

# U.S. “Humanitarian Aid” is Being Channeled to ...The Islamic State (ISIL)

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*While U.S. warplanes strike at the militants of the so-called Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq, truckloads of U.S. and Western aid has been flowing into territory controlled by the jihadists, assisting them to build their terror-inspiring “caliphate.”*

The aid—mainly food and medical equipment—is meant for Syrians displaced from their hometowns, and for hungry civilians. It is funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, European donors, and the United Nations. Whether it continues is now the subject of anguished debate among officials in Washington and Europe. The fear is that stopping aid would hurt innocent civilians and would be used for propaganda purposes by the militants, who would likely blame the West for added hardship.

The Bible says if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him something to drink—doing so will “heap burning coals” of shame on his head. But there is no evidence that the militants of the Islamic State, widely known as ISIS or ISIL, feel any sense of disgrace or indignity (and certainly not gratitude) receiving charity from their foes.

Quite the reverse, the aid convoys have to pay off ISIS emirs (leaders) for the convoys to enter the eastern Syrian extremist strongholds of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, providing yet another income stream for ISIS militants, who are funding themselves from oil smuggling, extortion, and the sale of whatever they can loot, including rare [antiquities](#) from museums and archaeological sites.

“The convoys have to be approved by ISIS and you have to pay them: The bribes are disguised and itemized as transportation costs,” says an aid coordinator who spoke to The Daily Beast on the condition he not be identified in this article. The kickbacks are either paid by foreign or local nongovernmental organizations tasked with distributing the aid, or by the Turkish or Syrian transportation companies contracted to deliver it.

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And there are fears the aid itself isn’t carefully monitored enough, with some sold off on the black market or used by ISIS to win hearts and minds by feeding its fighters and its subjects. At a minimum, the aid means ISIS doesn’t have to divert cash from its war budget to help feed the local population or the displaced persons, allowing it to focus its resources exclusively on fighters and war-making, say critics of the aid.

One of the striking differences between ISIS and terror groups of the past is its desire to portray the territory it has conquered as a well-organized and [smoothly functioning state](#). “The soldiers of Allah do not liberate a village, town, or city, only to abandon its residents and ignore their needs,” declares the latest issue of Dabiq, the group’s slick online magazine. Elsewhere in the publication are pictures of slaughtered Kurdish soldiers and a gruesome photograph of American journalist Steven Sotloff’s severed head resting on top of his body. But this article shows ISIS restoring electricity in Raqqa, running a home for the elderly, a cancer-treatment facility in Ninawa, and cleaning streets in other towns.

Last year, a [polio outbreak](#) in Deir ez-Zor raised concerns throughout the region about the spread of an epidemic. The World Health Organization worked with the Syrian government and with opposition groups to try to carry out an immunization campaign. This has continued. In response to a query by The Daily Beast, a WHO spokesperson said, “Our information indicates that vaccination campaigns have been successfully carried out by local health workers in IS-controlled territory.”

“I am alarmed that we are providing support for ISIS governance,” says Jonathan Schanzer, a Mideast expert with the Washington D.C.-based think tank Foundation for Defense of Democracies. “By doing so we are indemnifying the militants by satisfying the core demands of local people, who could turn on ISIS if they got frustrated.”

U.S. and Western relief agencies have been caught before in an aid dilemma when it comes to the war on terror. Last December, the Overseas Development Institute, an independent British think tank focusing on international development and humanitarian issues, reported that aid agencies in Somalia had been paying militants from the al Qaeda offshoot al-Shabab for access to areas under their control during the 2011 famine.

Al-Shabab demanded from the agencies what it described as “registration fees” of up to \$10,000. And in many cases al-Shabab insisted on distributing the aid, keeping much of it for itself, according to ODI. The think tank cited al-Shabab’s diversion of food aid in the town of Baidoa, where it kept between half and two-thirds of the food for its own fighters. The researchers noted the al Qaeda affiliate developed a highly sophisticated system of monitoring and co-opting the aid agencies, even setting up a “Humanitarian Co-ordination Office.”

Something similar appears to be underway now in the Syrian provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

Aid coordinators with NGOs partnering USAID and other Western government agencies, including Britain’s Department for International Development, say ISIS insist that the NGOs, foreign and local, employ people ISIS approves on their staffs inside Syria. “There is always at least one ISIS person on the payroll; they force people on us,” says an aid coordinator. “And when a convoy is being prepared, the negotiations go through them about whether the convoy can proceed. They contact their emirs and a price is worked out. We don’t have to wrangle with individual ISIS field commanders once approval is given to get the convoy in, as the militants are highly hierarchical.” He adds: “None of the fighters will dare touch it, if an emir has given permission.”

That isn’t the case with other Syrian rebel groups, where arguments over convoys can erupt at checkpoints at main entry points into Syria, where aid is unloaded from Turkish tractor-

trailers and re-loaded into Syrian ones.

Many aid workers are uncomfortable with what's happening. "A few months ago we delivered a mobile clinic for a USAID-funded NGO," says one, who declined to be named. "A few of us debated the rights and wrongs of this. The clinic was earmarked for the treatment of civilians, but we all know that wounded ISIS fighters could easily be treated as well. So what are we doing here helping their fighters, who we are bombing, to be treated so they can fight again?"

What becomes even more bizarre is that while aid is still going into ISIS-controlled areas, only a little is going into Kurdish areas in northeast Syria. About every three or four months there is a convoy into the key city of Qamishli. Syrian Kurds, who are now defending Kobani with the support of U.S. warplanes, have long complained about the lack of international aid. Last November, tellingly, Syrian Kurds complained that Syria's Kurdistan was not included in a U.N. polio-vaccination campaign. U.N. agencies took the position that polio vaccines should go through the Syrian Red Crescent via Damascus when it came to the Kurds.

The origins of the aid programs pre-date President Barack Obama's decision to "degrade and defeat" ISIS, but they have carried on without major review. The aid push was to reach anyone in need. A senior State Department official with detailed knowledge of current aid programs confirmed to The Daily Beast that U.S. government funded relief is still going into Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor. He declined to estimate the quantity. But an aid coordinator, when asked, responded: "A lot."

The State Department official said he, too, was conflicted about the programs.

"Is this helping the militants by allowing them to divert money they would have to spend on food? If aid wasn't going in, would they let people starve? And is it right for us to withhold assistance and punish civilians? Would the militants turn around, as al-Shabab did when many agencies withdrew from Somalia, and blame the West for starvation and hunger? Are we helping indirectly the militants to build their caliphate? I wrestle with this."

Western NGO partners of USAID and other Western agencies declined to respond to Daily Beast inquiries about international relief going to ISIS areas, citing the complexity of the issue and noting its delicacy.

Mideast analyst Schanzer dismisses the notion that ISIS can use an aid shutdown as leverage in its PR campaign: "I think this is false. In areas they control, everyone understands they are a brutal organization. This is their basic weakness and by pushing in aid we are curtailing the chances of an internal revolt, which is the best chance you have of bringing down ISIS."

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