



 REPORT SYRIA

Blame Game over Syrians Stranded in the Desert

JUNE 18, 2018 — ARON LUND

Looking at a map, nothing would seem easier than to drive a convoy of food and medical supplies to Rukban, a camp for refugees and displaced civilians on the Syrian–Jordanian border some 260 kilometers east of Damascus. Though the terrain is rough, the camp is located in an area of relative calm and stability, and it could be reached from Amman, Damascus, or both. But Syria’s seven-year civil war says otherwise.

All sides now blame each other for preventing aid deliveries to the tens of thousands of Syrians trapped in this desolate desert region, and Rukban has emerged as a cruel illustration of how civilians are snared in the tangled threads of sovereignty and proxy control that constitute current-day Syria.

For half a year, aid convoys to Rukban have been held up by disagreements among a dizzying array of actors, including: President Bashar al-Assad’s government, which uses its status as Syria’s internationally recognized sovereign to twist the rules guiding international humanitarian missions; the kingdom of Jordan, which bans UN cross-border assistance to the camp; the U.S. military, which controls the area but won’t guarantee the safety of aid workers seeking access to the camp; armed fighters inside Rukban, who tangle with humanitarians and with each other for control; and the jihadi extremists of the so-called Islamic State, whose infiltration of the camp has cemented its isolation.

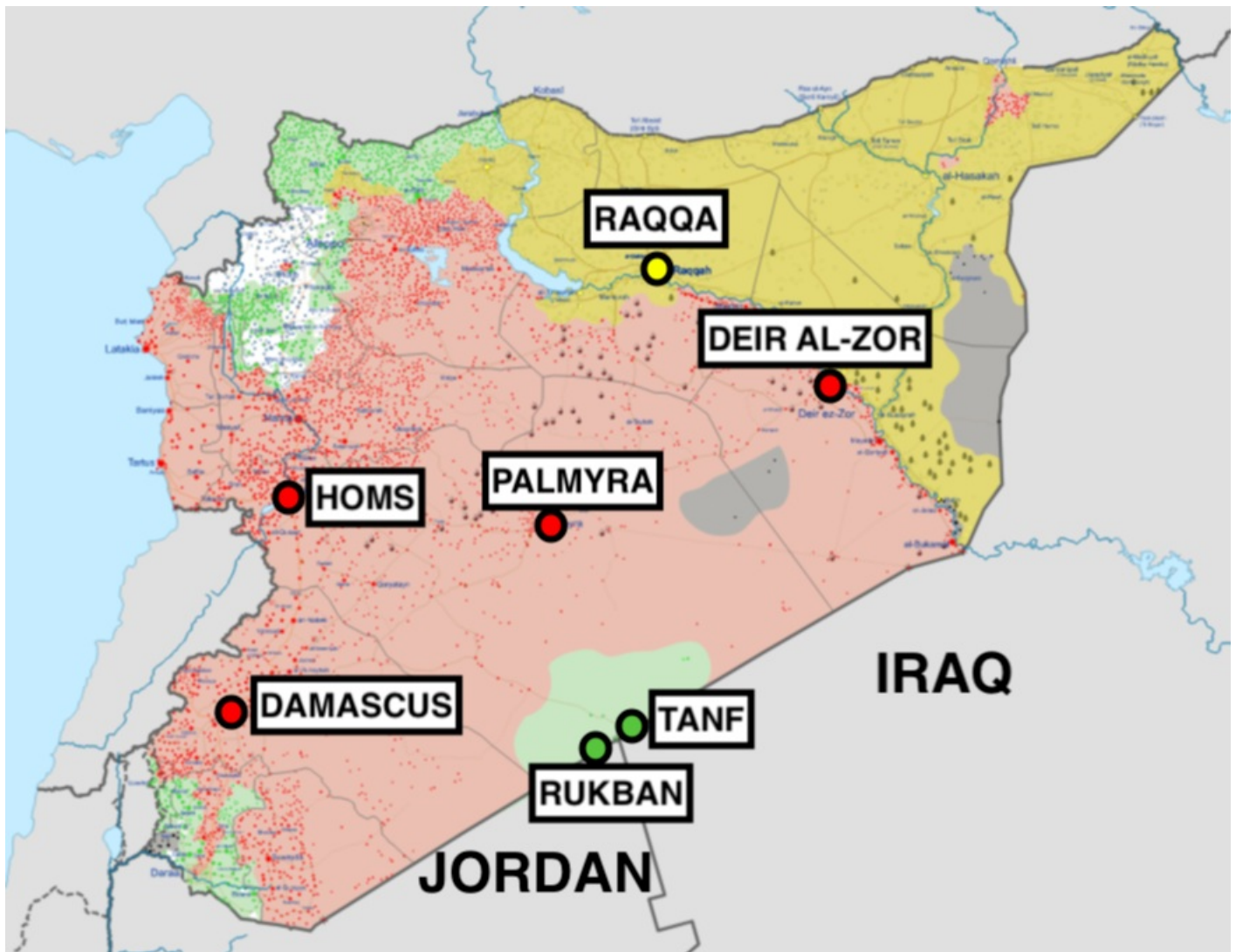
This report, which seeks to shine a light on the deadlock in Rukban and on the broader problem of Syria’s fragmentation, has been supported in part by a research grant from The Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. It draws on more than a dozen interviews with government officials, experts, and humanitarians interviewed remotely and in Jordan, on unpublished UN and humanitarian reporting, and on a survey of Arabic and English press coverage, social media, and think tank research, including a previous TCF study of the Tanf–Rukban problem.¹

Though the Rukban crisis is in many ways unique, it also illustrates the complexity of humanitarian operations in a fragmented country such as Syria, where every supply route seems to stretch through rival spheres of influence, and where unreliable proxies regularly upend agreements signed by their supposed masters. What is happening in Rukban is a bizarre form of starvation-by-committee, and its victims are Syrian civilians whose only crime was to ask for safety and sustenance.

No Man’s Land

As described in a TCF report by Sam Heller in September 2017, the Rukban camp first began to form in 2013–2014 when Jordan closed several informal border crossings further west.² The fact that a sometimes-open crossing remained for a time in the Rukban area lured thousands of civilians to this otherwise uninhabited region, creating a small border

settlement of hopefuls. The population at Rukban grew as violence engulfed eastern Syria following the rise of the Islamic State, also known as ISIS and Daesh, and more people arrived from the tribal areas of the Badiyah, the Syrian desert.³



RED: GOVERNMENT CONTROL. GREEN/WHITE: MIXED REBEL/JIHADI CONTROL. GREY: ISLAMIC STATE CONTROL. YELLOW: KURDISH CONTROL. SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA, MODIFIED BY AUTHOR.

The camp itself is a makeshift affair, but it has been estimated to hold as many as 50,000 people, 75–80 percent of whom are women and children.⁴ The region around Rukban and the nearby Syrian–Iraqi border crossing at Tanf consists of flat, rocky desert with little to sustain human life. “It’s like Mars out there,” a senior U.S. official told the *Washington Post*. “Just desert and a road.”⁵

Conditions in Rukban are bad even by Syrian standards, with humanitarian reporting from 2017 indicating that more than one out of ten newborns died for lack of proper care while four out of five inhabitants were unable to secure enough

food to eat.⁶ In the absence well-functioning camp administration, clan leaders, criminal bosses, and armed factions have filled the void, extorting civilians and skirmishing with each other for control over the mostly smuggling-based camp economy. Water is piped in across the Jordanian border, but the flow is sometimes disrupted, forcing inhabitants to pay militia-linked merchants that control nearby wells.

The political status of the camp is no less complicated. Outside actors cannot even agree on where Rukban is located: in Syria, in Jordan, or both? The question has political and legal implications, since Syrians in Syria would be regarded as internally displaced persons (IDPs) while Syrians in Jordan would be seen as refugees seeking asylum.

In reality, Rukban straddles both countries. Satellite photographs show that while one part of the settlement is clearly located inside Syria, other parts are found in a no-man's-land between the two sand berms that mark the border, including right next to Jordan's berm—i.e. on Jordan's side of the border. But although the evidence might seem hard to argue with, Amman has continued to insist that Rukban's inhabitants are displaced inside their own country and that their welfare is therefore a Syrian or international responsibility.⁷

For its part, the Syrian government may lay claim to the border region, but it exercises no control over it. For years, the area around Rukban and the nearby Tanf border crossing has been held by the U.S.-led Global Coalition Against Daesh, set up to fight the Islamic State in 2014.

In a further twist, the coalition forces that rule the sky and the surrounding desert have only limited influence over Syrian armed factions inside the camp, whose internal politics remain opaque to outsiders. As obscure as they may seem, these issues of overlapping and contradictory control are now at the heart of Rukban's predicament.

How America Came to Own Rukban

In 2016, American, British, and Norwegian special forces began deploying to Jordan and to the Syrian side of the Tanf crossing. U.S.-backed rebels had captured it from the Islamic State that spring, reportedly with Jordanian assistance.⁸

Damascus objected loudly to their presence, but Coalition members did not view their mission as being directed at Assad or his allies.⁹ They wanted to use the area as a jump-off point for attacks on the Islamic State in eastern Syria's Deir al-Zor region.

To reduce the risk of great-power clashes inside Syria, U.S. and Russian officers negotiated a fifty-five-kilometer aerial deconfliction zone around Tanf, and Moscow communicated to its Syrian and Iranian allies that it would not challenge U.S. control there. The flip-side of this understanding was that the Coalition would stick to its anti-Islamic State mandate and provide no support for rebel attacks on Assad's forces.¹⁰

"The Coalition does not hold territory in Syria, but takes appropriate measures to ensure the safety and security of its forces and Defeat ISIS partner forces," said Major Adrian Rankine-Galloway of the U.S. Marine Corps, a Pentagon spokesperson. "The most effective means of ensuring the safety and security of our forces is the deconfliction line, which we use to communicate with Russian forces to ensure that our respective forces, and partner forces, are not endangered."¹¹

Until 2017, Coalition forces seem to have felt no special responsibility for the people trapped in Rukban, viewing the



RUKBAN CAMP SEEN FROM THE AIR. SOURCE: VIDEO STILL, BBC DOCUMENTARY.

In early summer 2017, however, Iranian-led militias and Syrian government loyalists moved into the surrounding desert, attacking both U.S.-backed rebels and the Islamic State, which was then already in retreat.¹² Whenever pro-Assad forces strayed into the deconfliction zone, they were hit by U.S. air strikes to drive them back across the fifty-five-kilometer perimeter—yet they kept testing the limits of America's commitment to the area.¹³ "It was a scary few weeks," a senior State Department official told the *Washington Post*.¹⁴

However, since the U.S. Air Force would not strike in defense of its rebel allies outside the fifty-five-kilometer limit, Iranian- and Russian-backed Syrian loyalists could sweep through the wider desert with ease. By late summer, they had

captured all territory outside the perimeter and severed Tanf’s land route to Deir al-Zor. The deconfliction zone remained as an isolated bubble of Coalition-held land, jutting out into the Syrian desert from the tri-border area.

Inside that bubble lay the Tanf crossing, but also Rukban—and from that point on, the U.S.-led coalition was saddled with at least some responsibility for the camp, whose continued existence was entirely contingent on U.S. protection.¹⁵ Still, Coalition forces declined to establish a direct presence inside Rukban, viewing it as unruly, unsafe, and—most of all—unrelated to their mission.

At that point, most of America’s allies had already left the area. The British and Norwegian troops appear to have pulled out of Tanf during summer and autumn 2017, arguing that clashes with pro-Assad troops would be incompatible with the narrow anti-jihadi mission they had signed up for. While reluctant to discuss specifics, defense ministry spokespersons from the United Kingdom and Norway acknowledge that they are no longer involved with operations at Tanf.¹⁶

A Coalition spokesperson insists that the deployment at Tanf remains a multi-country effort: “There are Coalition and partner forces operating in Tanf, not solely U.S. forces,” the official said in May 2018, possibly referring to the involvement of Jordanian special forces.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it seems overwhelmingly clear that the foreign presence around Tanf and Rukban had by late 2017 boiled down to what is in practice an American mission, run by American troops for American reasons.¹⁸

Rebels without a Cause

Now heading into its third year as an American mini-protectorate, the Tanf–Rukban zone is patrolled by Coalition forces and their chosen Syrian partner, Maghawir al-Thawra, to “interdict and find ISIS fighters that are trying to transit the area.”¹⁹ Clashes were reported as recently as June 4, when a Maghawir al-Thawra patrol reportedly killed seven Islamic State fighters trying to bypass its checkpoints.²⁰

A small, Tanf-based band of fighters originating in eastern Syria, Maghawir al-Thawra’s members—numbering in the dozens or low hundreds—have fought the Islamic State under U.S. supervision for the past three or four years.²¹ Described by the Coalition as “a trusted partner,” its fighters have been carefully security-vetted for inclusion in the Pentagon’s train-and-equip program.²² Though the group continues to fly the Free Syrian Army flag and portray itself as a force for Assad’s overthrow, Maghawir al-Thawra is held on a tight leash by its American masters and barred from attacking Syrian government forces.

Inside Rukban, things are far more complicated. There are no Coalition troops on the scene and the camp has repeatedly been rocked by bombings, assassinations, and factional shootouts. Awash in arms, one fighter has called it “a jungle.”²³ The situation is so bad that Coalition patrols steer well clear of the camp to avoid coming into contact with its volatile mix of half-defunct insurgent groups, smugglers, suspected jihadi sleeper cells, and gun-toting clans of uncertain allegiance.

“The Americans do not control the camp,” said Sam Heller, who is now a senior analyst with the International Crisis Group. “That falls to Maghawir al-Thawra and to these other armed factions that have now nominally come under Maghawir al-Thawra’s leadership, although to what practical extent seems debatable. You also have armed elements at Rukban that are not part of a flagged faction, including armed clan elements from the Badiyah [desert] and eastern Syria.”²⁴

Although a Coalition official told the author that Maghawir al-Thawra has no presence inside Rukban, the group certainly does hold some sway there, including through its ties to a handful of half-demobilized Free Syrian Army-flagged insurgent factions.²⁵ These include a proxy force known as the Free Tribes Army, which has been Jordan’s preferred intermediary in the Tanf–Rukban area.²⁶ Also present are the remnants of a formerly Pentagon-backed group called the Qaryatein Martyr Battalions and three factions formerly linked to the CIA’s covert war in Syria: the Army of the Eastern Lions, the Martyr Ahmed al-Abdo Forces, and the Shaam Liberation Army.²⁷

Since about a year ago now, these have been rebels without a cause. When pro-Assad forces surrounded the Tanf–Rukban enclave in summer 2017, they found themselves locked inside a small patch of empty desert, lacking U.S.





A MAGHAWIR AL-THAWRA PATROL NEAR TANF IN NOVEMBER 2017. SOURCE: JACOB CONNOR, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE.

approval for any action that would violate the deconfliction line.²⁸ The Qaryatein Martyrs Battalions refused these orders and consequently lost their Pentagon support, while, in an unrelated decision, U.S. President Donald Trump canceled CIA payments to all other factions.²⁹

All in all, several hundred trained and armed rebel fighters found themselves without pay or protection. In the months that followed, some gave up the war and returned to government-held Syria, while others appear to have been co-opted into a Maghawir al-Thawra-run scheme to maintain order in and around Rukban. The rest have simply melted into the camp's chaotic stew of guns, clans, crime, and simmering extremism.³⁰

Jihadism and Border Violence

The Jordanian government takes Syria very seriously: it can't afford not to. According to authorities in Amman, the kingdom now hosts some 1.3 million Syrians.³¹ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) puts the number of registered Syrian refugees closer to 662,000, but there is no disputing the strain that this has placed on Jordanian infrastructure, education, and health services.³² Attempts to raise taxes and cut subsidies to shore up the country's ailing economy recently triggered street protests in Amman, forcing the prime minister to resign.³³ In the past few years Jordan has also been rattled by a string of jihadi attacks, including against the all-important tourism sector. Some were linked to Syria.³⁴

In Rukban, all of Jordan's Syria-related fears seem to have been wrapped into one single, scary package: a large refugee camp teeming with militancy, ready to spill across the border at any moment.

The breaking point came on June 21, 2016, when an Islamic State suicide bomber drove his explosives-packed car from Rukban into a Jordanian border post, killing seven soldiers. The authorities responded by declaring the area a closed military zone.³⁵

Since then, the Jordanian government has continued to report sporadic clashes and armed attacks near Rukban, often blaming "terrorists."³⁶ When NBC News visited the border in May 2017, military helicopters refused to fly too close to the camp, claiming that they were at risk of being shot down by Islamic State fighters armed with anti-aircraft weapons. Brigadier-General Sami Kafawin told reporters Rukban could be hosting as many as four thousand gunmen. "They consider the camp a safe haven," he said. "We consider it an imminent threat."³⁷

Western officials recognize that the camp is unsafe and that it seems to have been penetrated by jihadi cells, but also accuse Jordanian authorities of fear-mongering and demonizing civilians in the camp.

"It's not easy to say how many of the perhaps 50,000 inhabitants of Rukban are Islamic State warriors," said a European diplomat based in Amman. "Many of them are from areas where the Islamic State used to be strong, but the majority are women and children who fled from there."³⁸

Amman Bans Cross-Border Aid

In the months before the Islamic State attack in June 2016, Jordan had reluctantly bowed to American requests to screen thousands of Rukban inhabitants for possible resettlement in the kingdom. But after the bombing, all such plans were shelved and replaced by a harshly enforced border closure.

"The Jordanian border really is closed," a humanitarian worker told the author during an interview in Amman in April. "If you come too close, they shoot you, and this is well understood by the population living on the other side."³⁹

The Jordanian government even banned aid teams from accessing Rukban, forcing groups like the International Committee of the Red Cross to evacuate the berm area.⁴⁰ Despite growing international criticism, the kingdom stuck to its guns after pro-Assad forces cut rebel-controlled smuggling routes in mid-2017, worsening Rukban's humanitarian crisis.

“The residents of the Rukban camp are Syrian citizens on Syrian soil, which makes dealing with the camp a Syrian and international responsibility and not a Jordanian one,” Minister of Foreign and Expatriates Affairs Ayman Safadi said in a meeting with reporters in October 2017. “Jordan will not permit refugees from the Rukban camp to enter the kingdom,” he added, “and it will not accept any mechanism for dealing with it that could make treating the situation there a Jordanian responsibility in the future.”⁴¹

That month, several Western governments made a formal demarche criticizing Jordan’s attitude towards Rukban.

“The EU stands united on the issue of Jordan’s responsibility per international humanitarian law, and a demarche was made to try to persuade the government,” the Amman-based European diplomat said, explaining that the union “has voiced repeated and at times sharply worded criticism against Jordan over its opposition to aid deliveries.” Regardless of any security issues, the diplomat argued that it should be possible “to hand over food packages to people in the camp without incurring any risk, and mothers should be allowed to give birth in hospitals, which is something the UN has consistently demanded.”

But such demands have fallen on deaf ears, with Amman only permitting the delivery of water, very limited medical assistance, and a small number of one-off food drops by crane across the berm, to avert outright starvation. Jordanian decision-makers seem to fear that any sign of flexibility will turn into a slippery slope, ending with the resettlement of Rukban’s inhabitants in Jordan and potentially encouraging more Syrians to head south.⁴²

“To Jordan,” the diplomat concludes, “this is primarily about not wanting to have a greater responsibility for the future of these refugees.”⁴³

The Jordanian Foreign Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Damascus Stalls Deliveries of Cross-Line Aid

There is, of course, another way to get aid to Rukban: by delivering it from inside Syria. But moving food from Damascus is easier said than done, since Rukban is in the hands of insurgents working under a U.S. Air Force umbrella, while the aid would have to be transported from the heart of government-controlled Syria.

No convoy in Damascus can load its cargo and move east without Syrian government permission, nor could it safely negotiate the checkpoint-cluttered road into the deconfliction zone without security guarantees from all parties. With so many actors involved, politics immediately enter into the picture.

In most instances where the UN has tried to provide cross-line⁴⁴ assistance to Syrians, the obstacle has been Assad's government.⁴⁵ In theory, UN Security Resolution 2165, which was unanimously adopted in 2014 and has been renewed annually, allows the UN to send aid from Damascus into opposition-held territory without awaiting permission.⁴⁶ In practice, this is impossible, given the government's physical control of the space in which humanitarians operate. UN offices in Damascus have therefore continued to request permission from the Syrian government for all cross-line aid missions—and it is rarely granted. More than two out of three cross-line convoys requested by the UN in 2017 were blocked by a lack of Syrian government approval.⁴⁷

In Rukban's case, however, Damascus has lately shown some flexibility. Assad has political incentives to permit aid to flow from Damascus, as a way to keep the Tanf region structurally linked to his capital, instead of letting it drift toward



RUKBAN CAMP. SOURCE: VIDEO STILL, BBC DOCUMENTARY.

Rukban.

The Syrian Foreign Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

The UN first requested permission for a food convoy to Rukban in September 2017. UN agencies and international humanitarian organizations in Damascus then drew up a plan for a thirty-truck convoy of UN and Syrian Arab Red Crescent assistance to some 30,000 people in the camp.⁴⁸ However, Assad's government responded in traditional fashion: it did not respond at all, thereby blocking the mission.

As conditions in the camp deteriorated with the onset of winter, and Damascus still would not budge, the Jordanian

government finally relented and permitted another emergency cross-border delivery in early January 2018.⁴⁹ Like in the past, aid workers weren't allowed to enter the camp—they had to lift food crates across the border berm by crane.⁵⁰

No American Security Guarantees in Rukban

“Ever since the crane operation to deliver humanitarian assistance to these people came to an end in January 2018, we've been trying to send humanitarian convoys to Rukban,” UN Resident Coordinator in Syria Ali Al-Za'tari recently said, in a recorded comment provided to the author by the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA.⁵¹

In mid-March, finally, there seemed to be a breakthrough. The Syrian government green-lighted a convoy to Rukban on March 18, with a slight twist: the convoy should not be led by the UN, as requested, but by the International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC.

Yet, three months later, no aid has been delivered, as new obstacles appear to have cropped up inside the Coalition-controlled deconfliction zone.

“Unfortunately, we don't have the essential security guarantees from the controlling power in that area, and therefore the UN is unable to go with personnel into Rukban, because of the unmitigated risks that exist there,” Al-Za'tari explained, noting the presence of numerous armed factions inside the camp.⁵²

Although UN officials dance diplomatically around the point, the problem appears to be that Coalition forces refuse to escort aid workers all the way to the camp. They are only willing to provide security from the deconfliction perimeter to a point located some ten kilometers from Rukban itself.⁵³

The reason seems to be that the U.S. military views Rukban as too volatile and dangerous to approach, perhaps particularly with hundreds of tons of aid in tow. The number of armed camp-dwellers is believed to outnumber the small Coalition garrison at Tanf by some margin, and entering with an aid convoy could very easily trigger clashes: desperate civilians could storm delivery sites, outlaw elements could try to grab the trucks or set off a bomb, or fights could break out among aid recipients. Unwilling to wade deeper into the political mess that is Rukban, the United States has apparently decided to wash its hands of the problem and leave it to aid workers to sort out the related security issues on their own.⁵⁴

ICRC representatives are now trying to negotiate directly with Rukban-based insurgents and clan leaders, but talks appear to be progressing very slowly.⁵⁵

The attitude of the rival factions ruling Rukban remains unclear. Some in the camp appear to have objected to the involvement of the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), which is an indispensable local partner for the ICRC but remains close to Assad's government.⁵⁶ Given past experience of armed groups interfering with humanitarian assistance, it is also likely that factions are competing for influence over the distribution of aid for the same reasons that Assad's government wants to be involved: they want to siphon off resources and control who gets to benefit.

Dropping off aid at the ten-kilometer mark for pickup by local representatives would seem an unorthodox and politically problematic solution, but in his recorded comments, Al-Za'tari said that the UN is willing to deliver aid "at a distance" if no other solution can be found.⁵⁷

However, if Syrian authorities see an outcome taking shape that isn't to their liking, they could rescind their own permissions and security guarantees on the argument that the ICRC must not let its aid be commandeered by terrorists (which is how the government views all armed groups in Rukban). Assad's allies have already picked up on the problem, and appear to be laying the groundwork for such a rejection.

"The U.S. regional command refuses to guarantee safe entry for UN and ICRC aid convoys, insisting that all products, water and necessities should be transferred only to militant gangs controlled by Americans," Russian Defense Ministry spokesperson Major-General Igor Konashenkov told reporters in early May.⁵⁸

The U.S. military disputes that, pointing back to the other side. "The Coalition welcomes the arrival of humanitarian aid to Rukban and, contrary to repeated Assad regime and Russian misinformation, has done nothing to impede the flow of aid to the site," said the Pentagon's Maj. Rankine-Galloway, who also claimed that "the Assad regime has continuously obstructed aid convoys traveling from western Syria to Rukban."⁵⁹

Neither the Russian Foreign Ministry nor the Russian mission to the United Nations responded to requests for comment.

A Tragedy with Many Authors

That's where the situation still stands. Since June 2016, the Jordanian border remains closed, and the Damascus–Rukban convoy proposed in September 2017 has yet to happen. Meanwhile, all sides continue to blame each other, clouding the issue in propaganda and disinformation.

The truth seems to be that all major parties involved share at least some of the blame for Rukban's disastrous deadlock: Amman, for its ban on cross-border aid; Damascus, for long obstructing cross-line aid and for the untrammelled persecution of dissidence that dissuades so many displaced civilians from returning home; the armed factions in Rukban, or at least some of them, for refusing to let humanitarians work without interference; and Washington, behind its Coalition flag, for its evident lack of effort to secure the rights of civilians in an area where it is the *de facto* occupying power.

Perhaps there is some light at the end of the tunnel. The fact that the dispute has been whittled down to the very last leg of the convoy's journey is a sign that progress can be made. Talks continue, solutions to outstanding issues may eventually be found, and, once that happens, the trucks are ready to roll.

But the absurdity of the problem is galling. Were it not for military roadblocks and political manipulation, the distance from Damascus to Rukban could be traveled in the space of several hours. Failing that, there would still be access from Jordan.

Yet Syria's splintered geography continues to prevent cooperation, inviting all sides to exploit the issue in order to frustrate and scandalize each other instead of working constructively to address a pressing humanitarian crisis, even though that could be done swiftly and in isolation from political concerns. With tens of thousands waiting in the windswept no-man's-land between the berms, the clock is ticking—and even if aid may one day reach them, a sustainable solution to Rukban's ongoing tragedy is nowhere in sight.

Notes

1. Sam Heller, "Desert Base Is Displaced Syrians' Last Line of Defense," The Century Foundation, September 8, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/desert-base-displaced-syrians-last-line-defense>.
2. Sam Heller, "Desert Base Is Displaced Syrians' Last Line of Defense," The Century Foundation, September 8, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/desert-base-displaced-syrians-last-line-defense>. For a useful chronology of how the Rukban camp emerged, see also "Jordan: Syrians Blocked, Stranded in Desert," Human Rights Watch, June 3, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/03/jordan-syrians-blocked-stranded-desert>.
3. Most inhabitants come from formerly nomadic tribes from eastern Syria, particularly the Badiya desert east of Hama, Homs, Qalamoun, and Damascus. The largest tribes in the camp are thought to be Bani Khaled and al-Ummour, though

there are many others: Ruwallah, Naim, etcetera. In September 2017, the evacuation of the nearby Hadalat border camp toward Rukban introduced several thousand new inhabitants from the Houran region of southern Syria and from the Damascus countryside, but Rukban has remained strongly dominated by Bedouin clans from the deserts of central and eastern Syria. Palmyra-linked tribes are seen as particularly influential, and members of al-Ummour reportedly have considerable sway over the camp's smuggling-based economy.

4. UN estimates of how many people live in Rukban have fluctuated over time, from around 30,000 to 80,000 inhabitants. Some more recent approximations hover just below 10,000 households or 50,000 individuals, though humanitarians note that these figures remain very uncertain. For an example of a public UN estimate, see "The UN undertakes aid delivery at the Berm based on approval by the Government of Jordan for exceptional delivery of assistance to Syrians," United Nations/Relief Web, January 10, 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/un-undertakes-aid-delivery-berm-based-approval-government-jordan-exceptional-delivery>.

5. Missy Ryan and Greg Jaffe, "In Syria, an accidental bulwark against Iran shows confusion of Trump policy," *Washington Post*, May 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syria-an-accidental-bulwark-against-iran-shows-confusion-of-trump-policy/2018/05/12/458ed726-4ed7-11e8-af46-b1d6dc0d9bfe_story.html.

6. "Jordan/United States: Transfer 70,000 Trapped Syrians," Human Rights Watch, August 5, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/08/05/jordan/united-states-transfer-70000-trapped-syrians>. The figures cited apply to mid-2017 and are drawn from "Operational Plan to deliver humanitarian assistance to Al-Rukban camp," Syria Humanitarian Country Team, November 2017 (copy in author's possession).

7. Bethan Staton, "Syrians trapped in desert no man's land," IRIN News, June 9, 2016, <https://www.irinnews.org/special-report/2016/06/09/syrians-trapped-desert-no-mans-land>.

8. Dania Akkad, "Jordan begins covert operations against IS in Syria," *Middle East Eye*, March 25, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordanian-special-forces-poised-enter-syria-2033698172>; "British special forces 'operating alongside rebels in Syria'," *Middle East Eye*, June 6, 2016, www.middleeasteye.net/news/british-special-forces-operating-alongside-rebels-syria-1780850703; Mitch Prothero and Mike Giglio, "US Special Forces Are Secretly Training Syrian Rebels And Fighting Alongside Them," *Buzzfeed*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/mitchprothero/us-special-forces-are-secretly-training-syrian-rebels-and>; Amal A. Wahab, Kairo, Eirik Grasaas-Stavenes, and Yohan Shanmugaratnam, "Ba Norge krige mot regimet," *Klassekampen*, April 20, 2018, www.klassekampen.no/article/20180420/ARTICLE/180429997.

9. The original U.S. deployment of forces to Syria fell under a 2001 authorization of military force (AUMF) against al-Qaeda, on the argument that, by association, this also covered the Islamic State. In a subsequent legal paper, the White House made it clear that it had no intention of attacking Assad's army or his allies in Syria, though U.S. forces were empowered to take "necessary and appropriate" defensive measures if threatened. Quinta Jurecic, "White House Letter on Legal Basis for Syria Airstrikes," *Lawfare*, August 2, 2017, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/white-house-letter-legal-basis-syria-airstrikes>. Other Coalition nations had similar self-imposed political and legal restrictions, framing their deployment exclusively in terms of the anti-Islamic State struggle. For example, the Norwegian military reportedly formulated the following guidelines to avoid mission creep or legal disputes: "Norwegian forces shall not be involved in the struggle

against the Assad regime. If this precondition ceases to apply, the mission will be canceled. Norwegian forces have no mandate to support operations that are not directed against the Islamic State.” Sveinung Berg Bentzrød and Silje Rønning Kampesæter, “Norge vil stanse Syria-oppdraget om opprørerne angriper Assad,” *Aftenposten*, May 3, 2016, <https://www.aftenposten.no/verden/i/wEvO4/Norge-vil-stanse-Syria-oppdraget-om-opprorerne-angriper-Assad>.

10. In summer 2017, the U.S. cut support for the Qaryatein Martyrs Brigade, after it refused orders to stop fighting pro-Assad forces around the Tanf-Rukban enclave. “We have made it very clear time and again that our goal in Syria and in Iraq is to fight ISIS and to fight ISIS only,” the Pentagon’s Colonel Ryan Dillon told reporters. “Our partner forces, we’ve asked them to be committed to that same mission.” Carla Babb, “US Cuts Ties With Local Syrian Group Trained to Fight IS,” *Voice of America*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/united-states-cuts-ties-local-syrian-group-trained-fight-islamic-state/3962041.html>.

11. Email to the author from Adrian Rankine-Galloway, May 2018.

12. Aron Lund, “The complex battle for control in eastern Syria,” *IRIN News*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/05/30/complex-battle-control-eastern-syria>.

13. A smaller camp that held many Syrian rebel families, Hadalat, fell outside the 55 km perimeter and had to be evacuated when Coalition forces rejected opposition pleas to defend it, thereby acting in accordance with the U.S.-Russian agreement. Many of Hadalat’s inhabitants then fled to Rukban. Sam Heller, “Desert Base Is Displaced Syrians’ Last Line of Defense,” *The Century Foundation*, September 8, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/desert-base-displaced-syrians-last-line-defense>. An unpublished humanitarian planning document estimates that about 5,000 people moved from Hadalat to Rukban around September 2017, while some 2,000 left Rukban to return to government-held areas. “Operational Plan to deliver humanitarian assistance to Al-Rukban camp,” Syria Humanitarian Country Team, November 2017 (copy in author’s possession).

14. Missy Ryan and Greg Jaffe, “In Syria, an accidental bulwark against Iran shows confusion of Trump policy,” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syria-an-accidental-bulwark-against-iran-shows-confusion-of-trump-policy/2018/05/12/458ed726-4ed7-11e8-af46-b1d6dc0d9bfe_story.html.

15. As Heller put it, “The [Tanf] train-and-equip force’s mission has mutated into securing the Rukban camp, which houses its men’s families and from which much of its rank-and-file has been recruited, as well as patrolling the 55-kilometer zone.” Sam Heller, “What an Unfolding Humanitarian Disaster in a U.S.-Protected Enclave Tells Us About American Strategy in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, November 20, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/16162>.

16. Josie Ensor and Roland Oliphant, “Britain withdraws last of troops training Syrian rebels as world powers distance themselves from opposition,” *The Telegraph*, September 3, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/02/british-troops-halt-training-syrian-rebels-world-powers-distance>; Amal A. Wahab, Kairo, Eirik Grasaas-Stavenes, and Yohan Shanmugaratnam, “Ba Norge krige mot regimet,” *Klassekampen*, April 20, 2018, www.klassekampen.no/article/20180420/ARTICLE/180429997. Defense ministry officials from both countries have told the author that they are no longer part of the Tanf mission. “We don’t have personnel on the ground in Syria so we are not involved there,” stated Thomas Housden of the U.K. Ministry of Defence. “We did support the U.S.-led Coalition training programme in Jordan which delivered training to moderate and vetted Syrian armed opposition forces involved in counter

Daesh operations,” he said in an email. “However, due to the fast paced nature of events in the Middle East, partner forces are now focused on taking part in operations to defeat Daesh and we are tasked elsewhere.” Email to the author from Thomas Housden, May 2018. “We have concentrated the effort to Iraq,” said Marita Isaksen Wangberg of the Norwegian Defense Ministry. “We ended work from Jordan toward Syria operationally last October. We are now only working in Iraq and [from Jordan] toward Iraq.” Author’s phone and email conversation with Marita Isaksen Wangberg, May, 2018.

17. Email to the author from a Coalition press official, May, 2018. Rumors have in the past pointed to a Jordanian presence at Tanf, and possibly also to a role for the United Arab Emirates and/or Saudi Arabia, though this could be in a minor advisory role or aiding with tasks such as translation. The term “partner forces” likely refers to the Coalition-backed Syrian group, Maghawir al-Thawra.

18. By way of example, U.S. policymakers and think tanks have long debated the Tanf-Rukban region’s future in terms entirely unrelated to the Coalition’s strictly anti-jihadi mandate, arguing over whether it could be used to undermine Iranian influence or as a point of pressure on Assad. See, for example, Karen de Young and Greg Jaffe, “U.S. on collision course with Syria and Iran once de facto Islamic State capital falls,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-on-collision-course-with-syria-and-iran-after-fall-of-de-facto-islamic-state-capital/2017/06/21/b03d9620-55cc-11e7-ba90-f5875b7d1876_story.html; Missy Ryan and Greg Jaffe, “In Syria, an accidental bulwark against Iran shows confusion of Trump policy,” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-syria-an-accidental-bulwark-against-iran-shows-confusion-of-trump-policy/2018/05/12/458ed726-4ed7-11e8-af46-b1d6dc0d9bfe_story.html. Humanitarian arguments have also crept into the debate, with clear concern among some Coalition nations over what would happen with Rukban’s inhabitants if the camp were overrun by pro-Assad forces. “If the Rukban and Hadalat populations were not there, I think this conversation could more closely mirror de-escalations elsewhere,” a U.S. official told TCF’s Sam Heller in August 2017. “But the IDP populations are a big, big part of this conversation.” Hadalat was a smaller IDP camp that fell outside the fifty-five-kilometer perimeter established by the Americans, a fact that forced inhabitants, including families of various rebel groups, to relocate to Rukban. See Sam Heller, “Desert Base Is Displaced Syrians’ Last Line of Defense,” *The Century Foundation*, September 8, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/desert-base-displaced-syrians-last-line-defense>.

19. “Department Of Defense Press Briefing by Colonel Dillon via Teleconference From Baghdad, Iraq,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 17, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1496008/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-colonel-dillon-via-teleconference-from>.

20. “Coalition Partner Forces Kill 7 ISIS Terrorists in Southern Syria,” U.S. Department of Defense, June 8, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1544723/coalition-partner-forces-kill-7-isis-terrorists-in-southern-syria>; Maghawir al-Thawra statement no. 2/14, June 5, 2018, uploaded by Maghawir al-Thawra to Twitter, <https://twitter.com/MaghaweirThowra/status/1003907874819633153>. Previously, the groups fought in December 2017, according to Coalition reporting. “Coalition Partner Forces Kill More Than 20 ISIS Terrorists in Southern Syria,” U.S. Department of Defense, December 14, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1397449/coalition-partner-forces-kill-more-than-20-isis-terrorists-in-southern-syria>. “Coalition Partner Forces Clear ISIS Caves in Southern Syria,” U.S.

Department of Defense, December 27, 2017, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1404527/coalition-partner-forces-clear-isis-caves-in-southern-syria>.

21. Waleed Khaled al-Noufal and Justin Clark, "US-backed forces in southeastern Syria downsize, take on smaller role," *Syria Direct*, November 21, 2017, syriadirect.org/news/us-backed-forces-in-southeastern-syria-downsize-take-on-smaller-role.

22. Email to the author from a Coalition press official, May, 2018. Maghawir al-Thawra means "Revolution Commandos." Some also use the abbreviation "MaT."

23. Bahira al-Zarier, Madeline Edwards, Kristen Demilio, "In displacement camp along Syrian border, 'the strong devour the weak' as rule of law fades," *Syria Direct*, August 3, 2017, syriadirect.org/news/in-displacement-camp-along-syrian-border-the-strong-devour-the-weak-as-rule-of-law-fades.

24. Voice and text message from Sam Heller to the author in May 2018.

25. Email to the author from a Coalition press official, May, 2018. Though the group may lack fixed bases inside the camp, press reports have repeatedly noted the presence and influence of Maghawir al-Thawra members inside the camp, and it appears to be closely involved with events there. Maghawir al-Thawra fighters have in the past reportedly cracked down on jihadi cells in Rukban, rounding up dozens of suspected Islamic State sympathizers. For examples of reports noting the presence of Maghawir al-Thawra members inside Rukban, see Bahira al-Zarier, Madeline Edwards, Kristen Demilio, "In displacement camp along Syrian border, 'the strong devour the weak' as rule of law fades," *Syria Direct*, August 3, 2017, syriadirect.org/news/in-displacement-camp-along-syrian-border-the-strong-devour-the-weak-as-rule-of-law-fades; Waleed Khaled al-Noufal, Bahira al-Zarier, Noura Hourani, and Madeline Edwards, "Six-day water shortage hits remote Rukban displacement camp," *Syria Direct*, October 5, 2017, syriadirect.org/news/six-day-water-shortage-hits-remote-rukban-displacement-camp. For a report of alleged arrests by Maghawir al-Thawra inside Rukban, see Rami Nassar, "al-maghawir taataqel al-asharat min mukhayyem al-rukban," *Geroun*, January 26, 2017, <https://geroun.net/archives/73877>. In January 2018, Maghawir al-Thawra joined the above-mentioned five Free Syrian Army-branded factions in a joint body that declared itself responsible for security in and around Rukban. "6 fasaal souriya tatawahhad fi mukhayyem al-rukban bi-ghurfa amaliyat waheda," *Arabi21*, January 7, 2018, <https://arabi21.com/story/1062036/6--فصائل-سورية-تتحد-في-مخيم-الركبان>. بغرفة-عمليات-واحدة.

26. The Free Tribes Army has reportedly had poor relations with some of the dominant clans in Rukban, who view it as a tool of the Jordanian government, as exploiting its control over aid deliveries in the past, and as identified with tribal factions from the Houran and southern Syria rather than the desert east. While Jordanian officials have been comfortable working with Hourani clansmen, who tend to have cultural and family links to northern Jordan, diplomats and experts say they do not seem to have the same easy rapport with tribes from Palmyra or Deir al-Zor.

27. The Qaryatein Martyrs Battalion originally worked alongside Maghawir al-Thawra, but lost Coalition support when its fighters ignored orders to disengage from combat with pro-Assad forces in July 2017. Carla Babb, "US Cuts Ties With Local Syrian Group Trained to Fight IS," *Voice of America*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/united-states-cuts-ties-local-syrian-group-trained-fight-islamic-state/3962041.html>. The formerly CIA-linked groups had been supported as part of the Free Syrian Army's Southern Front, a loose agglomeration of rebel factions funded through the Military

Operations Center, or MOC, a now-defunct operations room that had since late 2013 coordinated American, Jordanian, British, and other support through Amman. The first two groups, Lions of the East and Ahmed al-Abdo, hailed from different regions—eastern Syria and the Qalamoun area, respectively—but developed close organizational ties with each other in 2017. Both operated around Tanf as well as in the Eastern Qalamoun region until that enclave’s collapse in spring 2018. The Shaam Liberation Army (Jaish Tahrir al-Sham, led by Firas al-Bitar, not to be confused with the jihadi faction Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, which is led by Abu Mohammed al-Golani and was formerly known as the Nusra Front) was a slightly more complicated beast. Rooted in some of south-central Syria’s oldest rebel networks, the group had operated in Qalamoun and previously also in the Eastern Ghouta, where it was a perennial rival of the Islam Army of Zahran Alloush. From around 2015, it clashed repeatedly with other factions in the Dumeir and Eastern Qalamoun regions, and was accused of maintaining secret ties to Islamic State smuggling networks in the eastern deserts. In early 2016, the group’s Dumeir wing defected to join the Islamic State, but it was swiftly crushed by attacks from both rebel and government forces, in very murky circumstances. A Shaam Liberation Army spokesperson denied any connection to the jihadis and described what had happened in Dumeir as a deplorable act of desperation on the part of local fighters. The spokesperson also insisted that his group had no presence in Tanf at that time, though possibly he referred the crossing itself and to U.S.-backed military camps there, rather than to Rukban. Author’s interview with Shaam Liberation Army spokesperson, online, August, 2017.

28. Sam Heller, “Desert Base Is Displaced Syrians’ Last Line of Defense,” The Century Foundation, September 8, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/desert-base-displaced-syrians-last-line-defense>. Some rebels tried to keep up appearances: “Having lost the road to Deir al-Zor is a thorny issue, but it will most certainly not be an obstacle. We will push on with our forces alongside those of the Free Syrian Army factions to recover our areas from the control of extremist terrorism,” Captain Ahmed al-Tamer, head of the Martyr Ahmed al-Abdo Forces, told the author in an online message in late August 2017. In the end, however, Captain Tamer’s fighters in the Rukban region were forced to remain inside the deconfliction zone, inactive, while the group’s strongholds further north in the Qalamoun region crumbled under a Syrian army offensive in spring 2018.

29. On the Qaryatein Martyrs Battalions, see Carla Babb, “US Cuts Ties With Local Syrian Group Trained to Fight IS,” *Voice of America*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/a/united-states-cuts-ties-local-syrian-group-trained-fight-islamic-state/3962041.html>. On the dwindling international backing for the anti-Assad insurgency in 2017, see Aron Lund, “How Assad’s Enemies Gave Up on the Syrian Opposition,” The Century Foundation, October 17, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/assads-enemies-gave-syrian-opposition>. Money from unknown sources seems to have continued to flow to at least some factions in the camp. An interview by Syria Direct, an Amman-based news site, cites a former fighter saying his \$250 monthly salary was cut in mid-2017 but that fighters who remained with their groups still received a meager \$100 per month. Bahira al-Zarier and Alice Al Maleh, “Former rebel fighter risks return to government-held Homs to escape dire living conditions in Rukban camp,” *Syria Direct*, May 22, 2018, syriadirect.org/news/former-rebel-fighter-risks-return-to-government-held-homs-to-escape-dire-living-conditions-in-rukban-camp.

30. A Maghawir al-Thawra representative recently claimed that his group is now the only faction operating in the enclave, and that other groups “have become a part of the Rukban camp and are no longer military factions.” Maher al-

- Shawakbeh, "masoul min al-moarada al-souriya: jaish al-maghawir huwa al-fasil al-wahid fi mantaqat al-55," 24, May 3, 2018, [24.ae/article/439416/55-مسؤول-من-المعارضة-السورية-جيش-المغاوير-هو-الفصل-الوحيد-في-منطقة-ال-55](https://www.24.ae/article/439416/55-مسؤول-من-المعارضة-السورية-جيش-المغاوير-هو-الفصل-الوحيد-في-منطقة-ال-55).
31. Mohammad Ghazal, "Population stands at around 9.5 million, including 2.9 million guests," *The Jordan Times*, January 30, 2016, www.jordantimes.com/news/local/population-stands-around-95-million-including-29-million-guests.
32. Author's interviews with aid workers and diplomats, Amman, Jordan, April and May, 2018. The number of UNHCR-registered refugees in Jordan stood at 661,859 according to official UNHCR data, as of April 7, 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36>.
33. Rana F. Sweis, "Jordan Withdraws Tax Bill That Fueled Nationwide Protests," *New York Times*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/07/world/middleeast/jordan-tax-bill-protests.html>.
34. Mona Alami, "Jordanians continue to struggle with jihadist threats," *The Arab Weekly*, March 4, 2018, <https://thearabweekly.com/jordanians-continue-struggle-jihadist-threats>.
35. Rana F. Sweis, "Jordan Closes Border to Syrian Refugees After Suicide Car Bomb Kills 6," *New York Times*, June 22, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/22/world/middleeast/jordan-syria-attack.html>.
36. Border guard repel terror attack, kill gunmen," *Petra*, June 3, 2017, www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?lang=11&site_id=2&NewsID=304668&Type=P; "Jordan shoots dead five approaching its borders from Syria," Reuters, June 11, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-jordan/jordan-shoots-dead-five-approaching-its-borders-from-syria-idUSKBN1920IQ>.
37. Bill Neely and Ziad Jaber, "ISIS Infiltrates the Rukban Refugee Camp at Jordan-Syria Border," NBC News, May 8, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/isis-infiltrates-rukban-refugee-camp-jordan-syria-border-n750206>. During a previous visit by reporters, Brig. Gen. Kafawin had said 10 percent of the camp's population was made up of "extremists or Daesh people." Khetam Malkawi and Omar Akour, "Jordan commander: IS expands hold in border camp for Syrians," Associated Press, February 15, 2017, <https://apnews.com/6f19357cea4c4dc49631d4958373fc23/jordan-commander-expands-hold-border-camp-syrians>.
38. Author's interview with a European diplomat based in Amman, email, May, 2018. In late May 2018, there were media reports that fighters and families from an Islamic State-controlled part of southern Damascus had been sent to Rukban after surrendering. A Maghawir al-Thawra spokesperson denied these reports, saying Islamic State families had indeed been escorted eastwards from Damascus but were dropped off at other points in the desert, outside the Tanf-Rukban enclave. Obeida al-Nabwani, "al-hurr yanfi wusoul awail li-tanzim al-dawla ila mukhayyem al-rukban min janoubi dimashq," *Smart News*, May 23, 2018, <https://smartnews-agency.com/ar/wires/297756/-الحر-ينفي-وصول-عوائل-لتنظيم-الدولة-الى-مخيم-الركبان-من>.
39. Author's interview with a humanitarian worker, Amman, Jordan, April, 2018.
40. Email to the author from Hala Shamlawi, an Amman-based spokesperson of the International Committee of the Red Cross, April, 2018.
41. "al-safadi: al-urdun lan yasmah bi-dukhoul laji'in min mukhayyem al-rukban ila-l-mamlaka," *al-Dustour*, October 8, 2017, addustour.com/articles/978343-الصفدي-الاردن-لن-يسمح-بدخول-لاجئين-من-مخيم-الركبان-الى-المملكة.
42. Aaron Magid, "Amman's Refugee Waiting Game: The Time Bomb on Jordan's Border," *Foreign Affairs*, May 24, 2017,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/jordan/2017-05-24/ammans-refugee-waiting-game>.

43. According to the European diplomat, the Jordanian military says it can guarantee the safe distribution of food packages and other aid on Jordanian territory, but the Foreign Ministry continues to reject the idea. Author's interview with a European diplomat based in Amman, email, May, 2018.

44. "Cross-line" is humanitarian jargon for missions that move across territory held by two or more rival actors inside a single country, for example by entering and exiting a besieged area. "Cross-border" is the corresponding term for aid delivered across international borders, such as from Jordan to Syria.

45. A particularly egregious example was the now-dismantled Eastern Ghouta enclave near Damascus. See Aron Lund, "The man-made disaster in Syria's Eastern Ghouta," *IRIN News*, December 19, 2017, <https://www.irinnews.org/analysis/2017/12/19/man-made-disaster-syria-s-eastern-ghouta>.

46. For an explanation of the functioning and importance of UNSCR 2165, see Sam Heller, "Syrian Humanitarian 'Lifeline' Goes to Vote," The Century Foundation, December 18, 2017, <https://tcf.org/content/report/syrian-humanitarian-lifeline-goes-vote>.

47. "Brussels II Syria conference must not fall short," Norwegian Refugee Council, April 23, 2018, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/april/brussels-ii-syria-conference-must-not-fall-short>.

48. "Operational Plan to deliver humanitarian assistance to Al-Rukban camp," Syria Humanitarian Country Team, November 2017 (copy in author's possession).

49. "Jordan allows entry of aid to Rukban camp," Petra, January 7, 2018, [www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?](http://www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?Site_Id=1&lang=2&NewsID=335131&CatID=13&Type=Home>ype=1)

[Site_Id=1&lang=2&NewsID=335131&CatID=13&Type=Home>ype=1](http://www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?Site_Id=1&lang=2&NewsID=335131&CatID=13&Type=Home>ype=1); "The UN undertakes aid delivery at the Berm based on approval by the Government of Jordan for exceptional delivery of assistance to Syrians," United Nations-Jordan, January 10, 2018, jo.one.un.org/en/news/the-un-undertakes-aid-delivery-at-the-berm-based-on-approval-by-the-government-of-jordan-for-exceptional-delivery-of-assistance-to-syrians/192.

50. "Jordan delivers humanitarian aid to Rukban camp," Petra, January 8, 2018, www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?lang=2&site_id=1&NewsID=335314&Type=P; "Jordan continues delivery of humanitarian aid to Rukban," Petra, January 13, 2018, www.petra.gov.jo/Public_News/Nws_NewsDetails.aspx?lang=2&site_id=1&NewsID=335864&Type=P. As this report was being finalized, Syrian opposition media reported a small cross-border delivery of small quantities of nutritional supplements for women and children. "musawadat ghidaiya khajoula tadhul mukhayyem al-rukban baad ghyab li-shuhour," *Shaam News Network*, May 24, 2018, www.shaam.org/news/syria-news/لشهور-بعد-غياب-الركبان-مخيم-تدخل-خجولة-غذائية-مساعداً-غذائية-خجولة-تدخل-مخيم-الركبان-بعد-غياب-لشهور.html.

51. Ali Al-Za'tari's comments were contained in an audio file provided to the author over email by Linda Tom, a Damascus-based spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, May 9, 2018.

52. Ali Al-Za'tari's comments were contained in an audio file provided to the author over email by Linda Tom, a Damascus-based spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, May 9, 2018.

53. The ten-kilometer limit is mentioned in a briefing by UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock to the Security Council on April 17, 2018. See the official transcript of the

8,236th meeting of the UN Security Council, S/PV.8236, April 17, 2018, www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/{65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9}/s_pv_8236.pdf.

54. That is, of course, not how the U.S. government would describe the situation. “The United States will always support the delivery of humanitarian and medical aid to the Syrian people,” said a State Department spokesperson, adding that Coalition forces are in “ongoing communication with humanitarian agencies and remain on standby to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid.” Email to the author from a U.S. State Department spokesperson, May 2018.

55. In interviews with non-Jordanian sources in Amman in April–May 2018, the author heard complaints that the ICRC had moved too slowly to negotiate access to Rukban. Two ICRC representatives were asked for comment, but neither responded.

56. The professionalism and neutrality of the ICRC is generally considered to be beyond reproach, but by design it relies heavily on the logistical capacities of its national partner, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). SARC volunteers have assisted civilians across the country at great personal risk, including in rebel-held areas, and the organization as such does not promote a particular political agenda. Still, it remains closely associated with the Syrian government, both structurally and in terms of its leadership. For example, its leader, Khaled Hboubati, was appointed by the Syrian cabinet. Many Syrian rebels consequently view the SARC as a Trojan horse for government influence. Ibrahim Olabi, “The Syrian Arab Red Crescent...The Reality of the Organization and its Commitment towards the Seven Principles,” *Jusoor*, February 15, 2018, jusoor.co/details/The-Syrian-Arab-Red-Crescent...The-Reality-of-the-Organization-and-its-Commitment-towards-the-Seven-Principles/374/en; David Kenner, “Syria Is Threatening to Break the Aid World,” *Foreign Policy*, March 27, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/27/syria-is-threatening-to-break-the-aid-world>.

57. Ali Al-Za’tari’s comments were contained in an audio file provided to the author over email by Linda Tom, a Damascus-based spokesperson for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, May 9, 2018.

58. “US hampering humanitarian aid deliveries to Syria’s Rukban, al-Tanf and Raqqa,” TASS, May 4, 2018, tass.com/world/1002923. The Pentagon’s Major Rankine-Galloway disputed this characterization. Email to the author from Adrian Rankine-Galloway, May 2018.

59. Email to the author from Adrian Rankine-Galloway, May 2018.



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