Syria’s Assad Is Deliberately Starving Thousands of Refugees

July 25, 2019

By Lara Seligman

Foreign Policy

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/25/syrias-assad-is-deliberately-starving-thousands-of-refugees-syria-bashar-assad-rukban-idlib-islamic-state-isis/>

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime is deliberately starving thousands of displaced citizens taking refuge in the Rukban camp in the southern part of the country, hoping to force them to flee with no guarantees for their safety, according to U.S. officials and a new report by a Syrian-led research organization.

As of July 23, roughly 11,000 internally displaced persons remained at Rukban, which lies in a no-man’s land off the border between Syria and Jordan, according to Etana, a research group based in Amman under the umbrella of former Syrian National Council spokesperson Bassma Kodmani’s Arab Reform Initiative. Etana gathered information from multiple civil and military sources on the ground in and near the camp.

“Most of those that remain in the camp are wanted by the regime, their security situation is dangerous, yet as a result of the hunger and the miserable living conditions, people have two choices: killed by hunger or killed by the regime,” a source inside the camp said, according to a July 23 memo provided to Foreign Policy by Etana.

The deputy commander of the U.S.-led coalition in Syria, Maj. Gen. Alex Grynkewich, said in an interview that Assad has refused to allow the flow of United Nations-led humanitarian aid to the camp since February.

“Our team has been working through the UN to message the Syrian Regime that it needs to allow the flow of UN-led humanitarian aid to the camp,” Grynkewich told *Foreign Policy* in an email. “We have been consistent in calling on all parties to encourage the appropriate authorities to allow the UN unfettered access to Rukban in order to provide relief to the population there.”

Grynkewich added that a number of families from U.S. partner forces reside in the Rukban camp.

Much of the media attention on Syria is focused on the northeast area of the country, where a U.S.-led coalition is fighting the remnants of the Islamic State terrorist group, or the northwest province of Idlib, where a fragile truce negotiated between Russia and Turkey is threatening to [shatter](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/turkish-prepares-syria-assault-idlib-burns.html). But the Etana report sheds light on a largely undiscussed area of Syria, where thousands of civilians are living at the mercy of Assad and Iran-backed militias such as Hezbollah.

A July 24 *Washington Post* [story](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/07/24/united-states-wont-feed-starving-syrians-living-under-its-protection/) kicked off a debate about who is to blame for the dire conditions in Rukban. In the article, James Jeffrey, the U.S. special representative to Syria, indicated that the United States was deliberately looking the other way.

“If we feed them, it will look like we are going to stay there forever,” Jeffrey said. “We can’t commit to a long-term presence in al-Tanf or in anyplace else in Syria.”

Many in the camp are blaming the United States, the United Nations, and even Jordan for not providing urgently needed aid to the Rukban camp, according to Etana. Some critics blame the U.S. government, which controls a small military garrison, al-Tanf, just 10 miles from the camp, for abandoning the residents to “[needlessly starve to death](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/07/24/united-states-wont-feed-starving-syrians-living-under-its-protection/?utm_term=.22a5930a15d1).”

But Grynkewich said it is the Syrian regime that is primarily to blame for the humanitarian crisis taking hold in Rukban.

A researcher closely following developments in Syria who asked to remain anonymous agreed that there is no precedent for a U.S. distribution of aid to Rukban, as the Syrian regime and its Russian backers control whether the U.N. is permitted to reach the area or not.

A senior administration official took issue with the *Post* article’s characterization. The U.S. Agency for International Development has “refused to certify the need” at Rukban because it does not have access to the camp, the official said, or “we’d already be feeding those people.”

Asked to respond to that claim, a USAID official said the United States is “pursuing every possible avenue to deliver aid to Rukban.”

“The United States believes strongly that the population at Rukban is in need of humanitarian assistance, and we have advocated for and worked to help the U.N. deliver assistance for years,” the official said, noting that the United States has provided more than $9.6 billion in aid since the start of the crisis to the most vulnerable populations. “Any assertion to the contrary is completely incorrect.”

But Colin Clarke, a senior fellow at the Soufan Center and an adjunct senior political scientist at the Rand Corp., criticized the U.S. government for washing its hands of the Syria problem after the defeat of the Islamic State’s territorial holdings.

“This is the United States,” Clarke said. “If we really wanted something to happen and we really pushed for it, we could make it happen.”

Whoever is to blame, the situation inside the camp is unquestionably desperate. Thousands of internally displaced persons have now fled Rukban, risking arrest by regime forces or conscription into military service rather than staying put due to the extreme conditions, according to Etana.

“We will die either way, in this squalid camp or in the hands of the regime … the camp is living the worst situation ever since it was created,” a source inside the camp told Etana.

Those left in the camp are suffering from severe malnutrition, surviving on bread made with ingredients normally used to feed animals, the group reported. In some cases, the bread has led to cases of food poisoning. Even so, nourishment is so scarce that even the bread is considered “a treat.”

Meanwhile, goods that do reach the camp are “unaffordable” due to carefully controlled smuggling and price-fixing, which is controlled by the regime’s local military officers.

“Prices have been fixed to exponential levels, which is exacerbating the dire humanitarian conditions inside the camp,” according to Etana.

Medical conditions are even worse. The few nurses available lack the adequate medical experience and are not able or permitted to provide the critical treatments, including surgeries.

Those who remain are holding out hope for another aid delivery. But that possibility looks increasingly unlikely, as all parties involved point fingers.

“This is reflective of this whole situation where we spent so much time and energy and resources on the kinetic part of this fight, and then as soon as Baghouz fell we just kind of washed our hands and walked away,” Clarke said.