

# We Failed al-Rukban. Let's Not Do It Again.

By Alexander Norris and Nadia Mokhallati

On November 1, 2018, the United States Central Command delivered an announcement that reaffirmed the worst fears of tens of thousands of Syrians trapped near the Syria-Jordan border: the US would not provide life-saving humanitarian assistance to the men, women, and children of the al-Rukban camp.<sup>1</sup>

The announcement implicitly denied American responsibility for the well-being of Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) while criticizing the Assad regime for blocking humanitarian aid into the camp; however, in doing so, the US disregarded the simple fact that American soldiers at the al-Tanf airbase were best situated to help these IDPs. As politicians turned a blind eye, tens of thousands of innocent Syrians starved, fled, or died in a camp merely ten miles from an American airbase. This disregard for human life, evident in America's policy toward the

al-Rukban IDP camp, reflects the broader failures of America's relationship with the Middle East.

The United States' last major outpost in Syria, the al-Tanf airbase, controls the strategically vital Syria-Jordan-Iraq border region in south-east Syria. Once established to combat the Islamic State through "train and equip" operations with Syrian rebel groups, the airbase remains operational to curb Iranian influence in Syria. Since 2017, a 55-kilometer "deconfliction zone" around the airbase has afforded the United States a sphere of de facto control, with regime-backed forces surrounding the sphere and American forces maintaining security within. Despite the Assad regime's demand that all foreign militaries leave Syria, the United States has stated its intentions to stay at the al-Tanf base for an unspecified period of time.<sup>2</sup>

Within the al-Tanf "deconfliction zone" is al-Rukban, an IDP camp nestled along the Jor-

dan-Syria border in a region known as "the Berm."<sup>3</sup> Since 2016, when a terrorist attack on Jordanian border guards led to a full border closure, the population of al-Rukban has grown to as many as 60,000 people. Seventy to 80 percent are women and children living in substandard conditions.<sup>4</sup>

Since 2017, the Assad regime has maintained a total blockade on all goods in and out of the al-Tanf region, exacerbating shortages of food, potable water, blankets, and basic medical supplies as the situation deteriorated into an acute humanitarian disaster. Although exact statistics are rare, *Middle East Eye* has reported that eight children in al-Rukban died of cold and malnutrition in January of 2019 alone.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, since its emergence as a major IDP camp, the American contingent at al-Tanf has refused to provide aid or assistance to the camp.

The US has long justified this stance by arguing that the Syrian regime alone is responsible for its citizens' health and well-being. As IDPs within the territory of their home state, the residents of al-Rukban do not qualify as refugees under international law; consequently, the US has deferred all responsibility for al-Rukban to the Syrian state.

This narrow-minded approach ignores several obvious contradictions. Customary and codified international humanitarian law states that "occupying powers" possess a duty of care to people living in regions under their control.<sup>6</sup> The United States' continued presence at al-Tanf, despite repeated and explicit requests by the Assad regime to withdraw from Syrian territory, has the dual effect of supporting America's status as an "occupying power" and invalidates its purported neutrality in the conflict. In addition, the presence of rebel groups within the al-Tanf zone explains why the Assad regime would not allow aid or assistance into what it considers to be a rebel stronghold.

Irrespective of any legal obligations, however, the US possesses a clear moral duty to help

civilians in areas under its control. Doing the right thing, even when it means putting aside trivial political rivalries or compromising on unilateral national security objectives, should always lead America's policy making decisions regarding non-combatants and civilians. As the richest and most powerful nation in the world, the United States should set an example by upholding human rights and basic decency in its foreign policy agendas. By refusing to offer aid or assistance to the citizens of al-Rukban, the United States committed an inexcusable and unjustifiable wrong. Such behavior actively undermines its reputation as the leader of peace-loving nations and substantively erodes

its credibility as a force for good.

Although anecdotal, the case of the al-Rukban camp sadly reflects America's broader policies toward the Middle East. Whether it be unnecessary sanctions that disproportionately harm civilians, drone strikes with "collateral damage," or proxy wars that displace, harm, and kill thousands of civilians, the time for military adventurism with little regard for human life must end.

Many strategic adversaries, including Russia, Iran, and the Assad regime, have already

used America's inaction towards al-Rukban as effective propaganda against American presence in the region. By engaging responsibly with the region and placing humanitarian concerns over unilateral national security benefits, however, the United States can begin to repair its damaged reputation, foster goodwill among former adversaries, and promote sustainable and healthy development in regions ravished by years of warfare and economic hardship.

Although it may be too late for the thousands of Syrians in the al-Tanf region, it is not too late for the next "al-Rukban." Moving forward, the United States must commit to upholding basic principles of human rights and morality in its foreign policy decisions and actively work to redefine its image as a force for good in the world.

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