

Stuck in the desert: Displaced Syrians struggle in sealed off camp

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In few places in the Middle East is the situation worse for Syrians fleeing the war than in Rukban. For The World Weekly, photojournalist Edward Jonkler investigates at the Jordanian-Syrian border.

The horrors of the Syrian Civil War have caused one of the biggest refugee crises in modern history. Over five million people have fled the country, the vast majority finding refuge in other parts of the Middle East and Turkey.

In few places is this hardship more apparent than in Rukban, an unofficial sprawling refugee camp where tens of thousands of Syrians are stranded in desperate conditions between Syria and Jordan.

As our convoy hurtles along the desert, a sand berm appears to the left, marking the Syrian border. In the front seat is Brigadier General Barakat al-Ajarmah, a border guard commander responsible for much of the frontier areas between Jordan, Syria and Iraq.

Jordan has a long history of welcoming refugees, over the last decades having taken in Palestinians, Iraqis and more recently over 650,000 Syrians since the start of the war. However, Rukban is a special case.

"We cannot let in any refugees, especially from Rukban," the general says. "The camp is full of terrorists and armed groups."

Rukban camp lies along a demilitarised no man's land between the Jordan-Syria border, hundreds of miles from the next city. Beginning in 2014, many who fled fighting in southern Syria became trapped between the two countries.

Rukban has grown rapidly to an estimated 85,000 people, the majority of whom live in tents. In this barren desert, temperatures can reach up to 45 degrees celsius in the day and drop to 5 degrees at night.



A Jordanian soldier watches for infiltrators as part of a security cordon for the aid distribution at Rukban camp. Edward Jonkler

Within seconds of coming to a halt, everything and everyone surrounding our convoy is covered in dust from top to bottom.

Jordan has always restricted access to those living in the camp, but after a suicide car bomber killed seven border guards in June 2016 it completely sealed the border to Syria.

The army says that up to 10% of the camp's residents are affiliated with Islamic State (IS), which claimed responsibility for the June attack. Since then an exclusion zone has been put into effect around the camp. Most services were cut off after the June bombing and have only recently been restored.

Jordanian forces do not officially enter the camp, but instead work with a moderate Syrian militia known as the tribal army, which is receiving training, weapons and equipment from the government. For some time, World Vision worked in partnership with them to distribute aid, an operation that drew criticism from parts of the humanitarian community. However, after a deadly suicide attack on a distribution warehouse, the organisation stopped operating in the camp. Since then no aid agencies have been operating inside the Rukban camp and the last food distribution was in August 2016.

The security situation appears contained for now but is deteriorating within the camp itself, we are told. The day before, an explosives-laden truck with fighters disguised as tribal army members drove into a guard post, killing five people; two days before that another car bomb at a rebel checkpoint on the Syrian side of the border killed three fighters and wounded 14 civilians. All these attacks have been claimed by IS, which according to sources has a forward base close to the camp inside Iraq and is able to enter covertly.

'All of us are hungry'

The general's radio suddenly crackles into life: an unidentified vehicle is close to Jordanian soldiers on the camp's outskirts. He orders it to be checked, and if it can't be identified to be attacked with rockets.



Ibrahim, five months old, at the UNHCR-led clinic on the outskirts of Rukban Camp, requires regular treatment. Edward Jonkler

Eleven kilometres from the camp is a small medical outpost, managed by the UN's refugee agency (UNHCR) working with various NGOs to provide primary and maternity care. Outside, a handful of patients wait to be seen, looking underweight and exhausted. Those seeking care have to walk an average of seven kilometres to a pickup point each way, where they are then ferried to the clinic by the army for examination.

"We are seeing cases of severe malnutrition and dehydration in the children, but very few moderate cases, which means people are not coming in until it becomes an emergency," says Doctor Ayman, who works with child admissions. Infectious diseases and respiratory problems are common, spreading quickly due to poor hygiene and the red sand that covers everything.

During our conversation, the doctor examines a malnourished boy, who without making a sound slowly chews on a snack bar. She prescribes the usual treatment, two weeks worth of weight-gain medication to try to get him back up to normal levels.

In the waiting area, Khaldiyah cradles her two-year-old daughter

while she waits to be seen. "All of us are hungry. There is no food, we spent 10 days without eating," she says. "The water we have is dirty and makes us sick. I caught my daughter eating sand, because there is nothing else for her."



Khaldiyah, from Tadmur, said, "we spent 10 days without eating". Edward Jonkler

Others waiting to be seen say conditions are worsening, that people are starving, and access to the medical point is tightly controlled by tribal leaders, who favour their own members, or those who can pay a bribe. Only 3,000 people have visited the clinic since December even though it is equipped to handle many more, which administrators suspect is down to access issues and internal politics within the camp.

During our visit in early May, aid distribution started again: For 20 days, food and emergency supplies worth \$8 million were to be handed out. The only source of food until then, according to Amnesty International was provided by profiteers who enter from Syria and charge hugely inflated prices for their goods.

Sangars covered with razor wire form a temporary base to carry out the aid distribution. As groups of women, in black niqabs, gather and wait for supplies to be handed out, militia forces

dressed in a mixture of camouflage and plainclothes stand around, waiting for instructions. Pickup trucks with mounted machine guns race between the distribution point and the camp, throwing up clouds of dust. The camp itself is roughly one kilometre away, tents stretching back for miles into a shimmering heat haze that covers most of the horizon.



Workers from a government-approved contractor unload supplies from lorries into a distribution point, at Rukban Camp. Edward Jonkler

The army has deployed a large cordon of armoured vehicles, with snipers scanning the area for hostile infiltrators, a reminder of the tense security situation in this remote corner of Jordan. A local contractor unloads boxes stamped with the UN logo containing winter kits for children. Sand covers everything and the air is filled with a brutal dry heat.

What could solve the situation for those trapped in this unforgiving environment? "Stability in Syria so people can return home is the only solution," says General al-Ajarmah. Jordan is planning to relocate the water point for the camp deeper into Syrian territory enabling authorities to move the camp further away from the border and thus creating a larger buffer zone. Such plans have stirred tensions in the NGO community, which

has criticised Amman's treatment of Rukban's residents in the past, but the general insists this is a necessary measure. A Syrian government offensive poses further risks.