# Survivors return to ruins of al-Qaryatayn after Rukban camp closure



Yasmine al-Saleh is filled with mixed emotions as her family returns to their home in al-Qaryatayn, located in the Homs province of Syria. Celebrating the Eid al-Adha holiday, her family has emerged from a years-long ordeal marked by life in a displacement camp notorious for its dire conditions. Although the home they returned to is in ruins — a casualty of nearly 14 years of civil conflict — al-Saleh reflects, “When I first entered my house — what can I say? It was a happiness that cannot be described.” Yet, the fragility of their situation looms large; surrounded by collapsed buildings, they face daily insecurities. With no financial resources, and her husband unable to work, al-Saleh’s joy is overshadowed by the stark reality of hunger and debt.

Last month, the last families trickled out of the Rukban refugee camp, once home to tens of thousands escaping the violence of the Assad regime and Islamic State forces. Set up in 2015, Rukban became a symbol of prolonged suffering, cut off from humanitarian aid due to a blockade enforced by the Syrian government and Jordanian authorities who closed borders in 2016. The United Nations and other charities struggled to deliver essentials, and many residents relied on smuggling to meet their basic needs, facing exorbitant costs for food and sanitation; Rukban was aptly dubbed a "death camp" by al-Saleh, who recounted her panic during childbirth when other women in the camp had died in similar circumstances.

The conditions in Rukban attracted international attention, especially after years of neglect. In June 2023, the Syrian Emergency Task Force succeeded in delivering much-needed supplies under Operation Syrian Oasis, marking a rare improvement after continuous blockades and humanitarian hindrances. Lt. Col. Ryan Harty, stationed nearby, confirmed the desperate situation, noting, “They lacked medical care, medical supplies, food — anything you could think of that you would need to sustain life, they lacked.” Recent aid efforts, including the involvement of the U.S. military and NGOs, provided sporadic relief, yet the overarching misery persisted.

As the political landscape in Syria shifts following the fall of Bashar al-Assad, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has reported a swell of interest from around one million Syrian refugees to return home in early 2025. This desire for repatriation reflects a broader trend where former camps and conflict zones are seeing a movement back to areas once governed by regime forces. Research indicates that nearly 30% of Syrian refugees in the Middle East express a wish to return, driven by the harsh realities of life in host countries and the hope of rebuilding their lives, despite the challenges that lie ahead.

For many like al-Saleh, returning home is bittersweet. Bakir al-Najim, another returnee, shared, “After 10 years of displacement, we will celebrate Eid al-Adha back in our hometown,” but lamented their lack of resources to provide for their guests. Ahmed Shehata, CEO of Islamic Relief USA, indicated that humanitarian organisations are scrambling for funding to address the needs of returnees, further complicated by funding cuts from the U.S. government.

In the aftermath of such extensive displacement, the task of rebuilding both physically and emotionally is a monumental challenge. Al-Saleh, reflecting on her time at Rukban, encapsulated the harsh truth of that chapter in her life: “Rukban was a death camp.” Her family's struggle, echoed by countless others, underscores the long-lasting impact of the Syrian civil war and the ongoing humanitarian crisis as displaced families seek solace in familiar, but fragile, surroundings.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/bashar-assad-people-homs-jordan-iraq-b2765176.html), [[4]](https://www.npr.org/2024/12/24/nx-s1-5235307/nx-s1-5293842-1)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/bashar-assad-people-homs-jordan-iraq-b2765176.html), [[2]](https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/syrias-rukban-camp-is-receiving-long-obstructed-humanitarian-aid), [[3]](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/28/assad-normalisation-leaves-syria-rukban-camp-fearing-future)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/syrias-rukban-camp-is-receiving-long-obstructed-humanitarian-aid), [[4]](https://www.npr.org/2024/12/24/nx-s1-5235307/nx-s1-5293842-1), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/nearly-30-syrians-want-go-home-up-almost-zero-un-refugee-chief-says-2025-01-25/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-refugee-agency-expects-1-million-syrians-return-six-months-2024-12-17/), [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/nearly-30-syrians-want-go-home-up-almost-zero-un-refugee-chief-says-2025-01-25/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/bashar-assad-people-homs-jordan-iraq-b2765176.html), [[3]](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/28/assad-normalisation-leaves-syria-rukban-camp-fearing-future), [[7]](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-new-rulers-seek-aid-boost-eu-conference-2025-03-16/)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/bashar-assad-people-homs-jordan-iraq-b2765176.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/blog/syrias-rukban-camp-is-receiving-long-obstructed-humanitarian-aid> - The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum discusses the prolonged blockade of the Rukban refugee camp by the Assad regime and its allies, which prevented essential humanitarian aid from reaching the residents. In June 2023, the Syrian Emergency Task Force launched Operation Syrian Oasis, successfully delivering much-needed supplies to the camp, marking a significant improvement in the residents' quality of life and inspiring new approaches to aid delivery.
3. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/28/assad-normalisation-leaves-syria-rukban-camp-fearing-future> - Al Jazeera reports on the dire conditions in the Rukban refugee camp, where residents face severe shortages of staple food items, medical supplies, and lack of education facilities. The camp has not received shipments of flour for several months, making bread scarce. Residents express fear for their children's future due to the absence of proper education and medical care.
4. <https://www.npr.org/2024/12/24/nx-s1-5235307/nx-s1-5293842-1> - NPR covers the situation in the Rukban camp following the fall of President Bashar al-Assad. Thousands of displaced Syrians, who had been trapped in the desert without aid or medical care for almost a decade, are now free to leave. The article highlights the years of deprivation and isolation faced by the residents and the toll it has taken on them.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-refugee-agency-expects-1-million-syrians-return-six-months-2024-12-17/> - Reuters reports that the U.N. refugee agency anticipates approximately 1 million Syrian refugees will return to Syria within the first half of 2025 following the unexpected rebel overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad. This development has led to new waves of internal displacement and returns from countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/nearly-30-syrians-want-go-home-up-almost-zero-un-refugee-chief-says-2025-01-25/> - Reuters reports that almost 30% of Syrian refugees in the Middle East express a desire to return home within the year following the ousting of President Bashar al-Assad by Islamist rebels. This change follows a 13-year civil war that led to one of the largest refugee crises in modern history.
7. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/syrias-new-rulers-seek-aid-boost-eu-conference-2025-03-16/> - Reuters reports that the interim government in Damascus is participating in an aid conference hosted by the European Union, facing reduced aid pledges amid ongoing humanitarian and security issues following the fall of Bashar al-Assad. The conference, traditionally held without Assad's government due to his civil war actions, is expected to see lower pledges this year.