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# RUKBAN

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE  
UNITED STATES EMBASSY IN AMMAN



## APPENDIX A

PREPARED AND PRESENTED BY

SARAH ADAMS | RAUSAN BORUJERDI | ELISHEVA GOLDBERG  
TARA HEIDGER | AMIR KHOUZAM | TERESA PEROSA | AMANDA SCHMITT

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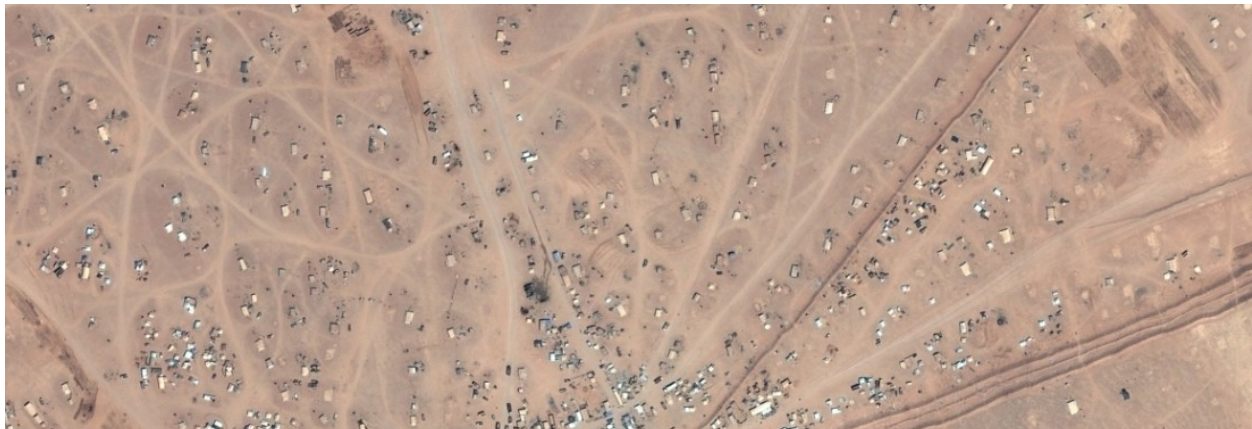
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# INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Embassy in Amman has requested that our Capstone team analyze the conditions under which internally displaced persons (IDPs) at the Rukban encampment could depart to return to other parts of Syria, in addition to whether and how the United States (U.S.) should support such an effort. Rukban is an isolated encampment along the Syrian-Jordanian border in close proximity to the U.S. military base at al-Tanf. This report examines policy options for IDPs to depart the Rukban encampment and presents recommendations to the U.S. on the combinations of options that would best meet residents' needs while adhering to humanitarian principles. Underpinning each option presented is the necessity that any departure be safe, dignified, voluntary, and informed.

We have identified a number of mechanisms that would help residents depart the encampment, for each of which we have *recommended action*. We have also identified outstanding issues regarding the conditions at potential departure destinations in areas unilaterally controlled by the Syrian Arab Republic Government (SARG). We recommend that these conditions be addressed as *outstanding points for discussion with Russia*.

While the roles of various actors are critical to finding a solution, Russia holds considerable equity in the issues pertaining to Rukban, and will inevitably be involved in any of the proposed options for Rukban residents. In fact, in March 2019, Russia announced that it would facilitate the evacuation of the camp's population to other areas of Syria. The objective of this report is to enable the U.S. to approach its discussions with Russia from a place of strength and to ensure the most sustainable, safe options for the IDPs at Rukban.





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# BACKGROUND

## RUKBAN IN CONTEXT

Since 2013, Rukban has served as an informal encampment for Syrians fleeing from both the SARG and ISIS in the hope of seeking refuge in Jordan. The current population of Rukban is approximately 36,000, eighty percent of whom are women and children.<sup>1</sup> It is located approximately 16 kilometers from al-Tanf U.S. military base, which was established to conduct operations against ISIS. The U.S. military maintains a 55 km-radius “deconfliction zone” around al-Tanf, prohibiting pro-regime forces from entering the area without prior coordination. Rukban sits inside the deconfliction zone, and thus benefits from the defense of the area by the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. However, the zone’s purpose is to protect al-Tanf. There is no formal relationship between it and the residents of Rukban.

The conditions at Rukban are dire. The most recent delivery of humanitarian aid took place in February 2019. Since then, Russian forces have provided “humanitarian corridors” for Syrians to leave Rukban, and pro-regime forces have shut down the smuggling routes that provided the encampment with basic necessities. The blocked access for goods has led to severe conditions and a lack of food and baby formula, an increase in infant mortality, and more cases of severe diarrhea and hepatitis.<sup>2</sup> These conditions have increased the pressure on residents to leave, resulting in departures of as many as 1,000 to 2,000 individuals per day in late April. As of April 22, 2019, an estimated 11,500 residents had left Rukban in March and April alone.<sup>3</sup> Many of these returns were not facilitated by Russia but rather were brokered through political connections, extortionary bribes, and smugglers.

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## DEMOGRAPHICS

A UN intentions survey conducted in February 2019 showed that Rukban's population is primarily composed of five main tribes, the two largest of which are originally from Homs Governorate. The survey data further showed that eighty-three percent of all Rukban residents wish to return to their homes, eighty percent of which are in SARG-controlled areas of Syria, mainly in the Homs Governorate. However, this desire to return home was qualified by a number of concerns that are articulated in this report, including different levels of risk for various groups within the population. The breakdown of preferences for relocation or return options are as follows: Homs (70%), Deir ez-Zor (7%), Hama (4%), and rural Damascus (4%). Very few (9%) preferred to go to opposition-held northern Syria.

There are also an estimated 300 to 1,000 members of armed groups currently living in and around Rukban within the deconfliction zone, all affiliated with the Free Syrian Army, or the moderate opposition. This population includes members of Jaysh Maghawir al-Thawra (MaT), a local partner of U.S. forces at al-Tanf; the Tribes Army, affiliated with the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF); the Lions of the East; Shuhada al-Quriyatayn; and Forces of Martyr Ahmad al-Abdo (FMAA). These individuals will require special considerations regardless of their choice, time, or method of departure, given that they are guilty of treason in the eyes of the SARG and thus may be more vulnerable to regime retribution than civilians. The families of armed actors should be included in options for these individuals, but in all cases should be treated as civilians.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, twenty-four percent of those surveyed by the UN reported having family members with specific medical needs. One hundred residents are estimated to require medical evacuation due to severe medical need.<sup>5</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

Following an extensive literature review, we identified key organizations and experts for Phase I interviews in order to build a holistic picture of the many factors surrounding Rukban. Interviews were conducted with representatives of the U.S. government, including USAID, the U.S. Embassy in Ankara, and State Department officials in Washington, D.C.; UN agency staff from UNHCR Amman and UNICEF Jordan; and Syrian activists and NGO staff from organizations including the Center for Civil Society and Democracy and the Syrian Emergency Task Force.

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Phase II research began after a brief status report to the U.S. Embassy Political Section in Amman and consisted of more pointed questions to close remaining gaps in knowledge. This phase included interviews with representatives of the Russian Government at the Russian Mission to the UN in New York City, further follow up with staff at UN agencies and INGOs including International Crisis Group, UNOCHA, and the ICRC, and follow up with people in close proximity to the camp, including armed actors outside the camp, representatives of the aid organization Bridges of Hope, and tribal elders within Rukban. We also analyzed data gathered during the UN intentions survey. The final report was written over the course of three weeks, with updates being made through May 2, 2019.



# STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

The situation at Rukban is fundamentally a political issue, and as such demands a critical analysis of possible areas for negotiation with relevant government stakeholders. In the interest of concision, we have limited the scope of this report to government stakeholders directly relevant to Rukban and options for departing the camp, focusing on Jordan, Russia, the SARG, Turkey, and the United States. The primary point of U.S. leverage with the SARG and Russia is al-Tanf base and defense of the deconfliction zone, which is limited by the expectation of a future withdrawal from the base. Additionally, the Russian government, which has continually made public its desires for the United States to leave al-Tanf, has repeatedly blamed the United States and Jordan for conditions at the camp, arguing that the deconfliction zone makes the U.S. responsible for the population. Secondly, U.S. leverage with Jordan and Turkey is linked to a recognition of their existing resource limitations and regional roles, in addition to continued financial aid.

## RUSSIA

The SARG has effectively delegated leadership of negotiation and planning regarding Rukban to Russia.<sup>6</sup> It is our assessment that Russia has a high level of autonomy and leeway when it comes to negotiating on Rukban. It is well known that Russia seeks a more prominent role in the Middle East as a regional power broker. Its demand for the dismantling of Rukban and its attempts to discredit the U.S. presence at al-Tanf through propaganda reinforce its attempt to be seen as an alternative locus of power to the U.S. on the international stage.

Russia repeatedly asserts in its public messaging that the U.S. is an occupying force due to its enforcement of the deconfliction zone. Russia argues that the U.S. has a responsibility, according to the Geneva Conventions, to provide humanitarian aid and

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human rights protection for those residing in Rukban. It further argues that this rationale should compel the U.S. to withdraw from al-Tanf and relinquish territorial control to the SARG. Russia is incentivized to maintain dialogue regarding a solution for Rukban IDPs because it sees the encampment as intimately connected to al-Tanf.

Operating since November 2016, the Fifth Corps is a Russian-run, voluntary section of the Syrian army, with the mandate of fighting ISIS and terrorism. It affords individuals who deserted their army positions in the war or who fought in an opposition armed group an opportunity to avoid harsh retaliation in return for continued military service outside of formal SARG command structures.<sup>7</sup>

Recent reports of SARG executions of Rukban returnees in Homs City demonstrate that Russia's practical control is limited to political negotiations and transitory procedures.<sup>8</sup> Once Russian military personnel are no longer involved on the ground, SARG forces often commit retributory violence against returnees. This inability to curb SARG violence greatly discredits Russia's ability to ensure safe, dignified, voluntary, and informed return for Rukban IDPs in the medium and long-term. *Nevertheless, Russia is the only stakeholder that offers both intermittent opportunities for cooperation with and temporary restraint over the actions of the SARG.*

## THE SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC GOVERNMENT (SARG)

The SARG's main priorities are the assertion and international acknowledgement of its sovereign authority over all Syrian territory. Tied to this is its desire for regional legitimization through normalization of bilateral relations and reinstated membership in the Arab League. The SARG also seeks international funds for reconstruction assistance to legitimize its role as the sovereign authority, and as a symbolic gesture of the conclusion of the civil war.<sup>9</sup> Thus far, the U.S. has withheld reconstruction aid pending progress towards a political transition.

Domestically, the SARG is focused on the remaining center of opposition control in Idlib. This focus has resulted in its current hands-off approach to Rukban, which it deems a lower priority. The SARG is an untrustworthy actor and frequently violates reconciliation deals that it strikes with various Syrian opposition groups.<sup>10</sup> Aside from the greater level of protection from regime retribution afforded to former opposition members who join the Fifth Corps, numerous reports have surfaced of the Syrian Armed Forces and regime-supporting militias arresting and torturing both civilians and opposition militants even after their safety had been assured through reconciliation deals.<sup>11</sup> This engenders *distrust among Rukban residents that the SARG will comply with any Russian-negotiated agreements, and severely increases risk to IDPs involved in such a deal.*

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## JORDAN

Jordan's public stance is to oppose any measures that anchor Rukban to the border. It has stated that its national security priorities mandate that the desert along its northern border remain unpopulated. In the aftermath of a terrorist attack in June 2016 along its border with Syria, Jordan stopped accepting Syrians for asylum and closed the border. Jordan has further declared its unwillingness to allow cross-border humanitarian aid delivery and has demanded that humanitarian aid be provided via Damascus. These positions severely limit the potential for Rukban IDPs to gain refuge in Jordan, as well as the possibility of sustained humanitarian aid across the border for those who remain. These policies mean that *the safest and most efficient options for Rukban IDPs are not politically viable*.

Nonetheless, our analysis suggests that the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) in particular may be open to allowing limited humanitarian assistance to cross the border *into Rukban if all options for aid delivery via Damascus are closed*, by Russia or the SARG. According to a UN official, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and JAF orchestrated an unpublicized cross-border humanitarian aid delivery to Rukban in May 2018.<sup>12</sup> Following delays in planned humanitarian aid from through Damascus, the JAF agreed to allow aid delivery via back-to-back truck loading at the Jordanian border crossing on the condition that there be no public comment on the operation.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, on a small scale and as a last resort, Jordan may be open to offering refugee status to a limited number of Rukban residents in combination with a more holistic solution for the camp. Specifically, if most IDPs are offered options to leave Rukban, Jordan could be encouraged to offer asylum for some allied militants and their families. The Tribes Army in particular has been supported by the JAF, and Jordan might feel a sense of responsibility and diminished security concern with regard to that group. The reality is that this is the only safe option for this specific subset of Rukban's population.

## TURKEY

Turkey closed its border to Syrians in 2015 due to security and economic concerns at the scale of Syrian asylum seekers it had received. In northern Syria, the Turkish military maintains twelve observation points around Idlib to defend the September 2018 Sochi ceasefire negotiated with Russia and the SARG. It also maintains control, through various partner forces, of the Euphrates Shield and Olive Branch areas in the north. Aside from Idlib, *the northern areas under Turkish control are the most secure areas inside Syria for Syrians fearful of potential punitive measures by the SARG*. Euphrates Shield areas offer the highest likelihood and longest time frame for safety inside Syria.

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Any relocation from Rukban to Euphrates Shield territories would require negotiation with Turkey.<sup>14</sup> Turkey emphasizes its regional leadership and international clout as it protects Syrian civilians from the SARG. Having received nearly \$814 million in aid from the U.S. since 2011, Turkey relies on the international support it receives to enable its support to Syrian refugees.<sup>15</sup> By offering further financial assistance and reinforcing this image of leadership, *the United States may be able to convince Turkey to provide de facto protection for Rukban IDPs who relocate to the north.*

Given past unrest in the north due to violence between opposition armed groups, the Turkish government may be concerned that adding militants from Rukban to this context could stir up local violence. Engagement with grassroots and community actors in the region in advance of any relocation will be key to mitigating this concern.

Allegations of Turkish ethnic cleansing and demographic engineering have been raised throughout its military campaigns in northern Syria.<sup>16</sup> Numerous Syrian Kurdish communities were displaced, and displaced Syrian Arab populations moved in. It is unclear whether these were intentionally coordinated or incidentally coinciding displacements; however, this issue is a critical concern for any proposed relocation option to northern Syria.

## UNCERTAINTY SURROUNDING THE U.S. PRESENCE AT AL-TANF

The recent dissonance of U.S. policy in Syria projects uncertainty about the utility and permanence of the U.S. military presence at al-Tanf. The Trump administration has declared its intention to maintain a limited military presence in Syria moving forward, which includes al-Tanf for the moment. But since the conclusion of the last Counter-ISIS offensive in Syria in March, the mandate for those stationed at al-Tanf is unclear. It is now viewed primarily as a strategic outpost to counter Iranian supply lines, although senior U.S. officials have questioned its value in this role.<sup>17</sup> Russia and the SARG likely recognize and hope to exploit, through political negotiations or propaganda, the lack of clarity on the U.S.'s future at al-Tanf. Given that Russia and the SARG recognize the diminishing strategic value of the base post-ISIS and the likelihood of a future U.S. departure from al-Tanf, *Russia and the SARG may well attempt to wait the U.S. out.* This further undercuts the minimal leverage that al-Tanf provided.

Since pro-regime forces have blocked smuggling routes into Rukban and the SARG has not agreed to another aid convoy, departures from Rukban have increased dramatically. The scale of departures has grown despite concerning reports of reprisals against returnees. *USAID has informed us that it is able to delegate authority for aid delivery in Syria within Rukban to the Department of Defense (DOD) if the DOD is deemed the only actor able to deliver aid within the deconfliction zone.*

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# THE THREE R'S

Given the diversity of Rukban's population, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for its IDPs, and each option offered below presents political, legal, and ethical questions. The only possible solution will be one that identifies a number of options for different groups based on their specific needs. As such, we have identified options for the population of Rukban along three tracks: *return, relocation or resettlement, and remain.*



## RETURN

The most durable solution, and the one that 83 percent of the residents of Rukban residents prefer, is the option to return to their area of origin.<sup>8</sup> UNHCR has made clear that the conditions under which it would endorse return do not currently exist, affirming the continued significant risk profile for this option.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the February 2019 UN intentions survey reported that *ninety-five percent of the population would like to leave, with nearly all saying that they would prefer to return to their areas of origin.*<sup>20</sup>

However, the reality of SARG control over most areas of origin, specifically Homs Governorate, has proven to be a significant deterrent to people returning. All residents surveyed indicated that security challenges were precluding them from leaving Rukban.<sup>21</sup> Of these, the primary concerns were a lack of formal documentation (47%), fear of a lack of adequate housing or ability to regain access to their property (31%), and fear of detention and military conscription (22%).<sup>22</sup> In the context of returning to areas controlled by the SARG, all of these factors present challenges and should be identified by the U.S. *as points of discussion with Russia, as only the SARG can address such issues.* In a later section of this report we outline these points at greater length.

The challenges surrounding Rukban residents' return are strictly political.<sup>23</sup> The primary issue is the poor protection record of the SARG, particularly with respect to returnees and former members of the political opposition. Given that eighty percent of Rukban residents are from areas now under SARG control, most residents would be forced to engage in renewed formal or informal interaction with the SARG, and would rely on the SARG and its partners for their livelihoods, safety, and security.<sup>24</sup> This would put them at risk of retribution if they were to approach SARG authorities to obtain new documentation or attempt to retake possession of property that may have been confiscated or occupied during their time in Rukban. It would also place people at risk of arbitrary detention and conscription.

## RELOCATION OR RESETTLEMENT

Although under ideal conditions most people at Rukban would prefer to return, many feel that they cannot do so safely. Given the litany of political, legal, and security obstacles exposing Rukban residents to dangerous security risks in their areas of origin, our report has identified relocation to opposition-controlled territories in Syria and international resettlement as options that may meet the specific needs of individuals whose safety is at a high level of risk in government-controlled territories. We identified three opposition-held territories within Syria that may serve as options for relocation — *Euphrates Shield territories, Idlib Governorate, and territories controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces* — and *Turkey* as the primary location for potential international asylum. We do not foresee a viable third-country resettlement option at this time.

*The most appealing option for internal relocation is to areas of northern Syria controlled by Turkey and its proxies.* Approximately 260,000 Syrians have safely relocated to these areas, also known as *Euphrates Shield territory*, in recent months, including civilians safely returning to areas where the Islamic State was defeated.<sup>25</sup> These areas have the advantage of Turkish military and civilian institutional support and offer relative stability and reliable access to aid.

The next most likely but far less preferred option is *Idlib Governorate*. Idlib is home to nearly three million people. The International Crisis Group calls it the “Syrian opposition’s last main bastion.”<sup>26</sup> As of September 2018, there were an estimated 70,000 opposition militants in Idlib. The agreement between Turkey and Russia that currently protects Idlib from a regime offensive has faced increasing stress since Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) gained control of the governorate. The Russian government and SARG claim that Turkey has not upheld its obligations under the ceasefire to maintain moderate opposition leadership. Clashes between militants inside Idlib and regime forces have escalated in recent months, and an impending attack by the government could ultimately expose relocated individuals to greater insecurity and danger than if they had remained at Rukban.

There are additional long-term challenges confronting the governorate. Idlib has been the most common destination for IDPs since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, and they have doubled the area's population over the course of eight years. Idlib is consequently dealing with issues of overpopulation, resource strain, and economic turmoil.

*Territories controlled by Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are another option that we considered. However, the high likelihood of a future agreement between the SDF and the Syrian regime make this a high-risk option. There are reports that SDF forces have attempted to demographically engineer villages to afford Kurdish communities greater territorial and political control.<sup>27</sup> Such reports may indicate to Rukban residents that relocating to these territories is not a viable long-term option.*

*Options for resettlement or asylum abroad are quite limited. Nations once willing to accept large numbers of refugees have placed greater restrictions on migration. Short of third-country resettlement, asylum in the region in Turkey or Jordan may offer the most expedient and safe options. Currently, *Turkey* appears to offer the most feasible option, with space for political negotiation for asylum given that it has consistently opened its borders to Syrian refugees throughout the conflict.*

## REMAIN

Although a prolonged presence of people in the Rukban area is suboptimal, our team has explored this possibility as an option for a self-selecting segment of Rukban's population that deems departure too high-risk. Given the challenges of other options, we assess that as long as al-Tanf base is under U.S. control, *a portion of the current inhabitants of Rukban will choose to stay.* Therefore, the option of a longer-term installation at Rukban should be considered. This will raise significant political challenges given the objections to this option of nearly all relevant stakeholders. This option will require the United States to make difficult choices and a greater investment of political capital than has been committed so far.

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# RECOMMENDED ACTION

## POINTS FOR NEGOTIATION AND POLITICAL MANEUVERING

Given the options and political considerations outlined above, we suggest that *the U.S. should negotiate on behalf of individuals at Rukban with the following government stakeholders: Russia, Jordan, and Turkey. It should also engage the United Nations, as an actor with significant in-country resources and personnel, and as a forum for high level political negotiation.* The following points for negotiation are intended to offer residents of Rukban options that minimize risk and maximize information, thus abiding by humanitarian principles and securing residents' ability to choose their own best course of action.

### ENGAGING RUSSIA

This report does not recommend solutions involving formal negotiated “reconciliation deals” such as those facilitated by Russia in the past, as these are too rarely upheld.<sup>28</sup> However, to support the above-mentioned options for the IDPs at Rukban, the U.S. should engage in direct negotiations with Russia on the following points.

***Medical Evacuations: The U.S. should negotiate for the immediate evacuation of the few IDPs in Rukban in desperate need of urgent medical care.***

Since the SARG does not allow medical supplies to reach facilities in Rukban and access to UN and Jordanian medical facilities is extremely limited, this process should involve evacuating a small group to hospitals in Damascus for treatment before returning to Rukban. The UN should be involved in a monitoring capacity throughout the process.

Currently, Rukban residents with severe medical needs are brought to a UN clinic just across the Jordanian border. The process is tedious and open only to a small number of individuals. Bringing residents with severe medical needs, especially those requiring long-term care, to hospitals in Damascus or other SARG-controlled areas is a lifesaving measure that should be prioritized before all else.

Even if medical evacuations to Damascus are undertaken, *access to the UN clinic in Jordan must be maintained* to remove the coercive element that limiting residents to care within SARG-controlled areas would introduce.<sup>29</sup>

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***Information Distribution: The U.S. should negotiate Russian security assurances for go-and-see and come-and tell visits.***

Rukban residents should have access to verifiable information about the situation in various destinations so that they can make informed choices. Particularly important topics include conscription requirements, updates to Syrian property laws, and a realistic estimation of the extent to which homes and businesses have been destroyed or taken over by pro-regime elements.

*The U.S. should negotiate with Russia to facilitate a small group of community leaders or representatives to conduct go-and-see visits.* These draw on existing humanitarian models to bring Rukban community leaders on short trips to their home regions and learn first hand what to expect upon a hypothetical return.<sup>30</sup> These leaders would then return to Rukban and discuss what they had seen.

These visits should be jointly facilitated by the UN and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), with security provided by Russian forces in areas in which they operate.

As both the SARC and Russian forces lack credibility with Rukban residents, UN involvement is necessary for visibility and accountability to assure those who go that they will not be immediately detained by the SARG.

Involving the MaT force in facilitation, likely by escorting participants to the edge of the deconfliction zone, could also increase the perceived credibility of the visits within Rukban.

The vast majority of Rukban residents are from the Homs Governorate, but visits to Deir ez-Zor, Hama, and the rural areas around Damascus would also be necessary.

Organizers should actively include women for visits to ensure that issues that would affect the majority of the Rukban population are not overlooked due to poor representation.

*Come-and-tell visits, in which former Rukban residents return to the encampment and provide candid accounts of their experiences in town halls, should supplement go-and-see visits.* Many of those who have already returned to regime-controlled areas are afraid to contact people in opposition-held areas out of fear that SARG intelligence is monitoring their communication. These visits provide an in-person form of information sharing that is not subject to remote monitoring.

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*The U.S. should press Russia to guarantee the security of individuals returning to Rukban for either go-and-see or come-and-tell visits, and to ensure that they are not subject to retribution at a later date. This can be accomplished by allowing the United Nations to facilitate and monitor these visits.*

*Go-and-see visitors should share their findings in town hall-style public forums within Rukban and via WhatsApp. Community leaders should act as initial distribution points and should spread information widely, both verbally and online, over tribal and social networks inside Rukban.*

*The success of the methods above requires creating clear, redundant channels of information such that it will be more difficult to distort factual information and so that as many residents as possible can access the information they need.*

***Transportation: The U.S. should negotiate the Russia to secure transportation access for both civilian and armed group members.***

Given the above context and risk assessment, the only way to ensure Rukban residents safely arrive at their destination of choice is to provide them with secure transportation.

While Russia asserts publicly that the U.S. is an occupying force inside Syrian sovereign territory, it recognizes the mutual interest in IDP departures from Rukban and will likely be open to minimal compromises to achieve this end for a large proportion of the Rukban IDPs.<sup>31</sup>

Negotiations should include Russian assurances for secure bus routes to (1) multiple locations within the Homs Governorate and (2) to Euphrates Shield territories.

Negotiations should include Russian assurances that their guarantors will ensure that the route is safe, not blocked by SARG checkpoints, and does not require any fees.<sup>32</sup>

There is strong precedent for the SARG to allow unimpeded bussing of civilians as well as militants, with Russian military escorts and security guarantees.

Relocation efforts involving civilians and militants should be implemented *simultaneously*. The sequenced relocation of civilians and militants present risks to both populations and should be avoided.

In order to reestablish trust in Russia's ability to ensure safety for returnees, *the U.S. should require assurances of access for UN monitoring in transit.*

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## ENGAGING JORDAN

***Cross-Border Aid:* Should the negotiation track in Damascus between the UN, Syria, and Russia for new convoys end in deadlock, the U.S. should request that the JAF coordinate a cross border aid convoy.**

While Jordan staunchly maintains its closed border and has made clear that its security interests require that the area along its border with Syria be unoccupied, the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) represent a possible flexible entry point for humanitarian aid delivery.

Such small-scale unpublicized cross-border aid delivery would alleviate some of the most immediate food insecurities, while still maintaining public pressure on Russia and the SARG for increased access via Damascus. This type of assistance could likely be facilitated on a limited scale in case of dire need.

Jordan understands that a dire humanitarian situation in the area may exacerbate security challenges, and recognizes that stabilizing the area is critical. The U.S. should keep options for discreet humanitarian assistance from Jordan on the table.

***Asylum for the Tribes Army:* The U.S. should question the assumption that the Jordanian government will take no more refugees.**

Given Jordan's support of and working relationship with the Tribes Army, we recommend that the U.S. *urge Jordan to offer asylum to the Tribes Army and their families*. This limited offering of refugee status is projected to include a group of no more than a few hundred people, who would otherwise have no other safe options.

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## ENGAGING TURKEY

***Relocation to Euphrates Shield:* The U.S. should negotiate with the Turkish government to facilitate the option for some of Rukban’s population to relocate to Euphrates Shield territories.**

Turkish-controlled Euphrates Shield territories are the best option for individuals who feel they cannot safely return to SARG-controlled territories. This would include much of the civilian population as well as members of the smaller armed groups, particularly those without significant foreign support.

To ease this process, *the U.S. should issue public statements that any relocation by Rukban IDPs to Euphrates Shield will not contribute to forced displacement or demographic shifts* between Kurdish and Syrian Sunni populations, and ensure that relocation is fully voluntary. The U.S. should pressure Turkey to do the same.

To minimize the potential local unrest between armed groups upon this relocation, *the U.S. should recommend that Turkey undertake preparatory dialogue with local councils and community leaders in Euphrates Shield* to maintain the good-will Turkey has maintained in the area thus far.<sup>33</sup>

The U.S. should ensure that any proposed relocation option in the north does not further displace others or significantly alter demographics.

***Asylum for the MaT:* The U.S. should negotiate asylum in Turkey for armed actors at Rukban with whom the U.S. has cooperated.**

Those with the fewest safe options are US-affiliated forces and their families. The U.S. should leverage its relationship with Turkey to request asylum for those few individuals who have worked with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, of which Turkey is also a member.

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## ENGAGING THE UNITED NATIONS

### ***New UN Monitoring Mission: The U.S. should propose a new mandate for UN observers in Syria via the United Nations Security Council.***

An expanded UN presence at return destinations for people leaving Rukban offers far greater safety and international accountability than guarantees from Russia or the SARG.

There is precedent for a Security Council-mandated monitoring mission. In 2016, the Security Council authorized UN observers to oversee the evacuation of Aleppo.<sup>34</sup> The resolution was unanimously adopted.

*The United States could introduce a similar resolution authorizing UN observers to oversee departures from Rukban.* Given the Aleppo precedent, the onus would be on Russia to either approve it or exercise its veto power, forcing Russia to explain why it is opposed to international monitoring of departures that it has previously claimed are safe. However, the United States should take caution in drafting this resolution, and prevent Russia from introducing language that normalizes the SARG.

*A less formal approach* to an increased UN presence would be to work through the Special Envoy for Syria's office to expand the existing UN footprint in Syria. UN agencies such as UNICEF, OCHA, and UNHCR are already in-country, as are the ICRC and NGOs such as the Danish Refugee Council.<sup>35</sup>

The Special Envoy could advocate that Russia and the SARG provide more latitude for these organizations to operate in Homs Governorate and other destinations where they currently have a limited presence.

The objective should be to secure for the UN at least the same level of access and flexibility as they currently have in rural Damascus, areas of Aleppo, and Hama.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Palmyra Initiative: The U.S. should recommend a UN presence at the UNESCO world heritage site at Palmyra in Homs Governorate.***

The archeological sites of historical Palmyra are symbolically powerful. Both the SARG and Russia have used Palmyra in public messaging campaigns since they recaptured the city from ISIS in December 2016 to portray the SARG as altruistic and cosmopolitan.<sup>37</sup>

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An international presence at the UNESCO world heritage site would augment the reach of other UN bodies, as well as newly mandated observers. International media attention directed at the site could help put a spotlight on a “Palmyra Initiative” that would include protecting returnees to Homs.

Although the United States should not be party to attempts to sanitize the record of the SARG in Syria, the U.S. can use Palmyra, and the international attention the city has garnered, to keep the focus on the treatment of Rukban residents who might return to areas nearby.

***UN Communication with Residents: The UN should work with Syria civilians in Homs to produce a verified information handout for distribution to Rukban residents.***

The U.S. should support a process of data gathering to provide an informative handout to Rukban residents, including a comprehensive description of the security dynamics and issues of concern in areas of potential return in Homs Governorate.

The information should be *collected by the UN*, sourced from independent analysis and civilians who previously returned, and *distributed by the UN* to Rukban community leaders and residents.

Since information provided by Russia will not be trusted, and SARC is viewed as Damascus-aligned, participation by the UN in gathering the information, its curation, and sponsorship of the handout is important to reduce credibility concerns.

The information should include important topics of concern to IDPs over which the SARG has unilateral control, such as conscription parameters, implementation of Property Law 10, an assessment of physical and infrastructure destruction, processing center procedures, and the status of any deals with the SARG that individuals have made to reconcile their status.

Much like the go-and-see and come-and-tell visits, the mode of distribution for the handout should include a town hall forum, hosted by community leaders in Rukban, and its widespread sharing via Whatsapp.

This activity would serve dual purposes: ensuring maximal information sharing that would thereafter allow individuals to conduct their own risk assessment, and a public demonstration of the U.S.’s support for efforts to ensure adherence to a principled process to the best of its ability within the context.

By facilitating go-and-see and come-and-tell visits in addition to this informative document, the U.S. will ensure redundant sources of verified information for individuals to cross-reference and assess independently.

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## FOR THOSE WHO REMAIN

Regardless of the options offered, some IDPs may perceive relocation or return options to be unsafe. Therefore, the U.S. should also prepare for sustained assistance to the small population that is likely to remain at Rukban. We suggest that the U.S. move forward with one of the two following recommendations, listed in order of preference.

### ***Creation of a UN-administered IDP encampment at Rukban: The U.S. should support the creation of an official UN-Administered IDP Camp.***

As per the example of other IDP settlements inside Syria, most notably in the Northern area currently under Turkish control, the best case “remain” scenario would be for the *United Nations to administer Rukban as an official IDP camp.*

The formalization of the encampment would address the main concerns expressed by current Rukban residents, some of which underlie their desire to leave, such as the absence of basic necessities, the lack of services in the camp, and concerns about safety. Barring a more permanent UN administrative presence at the camp, sustained access by humanitarian actors and regular delivery of humanitarian aid would improve conditions at the encampment for those who remain.

## OR

### ***Unilateral Aid Delivery by the DOD: The U.S. should provide unilateral aid delivery by the DOD.***

If all other avenues have been exhausted, it is our recommendation that USAID authorize the DOD to carry out aid delivery into Rukban.

We recognize that the U.S. aims to maintain pressure on the SARG and Russia for sustained humanitarian access via Damascus throughout Syria, and that this option raises concerns for adherence to humanitarian principles, particularly lack of neutrality and independence in aid distribution. Nonetheless, this avenue is practically feasible and should be very seriously considered given the closed smuggling routes and dwindling supplies of food in Rukban.

This option may be seen as giving credence to the Russian argument that the U.S. is responsible for the welfare of Rukban residents. However, in a scenario in which people are facing starvation, it is consistent with U.S. values, interests and previous actions to provide humanitarian aid. Given the proximity of al-Tanf, it is logistically possible for the United States to provide assistance to Rukban and we strongly recommend that it do so.

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# RECOMMENDED POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

## ISSUES AFFECTING THE CONDITIONS AT DESTINATION AREAS FOR RUKBAN RESIDENTS THAT ARE CONTROLLED BY SARG AND RUSSIA

In addition to points for active negotiation, there are *five points on which the United States should open discussions with Russia*. These are areas where the U.S. has little leverage to affect change; nonetheless, the U.S. can still present these issues as Russian and SARG-controlled obstacles to sustainable solutions for Rukban residents and frame them in terms of mutual interest for facilitating departure from Rukban.

### CIVIL DOCUMENTATION

Many Syrians' documents were lost, destroyed, or confiscated in the course of fighting or displacement—seventy percent of refugees in neighboring countries no longer have their national ID card. Children born during the conflict face particular documentation hurdles, as many births were never registered.<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that the two main civil identity documents in Syria are the national ID card and the family booklet, which is sometimes used as a substitute for missing national ID cards.

Respondents to the UN intentions survey in Rukban highlighted lack of civil documentation as a key concern and Rukban residents are assumed to lack one or both documents at similarly high rates to other forcibly displaced Syrians.

Those leaving to SARG-controlled areas without documentation are temporarily held in processing centers, where conditions and ease of regaining access to documentation are highly politicized.<sup>39</sup>

Those leaving to non-SARG areas or attempting to seek asylum can expect limited access to humanitarian services—and perhaps similar suspicion and detention to that seen in SARG areas—without proof of identity. *Providing civil documentation must be prioritized as a way to make these options outside Rukban more accessible to those who wish to pursue them.*

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## CONSCRIPTION

Sources inside Syria report that the conscription of men as young as sixteen and as old as fifty is widespread, but the lack of clarity or consistent enforcement of conscription rules creates significant safety concerns for many Rukban IDPs who might otherwise return to SARG-held territory.<sup>40</sup> Clarity should be provided regarding official and actual conscription policies, and should be confirmed by international and impartial actors such as the United Nations.

## DETENTION

Many returnees from Rukban and elsewhere have been held in temporary processing centers.<sup>41</sup> In Homs Governorate, where the majority of Rukban residents are from, the ability of the ICRC, UNHCR, and OCHA to monitor and supervise the conditions of these centers is extremely limited. Given the history of SARG detainee treatment, the lack of clarity around causes of detention represents a serious protection risk for returnees. The ICRC, tasked by the Geneva Convention with monitoring conditions of detention in war zones, should be provided greater access to detention facilities so as to assess conditions of detention and the welfare of detainees.

## PROPERTY LAW

In 2018, the SARG introduced Law 10, giving displaced Syrians only one month to reclaim property they had abandoned or left over the course of the war, or yield ownership to the government. The law was amended in November 2018, extending the grace period to one year, until November 2019.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless it is unlikely, given people's lack of documentation and information about their property, that this time period is enough to safely allow people to reassert rights to their property.

Moreover, it is difficult to ascertain the status of homes in the first place—whether they have been destroyed, repurposed, or confiscated—and relay that information reliably to people inside Rukban. This ambiguity about access to property upon return is also a significant concern to IDPs.

## FIFTH CORPS

The Fifth Corps takes a hybrid army-militia structure.<sup>43</sup> This structure provides it with some insularity and autonomy from the SARG.<sup>44</sup> The process by which individuals at Rukban might choose this option is currently unclear, although some IDPs may be open to this option over other types of conscription.

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# LOW PROBABILITY OPTIONS

The following analysis refers to some of the options assessed for Rukban IDPs—mainly within the resettlement and relocation tracks—which we found to have a low probability of being pursued, given they represent unlikely outcomes. This, however, is the conclusion bound by the current timeframe and political circumstances. Should the scenario change, it is possible they can be revisited as options for Rukban residents and it is why we chose to include them in this report.

## RELOCATION OF CIVILIANS TO IDLIB

Based on the examples of previous evacuations—most notably of Eastern Ghouta and Dara’a—our team analyzed a possible voluntary relocation framework for civilian Rukban residents to the Idlib region.<sup>45</sup> Given both the current dire humanitarian situation in the city, and the impending offensive against opposition groups, we believe it would be irresponsible to actively seek relocation of Rukban IDPs in Idlib. While some Rukban residents may choose to relocate to Idlib independently, we maintain our recommendation that the U.S. not encourage this option.

## THIRD-PARTY RESETTLEMENT

We have previously explored possibilities for third-party resettlement. Resettlement to the U.S. and other countries where Syrian refugees have previously been resettled, such as Canada and European countries, while highly desirable, does not have buy-in from the governments involved. The political will to receive Syrian refugees has diminished significantly in these countries, especially given the current context of an impending push for normalization by the SARG.

Resettlement in countries with no visa requirements for Syrians was also evaluated as a possibility, most notably Malaysia, as it has already accepted the entry of a number of Syrian nationals. We found this option to be unlikely due to the likely low interest from IDPs, cultural and geographical constraints, a recent shift toward negative Malaysian government rhetoric on the topic, and the absence of a long-term guarantee of asylum.<sup>46</sup>

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## ASYLUM IN THE REGION

We have considered both Jordan and Iraq as destinations for asylum. Iraq is not a reliable possibility at this point, given its own unstable security conditions and the current strained state of the country's resources.

Under tremendous pressure after receiving more than 600,000 registered refugees from Syria, Jordan has been firm in its refusal to accept more Syrian refugees. Jordan has made its position clear to the United States at the highest levels. We understand that the U.S. does not have the political will or inclination to pressure Jordan further on this point. However, Jordan represents a stable and appealing option for Rukban IDPs. It is our assessment that should a small contingent of IDPs remain in the Rukban area, in any combination with the options articulated above, there may be room for negotiation with Jordan to offer asylum to a small number of people for whom other options for departure are simply not viable. *While we recognize that large-scale relocation from Rukban to Jordan is untenable, a limited option is still worth investigating.*

## AL-TANF BASE WITHDRAWAL AND DECONFLICTION ZONE RENEGOTIATION

Our team also assessed the possibility of leveraging a possible withdrawal from al-Tanf in negotiations with the SARG and its allies in return for guarantees for the security of Rukban residents as they return home or resettlement elsewhere in Syria. We also evaluated a change in the current parameters of the deconfliction zone with the same goal in mind. The consensus among sources inside outside the US government are that both al-Tanf and the deconfliction zone are off-limits for negotiation at this point in time.

# CONCLUSION

The status quo is untenable for Syrian IDPs at Rukban, and finding a solution that offers safe options is in the mutual interest both the U.S. and Russia. With the goal of minimizing risk and maximizing choice, we have identified options for Syrians at Rukban to *return home, relocate or resettle, and remain*. On each track we have *recommended U.S. actions for negotiation, as well as outstanding points for discussion with Russia*.

*With Russia*, the United States should press for Russian forces to provide security and access guarantees to allow *medical evacuations from Rukban, information distribution* through go-and-see and come-and-tell visits, and *secure transportation* for civilians and militants at Rukban as they depart.

*With Jordan*, the United States should request that the JAF coordinate a *cross-border aid operation* to Rukban should the SARG and Russia continue to prevent humanitarian aid access from Damascus. The United States should also urge Jordan to *offer asylum for the members of the Tribes Army and their families*, who are unlikely to find safety elsewhere in Syria.

*With Turkey*, the United States should negotiate for a *safe relocation option for interested Rukban IDPs to Euphrates Shield territories* in northern Syria, and for Turkey to *offer asylum for the Coalition-affiliated MaT forces*.

In parallel to these negotiations, the United States should work toward a broader United Nations role in addressing Rukban. This effort should involve a new *UN Monitoring Mission*, mandated by the Security Council to observe conditions of return and relocation for the IDPs at Rukban. On a less ambitious scale, the United States should advocate for an *expanded UN presence*, and greater latitude for UN agencies already operating in Syria. This could come through a *Palmyra Initiative*, leveraging the site's cultural capital to allow for other UN agencies to operate more freely in Homs Governorate, and inducing the SARG to refrain from human rights violations due to the increased media attention such an initiative could attract. The United States should also request that the UN work with Syrian civilians in Homs to produce a *verified information handout* detailing conditions that Rukban's residents should expect upon their departure.

Finally, in order to provide basic humanitarian support for the small number of people likely to remain, United States should support the creation of a *UN-administered IDP encampment at Rukban*. If this is not possible, the United States should conduct unilateral aid delivery through the Department of Defense and its facilities at al-Tanf.

Separate from these points of negotiation, there are several issues on which we recommend the United States enter into further discussion with Russia. These include the challenges around *civil documentation, conscription, detention, and property laws*. For armed elements at Rukban, the United States should open discussions with Russia around the possibilities offered by the *Fifth Corps*. We recommend that the U.S. discuss these issues with Russia, emphasizing that these are obstacles to return that only Russia and the SARG have the power to ameliorate. Given the limited leverage available to the U.S., we do not foresee that the U.S. will be able to compel Russia or the SARG to amend their current practices in these areas. However, the U.S. could clarify that, by addressing them, Russia and the SARG might somewhat mitigate perceived security concerns and incentivize broader IDP departure from Rukban.

Finally, it is our hope that these recommendations are rapidly evaluated and that action is taken to both alleviate the immediate needs of the Syrian IDPs at Rukban and support U.S. foreign policy objectives in Syria.

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