliminary results should cover each year during the program's implementation, the interim results for 2023-2025, and the final results for 2026. However, unfortunately, the State Program provides only interim (2025) and final (2026) indicators for resettlement, making it impossible to assess and monitor the process annually.

Monitoring and evaluation of the State Program are to be carried out in accordance with the "Rules for the Preparation, Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation of State Programs," approved by the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan on March 6, 2021[\[2\]](#). This means that independent civil society organizations and experts will not be involved in the monitoring and evaluation process, which will be conducted by the public legal entity, the Center for Analysis of Economic Reforms and Communication. Since the results of their monitoring and evaluation have not been published on the Center's official website (in the Monitoring section)[\[3\]](#), it is difficult to comment on the quality of the work. The Center last announced[\[4\]](#) on September 19, 2024, that it had completed the monitoring and evaluation process for the first half of 2024, but did not mention whether resettlement or other targets had been achieved, relying instead on general statistics (not compared to target indicators). Thus, the requirements of the "Rules for the Preparation, Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation of State Programs" have not been fully adhered to.

According to the "First State Program on the Great Return to the Liberated Territories of the Republic of Azerbaijan," the goal is to resettle 10,270 families by the end of 2025 and 34,500

families by the end of 2026 in the liberated territories. As of October 20, 2024, the number of families and individuals resettled in the residential areas (villages, towns, cities) built in the liberated territories is presented in the table below.

**Table 1. Resettlement to the Liberated Territories** [\[5\]](#)

Administrative District	Population as of 2020 (number of people)	Number of Families Resettled	Resettled Population (number of people)	Resettled Population as a Percentage of Total District Population (%)	Projected Population by 2040 (number of people)
Fuzuli	125,256	822	3,132	2.5	170,240
Lachin	Lachin city	78,535	570	2,090	4.0
	Zabux village		217	823	
	Sus village		59	215	
Khojaly	28,644	44	169	0.6	35,060
Shusha	Shusha city	29,144	220	823	2.8
Zangilan	Agali village	42,529	175	871	2.1
	Talysh village	626	20	90	14.4
Jabrayil	Jabrayil city	72,668	36	117	0.2
Agdam	193,116	-	-	-	267,540
Kalbajar	83,994	-	-	-	104,930
Gubadli	38,572	-	-	-	49,500
Khankendi	55,900	-	-	-	62,680
Khojavend	42,312	-	-	-	54,410
<b>Total resettled population</b>		2,163 families	8,330 people		

As the table shows, 2,163 families (8,330 people) have been resettled in the liberated Karabakh territories to date. As 2024 is ending, this figure represents 21% of the target for 2025 (10,270 families) and 6.3% for 2026 (34,500 families).

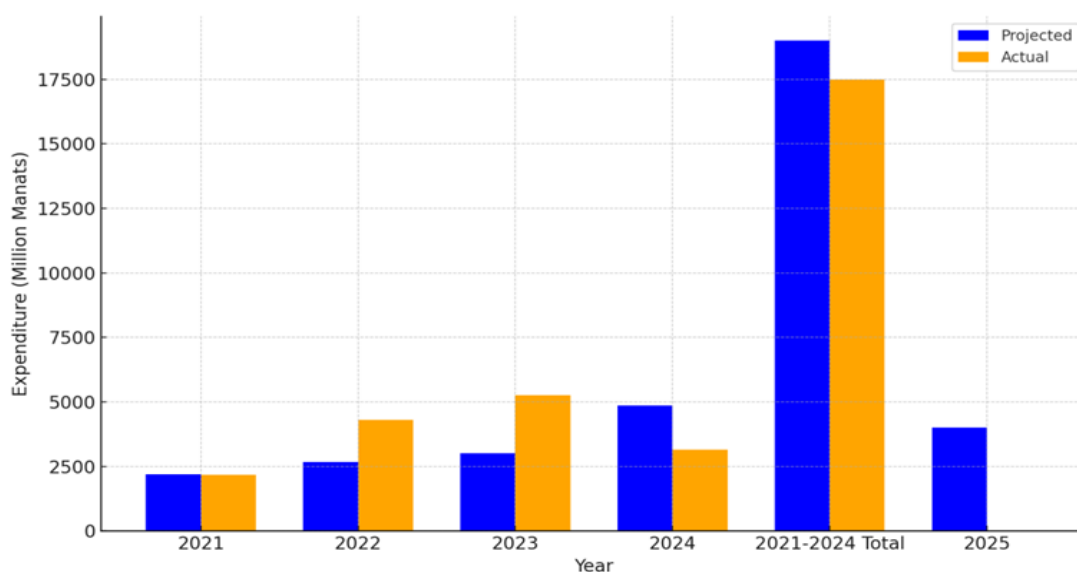
Construction is currently underway in several areas, including Jabrayil city (around 700 apartments), the villages of Horovlu (867 houses) and Shukurbeyli (635 houses) in the Jabrayil district, Aghdam city (470 flats), and the towns of Sarijali (203 houses), Khidirli (719 houses), and Kangarli (292 houses) in the Aghdam district, as well as in Zangilan city (104 apartments). However, experience shows that construction projects in the liberated areas are often delayed and not completed as planned. This is primarily due to funding shortages, lack of transparency in public procurement, insufficient accountability for expenditures, and limited public oversight.

The President initiated numerous examples of projects with a set completion date but were still ongoing. For instance, the construction of the village of Dovletyarly in the Fuzuli district, which was supposed to be the first "smart village," was planned to begin in August 2023, but construction has not yet started. Similarly, construction of the villages of Pirehmedli and Dadali in Fuzuli, which was supposed to start in October 2023, has yet to begin. The foundations of several villages, including Cahangirbeyli, Alibeyli, and Mammedbeyli in Zangilan and Mahrizli and Zilanli in Gubadli, were laid in 2023 but have faced similar delays.

The State Program for the Restoration of Karabakh outlines eight specific funding sources for activities in the region. However, to date, only one of these sources, the state budget of Azerbaijan, has been utilized. The exception to this is one school and one creative center, which were built with the support of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The potential of other sources, such as the State Oil Fund of Azerbaijan, the Karabakh Revival Fund, the Azerbaijan Business Development Fund, the Agrarian Credit and Development Agency under the Ministry of Agriculture, local and foreign investments, public-private partnerships, and funds from international organizations and donors, remains untapped.

Since 2020, including the first nine months of 2024, approximately 17.5 billion manats have been spent on the restoration of the liberated territories. **Graph 1** shows the projected and actual expenditures from the state budget for constructing infrastructure in Karabakh, including roads, electricity, gas, water systems, residential areas, administrative buildings (schools, hospitals, various centers), and more.

**Graph 1. Projected and Actual Expenditures for the Restoration of Karabakh from the State Budget, in Million Manats (2021-2025) [6]**



Based on the data from **Graph 1**, initial general conclusions can be drawn, but detailed statistics (such as allocations by district and specific purposes like mine clearance, demolition, communications, urban planning justification, construction of administrative and residential buildings, transportation, etc.) are needed for a deeper analysis. The trend in actual allocations from the state budget shows a decrease starting from 2024, which is expected to continue into 2025.

According to the draft law "On the State Budget of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2025"<sup>[7]</sup> prepared by the Ministry of Finance, it is planned to allocate 4 billion manats for the restoration of Karabakh in 2025, which amounts to 10.1% of the total budget expenditures. This figure is 17.6% less than the corresponding projected amount for 2024. Although the Azerbaijani government aims to resettle all internally displaced persons in the liberated territories of Karabakh by 2040, under the current conditions, this seems unlikely. However, by the end of 2026, when the first phase of the Great Return outlined in the First State Program concludes, it will be possible to make more concrete predictions regarding the progress and final timeline of the resettlement.

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[1] <https://e-qanun.az/framework/52757>

[2] <https://e-qanun.az/framework/47063>

[3] <https://ereforms.gov.az/az/monitoring/dovlet-proqramlari>

[4] <https://ereforms.gov.az/az/media/xeberler/boyuk-qayidisa-dair-i-dovlet-proqrami-nin-2024-cu-ilin-birinci-yarisi-uzre-icrasinin-monitorinqi-basa-catib-1147>

[5] The table was compiled by the author of the article on the basis of official statistical data.

[6] The table was compiled by the author of the article on the basis of official statistical data.

[7] <https://maliyye.gov.az/scripts/pdfjs/web/viewer.html?file=/uploads/static-pages/files/670f76861636b.pdf>