

Syrians turn plastic waste into rugs to make a living

June 11 2023, by Aaref Watad



Abu Mohammed sifts through rubbish at a dump near the village of Hazreh.

At a rubbish dump in northwest Syria, Mohammed Behlal rummages for plastic to be sold to recyclers and transformed into floor rugs and other items in the impoverished rebel enclave.

In rebel-held Syria, recycling is rarely an environmental impulse but rather a grim lifeline for needy residents looking for work or items they otherwise could not afford.

Braving the stench, insects and risk of disease, 39-year-old Behlal hacks through the rubbish pile with a scythe and his bare hands.

He and two of his six children earn a living sifting through the refuse in Idlib province's village of Hezreh, earning \$7 to \$10 a week each.

"It's tiring... but what can we do, we have to put up with this hard labor," said Behlal, who was displaced from neighboring Aleppo province during Syria's civil war.

"Thank God, at least we have work with the trash," he added.

Behlal was shot in the leg during fighting and has had trouble finding employment.

Hunched over to collect pieces of plastic or metal, he throws everything into a bag to sell to a nearby scrap facility.

Syria's conflict has killed more than 500,000 people, and around half of the country's pre-war population has been forced from their homes since fighting broke out in 2011.



A child worker sorts through mats and rugs made from recycled plastic at a factory in Sarmada.

More than four million people, most of them dependent on aid, live in areas controlled by jihadists and Turkish-backed groups in Syria's north and northwest.

In a large scrapyards next to [agricultural fields](#), workers sort plastic junk loosely into piles according to color.

They then cut it up and crush it into small pieces that are washed and melted into plastic pellets.

Plastic thread

Farhan Sleiman, 29, is among those who handle the material brought in from the landfill.

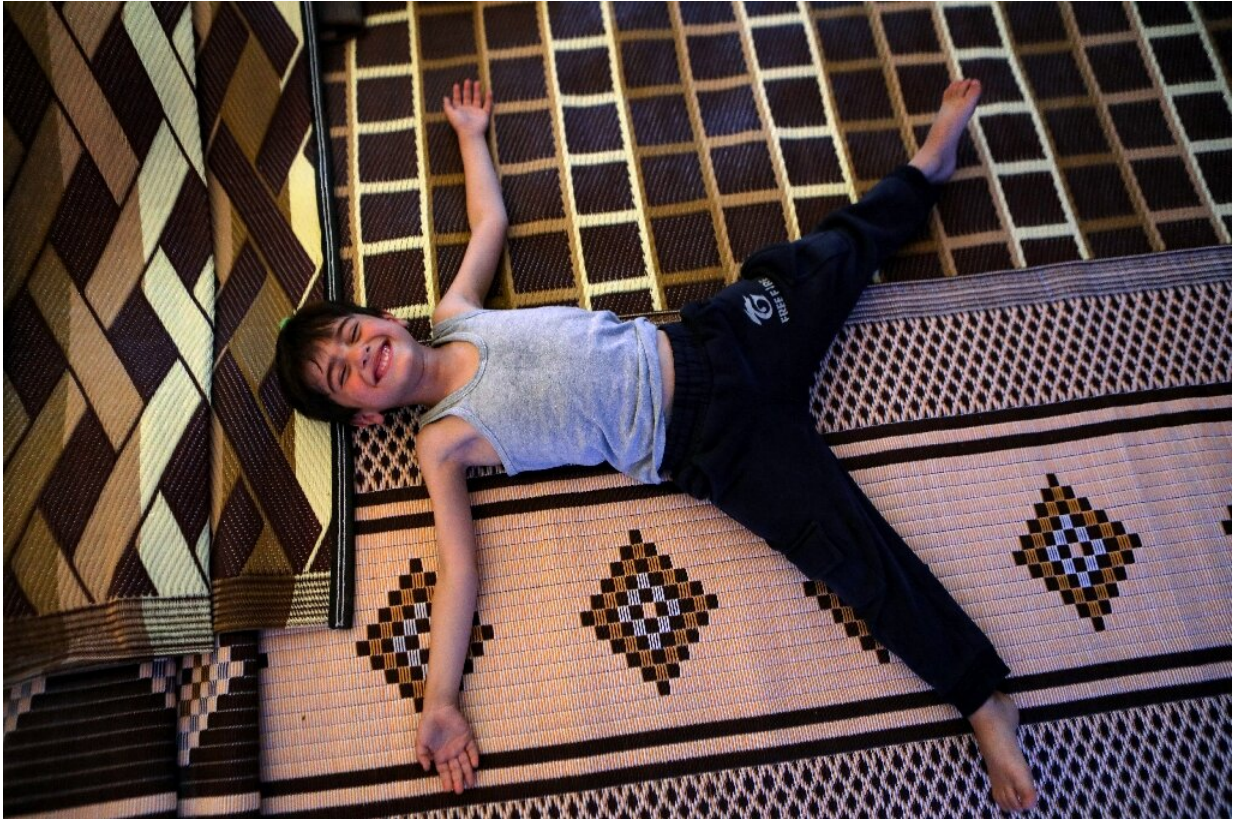
"We buy plastic from roaming trash-picker trucks and children," said Sleiman, originally from Homs province.

He expressed fear of the risk of contracting "cholera or chronic illnesses" from working with the rubbish.

Elsewhere in northern Idlib province, workers at a factory making mats and rugs churn out brightly colored plastic thread while large weaving machines click and clack.



Working with recycled plastic to make cheap mats and rugs.



The mats have become a hit in an area where many people are displaced and live in basic tents or makeshift dwellings.

Factory owner Khaled Rashu, 34, says rug-making is a family tradition.

"We have more than 30 employees" at the factory, he boasted as a significant feat in a region where many are jobless.

Large mats featuring geometric designs, some made with striking red or

purple plastic thread, emerge from the weaving machines and are stacked into piles.

Shop owner Mohammed al-Qassem, 30, is among those selling the mats, which he says are a hit in an area where many people are displaced and live in basic tents or makeshift dwellings.

The mats made from recycled plastic cost between \$5 and \$15, while traditional Persian-style rugs are around \$100.

"In summer, demand for [plastic](#) mats increases" because they retain less heat, Qassem said from his shop in Maaret Masrin, a town in Idlib province.

But "they can also be used in winter and are less costly", he added.

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