

Cross-border Aid, Covid-19, and U.S. Decisions in Syria

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THE ISSUE

- The Syrian government has restricted international humanitarian access to opposition-controlled areas of Syria as part of its efforts to regain control of the entire country
- In 2014, the United Nations designated four border crossings humanitarians could use to deliver aid to those in need without government approval.
 - Russia and China blocked the United Nations from using two border crossings in January, and the mandate for the remaining two crossings will expire on July 10, 2020.
- Cutting off UN humanitarian agencies' cross-border access to northwest Syria as the country faces the Covid-19 pandemic would be a catastrophe for Syria, the Middle East, the broader international community, and U.S. interests.
- The U.S. government should maximize its leverage in negotiations by focusing on the imperative to maintain UN agencies' cross-border access to northwest Syria.
 - The United States should push for a separate agreement to allow cross-border medical access to northeast Syria through the Yaroubiyah crossing.

COMPOUNDING CRISES

Idlib Province in northwest Syria contains the last stronghold of rebels fighting the Syrian government.¹ As civilians have fled to the northwest from conflict zones elsewhere in the country, the province's population has doubled to about 3 million. While an estimated 30,000 are rebel fighters, the overwhelming majority are civilians in increasingly desperate circumstances. A December 2019 offensive by Syrian and Russian troops seized control of the southern part of the province and displaced almost 1 million civilians. Many of the displaced lack adequate shelter, food, water, and sanitation.

Cross-border assistance supplied by the United Nations is a lifeline for millions of civilians in northwest Syria. Working with and through international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in southern Turkey and local Syrian NGOs, the World Food Programme (WFP) reached 1.2 million people and the World Health Organization (WHO) supplied at least 55 tons of medical supplies to health facilities in northwest Syria in February alone.² The need is growing. A new record for aid delivery was set in March when 1,486 trucks crossed into the area. Even so, the UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs said needs were far from being met.³

The Syrian government has often taken a skeptical attitude toward international humanitarian relief operations in rebel areas, seeing such efforts as entrenching enemy forces and sustaining the rebellion. The government's preferred strategy—employed in Homs, Aleppo, Eastern Ghouta, and elsewhere—is to control the supply of resources from Damascus and make life in besieged areas so unlivable that populations either surrender or flee.⁴ But for populations in the northwest, there is nowhere else to flee. The government intends death or surrender to be the only options.

China and Russia have been sympathetic to the Syrian government's approach. In some measure, this is because each has faced its own internal rebellions by Islamist groups and bristled at international attention to its domestic challenges. Each has a strategic angle as well, seeking to secure future footholds in Damascus.

The Covid-19 pandemic should change the calculus of all concerned. Covid-19 is spreading in Syria and could become the most severe outbreak in the world. Much of the population is already sick and malnourished, and diseases have gone untreated in months and years of conflict. Over the course of the war, Syria's health care infrastructure has been fragmented, downgraded, and destroyed, and 70 percent of health care workers have fled the country. It is woefully underequipped to deal with the pandemic.⁵ Health facilities across the country are estimated to have the capacity to deal with just 6,500 Covid-19 cases.⁶ In the northwest, at least 84 medical facilities have been damaged, destroyed, or forced to close since December 2019, and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people (IDPs) lack access to basic sanitation services.⁷

Were Russia or China to veto the renewal of the cross-border mandate in July, the United Nations would then be forced to rethink the modality of its aid operations. Elements of its operations would be forced to shift to Damascus, and the Syrian government would use that influence to punish opposition-held areas.⁸ Because those operations would require government approval, they are unlikely to reach Syrians in the densely populated opposition-held areas in the northwest, where a Covid-19 outbreak would be catastrophic. There are just 203 ventilators to meet the needs of 3.2 million people, and 95 percent of ICU beds are already occupied.⁹

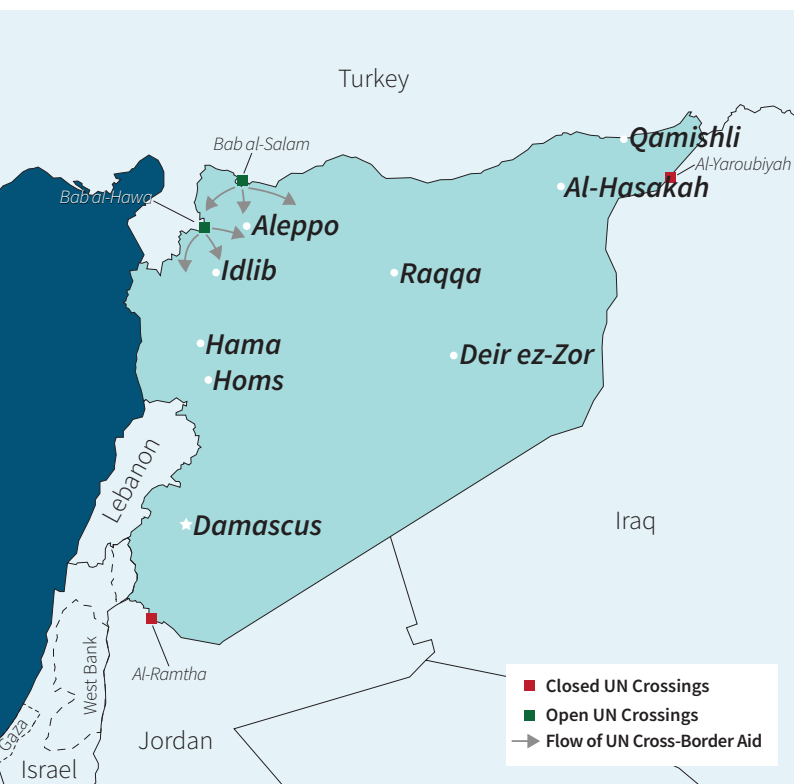
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This report argues why the United States and its allies must work to ensure that the UN Security Council renews the mandate for cross-border access in Syria. The report begins by outlining the evolution of UN Security Council resolutions on cross-border access in Syria. Drawing lessons from elsewhere in Syria, it shows why crossline access cannot substitute for cross-border access and why the loss of cross-border access undermines efforts to deal with Covid-19.¹⁰ After an analysis of the implications of the loss of UN access to the two border crossings in northwest Syria, the report investigates the issues that the UN Security Council will debate before the renewal vote in July and the impact of Covid-19 on that debate. It then outlines a set of U.S. interests which would be jeopardized if the resolution is not renewed and proposes ways in which the United States and its allies can build their leverage over the debate to ensure that the United Nations maintains cross-border access in Syria. It concludes with a set of contingency measures that should be adopted if the resolution expires.

THE POLITICS OF THE CROSS-BORDER AID RESOLUTION

The UN Security Council has agreed on very little relating to the conflict in Syria. However, when the Syrian government lost control of large parts of its territory and proved neither willing nor capable of delivering aid to opposition-held areas, the Security Council was at least able to reach agreement on a new modality to deliver aid. It adopted UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2165 in 2014, which gave the United Nations a mandate to use four border crossings to conduct humanitarian operations into Syria without the permission of the Syrian government.¹¹ The Ramtha crossing from Jordan was designated to access southern Syria, the Yaroubiyah crossing from Iraq provided access to northeast Syria, and the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam crossings from Turkey allowed the United Nations to deliver aid to northwest Syria. The Security Council renewed this cross-border mandate on an annual basis until 2019.

With this cross-border mandate, the United Nations has led the regional humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis. UN agencies not only procure commodities and deliver shipments of humanitarian goods across the designated



border crossings; they provide bilateral and pooled funding to Syrian and international NGO partners, coordinate those partners' relief efforts, and provide technical assistance and expertise for their operations.

As the situation on the battlefield changed, consensus in the Security Council on the need for cross-border assistance began to fray. With increased Syrian government territorial control, the government's backers argued that cross-border operations were no longer needed. Russia and China argued increasingly vocally that the resolution was an unacceptable infringement on Syrian sovereignty, that jihadists were benefiting from UN operations, and that aid operations should be centralized in Damascus. Reflecting these growing concerns, Russia and China abstained from the renewal vote for the first time in 2018.

Ongoing military campaigns have also influenced the renewal debates. For example, the renewal debate coincided with the escalation of the Syrian government's campaign into northwest Syria in December 2019. An independent UN investigation found that the Syrian military deliberately struck medical facilities used by the United Nations in the area as part of the offensive, as it has repeatedly done before.¹² These strikes underscored the Syrian government's view that UN operations to assist Syrians in rebel-controlled areas are an obstacle to the government's military advance. Syrian government targeting of UN-supported humanitarian facilities appears intended to advance military goals. Yet, the

offensive caused an unprecedented humanitarian crisis on the Turkish border, and Russia could not afford to jeopardize its relationship with Turkey. Syria's backers therefore declined to precipitate an even greater crisis in December by blocking UN cross-border access to the northwest.

But at the same time, Russia sensed opportunity in northeast Syria.¹³ At the time of the renewal debate, the future of the U.S. presence in northeast Syria was in the balance, as President Trump had announced a withdrawal two months earlier. The Syrian government seized the opportunity to extend its influence in the region. Cementing its control over UN aid operations was a key step toward achieving that goal. Russia and China supported this effort, believing it would bolster their efforts to legitimize the Syrian government and normalize its relations with other powers.

Russia and China vetoed the renewal of the cross-border resolution in December 2019. The Security Council then passed UNSCR 2504 as a consensus resolution in January 2020.¹⁴ It removed authorization for the Yaroubiyah crossing into northeast from Iraq and the little-used Ramtha crossing from Jordan. The compromise resolution also shortened the UN mandate to use the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam crossings into northwest Syria to just six months, rather than a year. The United States abstained from the vote to show its opposition to the reduction of cross-border access. Syria's backers in the Security Council had taken an important step toward unraveling the United Nations' cross-border mandate. However, the move inflicted a serious humanitarian price on northeast Syria because of the difficulty of compensating for cross-border operations with crossline access from Damascus.

THE CHALLENGES OF CROSSLINE ASSISTANCE

The Syrian government has made a concerted effort to control all humanitarian efforts operating from its territory and has consistently restricted the United Nations' ability to provide relief to civilians in rebel-controlled areas from Damascus. Throughout the conflict, the government has constructed bureaucratic hurdles, cited security concerns, and simply ignored requests to conduct such aid operations.¹⁵ The Syrian government has also attacked UN aid workers directly. An independent UN investigation found that the Syrian air force "meticulously planned and ruthlessly carried out" an attack on a humanitarian aid convoy in 2016.¹⁶ The Syrian government prevented the United Nations from conducting a needs assessment in Raqqa for more than six months after the city's liberation,

and it took over a year to approve the appointment of the United Nations' Damascus-based humanitarian coordinator.¹⁷ The government now demands an exhaustive 12-step authorization process for UN operations in the country.¹⁸ It has also interfered with aid organizations' procurement procedures, prevented independent monitoring and evaluation, and forced international humanitarian organizations to work with the local partners that the government has selected for them.¹⁹

Blocking UN access to opposition-held areas has been a key strategy of the Syrian government to weaken opposition groups, compel the surrender of populations living under their control, and gain leverage over international actors. UN access has been especially restricted in areas besieged by Syrian forces. UN agencies had no access to besieged Eastern Ghouta for the first half of 2017, despite the area being just miles from their Damascus headquarters.²⁰ When a UN convoy reached besieged Eastern Ghouta for the first time in 78 days, in February 2018, it provided aid for 7,200 people—only 0.8 percent of the total number of people that the United Nations had requested access to over two months.²¹

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The government also heavily restricts access to areas it retakes from opposition groups. When rebel-held areas of southern Syria fell to the government in 2018 through “reconciliation” deals, reconciled communities did not benefit from increased humanitarian support.²² The United Nations was no longer able to provide cross-border aid from Jordan, and local NGOs which had delivered humanitarian aid in the area were forced to dissolve. UN access from Damascus was severely limited. In 2019, the government rejected 50 percent of all UN requests to access southern Syria and Eastern Ghouta.²³

CONSTRAINING ACCESS TO THE NORTHEAST

Northeast Syria's recent history may give us a sense of the Syrian government's plans for the northwest. Prior

to January 2020, UN agencies had both cross-border and crossline access to northeast Syria. The Syrian government withdrew its forces from the area in mid-2012, likely in order to concentrate its resources on western Syria, and Kurdish and local Arab authorities then assumed de facto control of a large swath of the region. Kurdish-led forces were boosted by the support of the U.S.-led coalition to defeat the Islamic State group (ISG) and extended their authority across areas to the east of the Euphrates liberated from the ISG but avoided engaging in active hostilities with the Syrian government. The United Nations could access the area from both Iraq and Damascus, with the Yaroubiyah crossing being principally used by the WHO. The WHO shipped 1.43 million medical treatments and other medical equipment weighing 210 tons through the crossing in 2019.²⁴

When Russia and China blocked the use of the Yaroubiyah crossing, the Syrian government gained substantial control of UN agencies' ability to access northeast Syria. The government has restricted humanitarian access to the region in a similar manner to how it operates in areas formerly held by opposition forces. It has exerted pressure on Damascus-based NGOs not to enter into formal dialogue with the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that control the territory and has pressed NGOs to deliver aid only from Damascus, ending their cross-border activities.²⁵ As with elsewhere, the government has imposed bureaucratic obstacles to humanitarian access. The WHO requested authorization to increase its full-time staff presence in the northeastern city of Qamishli on January 22, 2020. A month later, it had not received a response.²⁶

Some of the constraints of reaching northeast Syria from Damascus are logistical.²⁷ The road from Damascus is long and dangerous, as it crosses multiple front lines. Delivering aid by air is an imperfect and more costly solution, as supplies flown from Damascus to Qamishli cannot reach many parts of northeast Syria. Using Syrian airlines to deliver also requires specific humanitarian exemptions from U.S. sanctions, which adds a bureaucratic hurdle.

Because of the political and logistical constraints, UN agencies operating in northeast Syria have not been able to compensate for the loss of access through the Yaroubiyah crossing, and humanitarian conditions have deteriorated as a result. Although NGOs have increased their emergency activities in the area using a pontoon crossing from Iraqi Kurdistan, they lost access to UN-pooled and bilateral funding, and they no longer benefit from the United Nations' cross-border coordinating role or its technical



A member of the semi-autonomous Syrian Kurdish administration's disinfection units sprays billboards in the Kurdish-majority city of Qamishli, on March 24, 2020.

DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP via Getty Images

assistance. Supplies are running short, education programs in IDP camps have been cut, and protection concerns have increased as various programs had to stop.

The United Nations has explicitly stated that the loss of cross-border access to northeast Syria has left people in the region more exposed to the threat of Covid-19. The WHO can only operate from Qamishli, where the Syrian government has a presence, and it has begun to deliver tests for Covid-19 to the region. However, tests are analyzed in Damascus, and the WHO has not been able to deliver the PCR machines to detect Covid-19 to the area.²⁸ The Syrian government's influence over the WHO's ability to build the capacity of the Covid-19 response in northeast Syria and the delivery of UN medical supplies to the area is also clear. Of the goods that the WHO has delivered to northeast Syria, 89 percent will be used in the Qamishli National Hospital, which is under the control of the Syrian government.²⁹ The Syrian government has also not been transparent about Covid-19 testing in the northeast. The SDF did not hear about the first confirmed case of Covid-19 in northeast Syria until 11 days after the patient died.³⁰

The spread of Covid-19 also curtails NGO activities in the area and stymies their attempts to lead the pandemic response. The SDF restricted movement across the Faysh Khabour crossing to guard against the spread of the disease, and NGOs are only able to cross once a week.³¹ Because

Faysh Khabour is a commercial crossing, it has less regulation and therefore has more potential to spread the disease. A UN crossing has greater protection, as UN operations are coordinated and can adhere to higher standards of disease control prevention measures. In this way, the spread of Covid-19 has magnified the loss of the Yaroubiyah border crossing.

THE LOSS OF CROSS-BORDER ACCESS IN THE NORTHWEST

Cross-border aid is currently the only modality for reaching more than 3 million people in northwest Syria, of whom 940,000 are recently displaced and another half-million or so have fled other parts of Syria.³² Although a ceasefire agreed on March 6, 2020 has largely held, there are ongoing fears that the Syrian government and its allies will renew their offensive to try to retake the M4 highway, which bisects the province, and potentially the city of Idlib to the north.

If the UN mandate for cross-border access expires in July 2020, the United Nations will need to end a variety of its activities in the area, as it did when it lost access to Yaroubiyah. In addition to the material loss of shipments from Turkey, UN agencies would likely need to suspend their pooled-funding mechanism, the bilateral funding they provide to NGOs, their role in coordinating the overall aid response, and the technical assistance they provide NGOs. With the loss of the final border crossing, the United Nations' Whole of Syria mechanism for the Syria response would be effectively dismantled.

In the event that all UN activities are shut down, NGOs would not be able to compensate for the loss of UN support in the northwest.³³ Not only are most NGOs in the area unable to scale up their operations significantly, but the loss of UN support would actually force them to curtail their activities. The loss of funding may even force some local NGOs into insolvency. Many are already operating at maximum capacity in the northwest in response to the unprecedented displacement since December 2019. NGOs could also struggle to source the items they need for their operations. Were the United Nations to cease its cross-border operations, NGOs would also lose access to supply chains such as the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) single-source procurement pipeline, resulting in shortages of critical items.

The spread of Covid-19 in the northwest would be catastrophic. The population density in the area is extremely high, rendering the area especially vulnerable to the pandemic. More than 500,000 newly displaced people are sleeping in the open, in tents, or in makeshift shelters. There are just 203 ventilators to meet the needs of 3.2 million people in northwest Syria, and 95 percent of ICU beds are already occupied.³⁴ The WHO is procuring testing kits for Covid-19 and has worked to establish testing labs in Idlib, but the capacity to process tests remains limited. NGOs have adapted their programs to respond to the threat of Covid-19 but are ill-prepared to take on the WHO's formidable task of leading the response to a pandemic outbreak in northwest Syria.

The United Nations would not be able to conduct large-scale operations in the northwest from Damascus. The Syrian government is certain to use its traditional tactics of citing security concerns to add bureaucratic obstacles and reject requests for UN access to the area, as it has done throughout the conflict. In addition, operating from Damascus would be extremely dangerous and inefficient for the United Nations. It would require UN officials to cross front lines and travel long distances. Therefore, the expiration of the UN cross-border mandate would likely cause the vast majority of UN operations in northwest Syria, if not all of them, to cease, just as they should be scaling up to deal with Covid-19.

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COVID-19 UPENDS THE RENEWAL DEBATE

The spread of Covid-19 raises the stakes for the upcoming negotiations in the UN Security Council about the cross-border mandate. The Security Council has three main options. A technical rollover would renew UNSCR 2504, maintaining access to Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam and extending the mandate for six months. The second choice would be to open the resolution to debate, which gives council members the ability to add (or remove) border crossings and to change the timeframe of the mandate. The third option would be to let the mandate expire, which will occur if Russia or China vetoes the resolution and refuses to compromise.

There are some grounds for optimism that Russia and China will accept the imperative to renew the cross-border

mandate. China has demonstrated a willingness to send medical aid to numerous countries across the globe and seems keen to help contain the spread of the virus. Given China's ambition to project itself as a global force combatting Covid-19, it would be difficult for China to justify blocking UN humanitarian operations in an extremely vulnerable part of the world.

The stakes also have become higher for Turkey, which is an important partner for Russia in Syria. Turkey is struggling with the pandemic within its own borders and has a keen interest in preventing a spiraling outbreak in northern Syria which could spill over. Turkish pressure on Russia to maintain UN access to northwest Syria could help tip the scales to dissuade Russia from vetoing the renewal.

However, the pandemic also creates some dynamics which work against the renewal of cross-border operations. States around the world have closed their borders to prevent the spread of the pandemic. The Syrian government could attempt to depict the threat of Covid-19 as justification to restrict humanitarian movement in Syria and use it as an excuse to accelerate the government's push to centralize aid operations in Damascus. The Iraqi government or the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) could become more active in the debate in order to prevent the movement of humanitarian officials and aid into Syria from their territory.

One could well make the argument that the threat of Covid-19 should mean restoring cross-border access to northeast Syria, but any effort to do so would face long odds. Russia has long expressed its desire for cross-border access to Syria to expire, publicly stating that it would block further renewals of the mandate after July 2020. Therefore, despite the clear need to increase UN medical operations in northeast Syria, attempts of other council members to add Yaroubiyah back into the resolution, or to add a new crossing at Tel Abyad, are unlikely to succeed.³⁵ Because UN agencies have no effective alternative to the Yaroubiyah crossing for reaching the northeast, the Security Council must seek alternative agreements to use the Yaroubiyah crossing for medical operations for a temporary period, given the unprecedented circumstances.

Covid-19 increases the justification to extend the mandate for UN cross-border access to northwest Syria for at least an additional 12 months. Chief government scientists predict that a vaccine will take months to produce and will not be widely available for 12 to 18 months.³⁶ Agreeing to a longer mandate is therefore necessary to bolster the United Nations' ability to respond to the pandemic in northwest Syria and allow it to plan its operations for a realistic timeframe.



The White Helmets spray disinfectant on tents at a camp for displaced people in Idlib province as a preventive measure against the spread of Covid-19, on April 9, 2020.

MUHAMMAD HAJ KADOUR/AFP via Getty Images

U.S. INTERESTS

It is in the U.S. interest for the United Nations to maintain cross-border access to Syria. Failing to do so would lead to a significant deterioration of humanitarian conditions for the Syrian people, embolden U.S. adversaries, damage U.S. interests in the region, and undermine U.S. leadership.

The Syrian government would seek to direct UN humanitarian operations to support its political goals. It will continue to block UN agencies' access to opposition-held areas. Iran, Russia, and other U.S. adversaries will extend their influence over humanitarian operations and further entrench their presence in Syria. The centralization of UN operations in Damascus would accelerate Russia's push for the normalization of the Syrian government in the region and undercut U.S. efforts to foster a lasting settlement to the Syrian conflict.

The loss of UN cross-border access would also put U.S. allies and partners at risk of increased instability. The humanitarian situation in northwest Syria would deteriorate to even more catastrophic levels and could prompt a new wave of displacement. A refugee flow would likely spread beyond the Middle East. Another large refugee flow to Europe risks destabilizing U.S. allies at a time when they have been weakened by Covid-19.

If northwest Syria becomes a hotspot for Covid-19, the spread of the pandemic in Syria, the region, and further abroad would be impossible to contain. The multitude

of soldiers and aid workers of different nationalities in Syria, including Americans, would constantly threaten to spread the impact of the pandemic and reignite clusters. The spread of Covid-19 in the Middle East has already weakened U.S. allies and partners and has damaged U.S. economic interests in the region. The longer the pandemic remains in the region, the more likely it is to provoke longer-term unrest.

Extremist groups would benefit from increased instability in Syria. They have already used Covid-19 to their rhetorical advantage to the detriment of the United States' reputation in the region. Non-state actors in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, have filled gaps in state services to gain influence.³⁷ Violent actors could also seize the opportunity to strike while the world is preoccupied with Covid-19. The ISG has already issued statements urging its members to conduct attacks.

Finally, the centralization of aid in Damascus would further degrade the principle of unimpeded humanitarian access and undermine U.S. leadership on the issue. This precedent could carry implications for humanitarian operations in other conflict areas.

MAXIMIZING U.S. LEVERAGE

The United States government is accustomed to being the most powerful voice in the room, and U.S. diplomats do not always think about ways to create additional leverage. In the case of humanitarian assistance in northwest Syria, the United States and its allies do not come in with a commanding position. They need to find ways to enhance their leverage in the UN Security Council to ensure the renewal of the UN mandate for cross-border access in Syria, prevent a Russian or Chinese veto, and improve the United Nations' ability to respond to the spread of Covid-19 in Syria in various ways:

- **Make a clear case that the loss of cross-border access to northwest Syria would exacerbate the spread of Covid-19 in Syria and the broader Middle East.**
 - Push for the United Nations to produce a rapid, independent assessment of the likely impact of cross-border aid ending in northwest Syria in light of the spread of Covid-19.

- Make the case that UN cross-border operations are the most cost-effective, coordinated, and pragmatic way to prevent the northwest from becoming a hotspot of the pandemic.
- Document how, as long as a hotspot of Covid-19 in northwest Syria exists, the virus would be impossible to contain and would spread to areas held by the Syrian government, undermining Russia's and China's interests.
- Urge Turkey to bolster these efforts by stating its concerns to Russia about the loss of the UN response to Covid-19 in northern Syria.
- Lobby China at least to abstain on the renewal vote, isolating Russia in the Security Council.
- **Utilize the full potential of U.S. diplomatic power.**
 - Elevate U.S. diplomatic engagement on this issue to the ministerial level by conducting a phone call between Secretary Pompeo and Minister Lavrov to complement the efforts of Ambassador James Jeffrey.
 - Capitalize on the personal investment Ambassador Kelly Craft has demonstrated through her visit to Idlib in March in negotiations with the 10 elected members of the UN Security Council to convince them of the imperative for continued cross-border access.
- **Maintain sanctions on the Syrian government but display flexibility in efforts to ensure U.S. sanctions do not stymie attempts to prevent the spread of Covid-19.**
 - Resist attempts to depict U.S. sanctions as an obstacle to UN agencies' responses to Covid-19 in Syria.
 - Consult Damascus-based NGOs on ways to increase the efficiency of the sanctions-waiver process.
 - Explore appropriate ways to broaden the scope of exemptions to facilitate increased humanitarian access during the Covid-19 response.
- **Push for a temporary arrangement outside of the framework of UNSCR 2504 to grant the United Nations cross-border access to conduct medical operations in northeast Syria.**
 - Propose that UN agencies be granted access to use the Yaroubiyah crossing, for which there is no alternative.
- Explore the United Nations' use of additional border crossings into the area from southern Turkey and the KRG to prevent the likelihood of Turkey, the SDF, Iraq, or the KRG from acting as a spoiler.
- **Take immediate measures to mitigate the impact of losing cross-border access in the short term.**
 - Urge UN agencies to stockpile resources with NGO partners in northwest Syria where safe to do so.
 - Explore ways to decrease NGOs' dependence on UN funding, including by conducting an assessment of the feasibility of setting up a new pooled fund which would be managed by a third party.
- **Resist the urge to be diverted by other issues during the cross-border access debate.**
 - Do not politicize the debate by referring to U.S. efforts to advance a political solution to the Syrian conflict in statements about the cross-border access issue.
 - Focus cross-border negotiations on maintaining access to northwest Syria, which is the highest priority.
 - Seek an extension of UNSCR 2504 to 12 months, but otherwise pursue a technical rollover.
 - Do not dilute U.S. leverage by attempting to restore the Yaroubiyah border crossing to the resolution or adding a new crossing at Tel Abyad.

BEYOND THE CROSS-BORDER RESOLUTION

If Russia or China vetoes the renewal of the cross-border mandate in July 2020, there are various steps the United States should take to mitigate the devastating consequences.

- **Support all UN efforts to find new modalities to maintain their operations in northwest Syria and avoid the centralization of UN operations in Damascus.**
- **Leverage U.S. funding to the United Nations to counter the Syrian government's ability to interfere in the work of UN agencies operating in Damascus.**
 - Focus U.S. funding on UN agencies that adhere to appropriate standards of independence and effectiveness.
 - Monitor the performance of individual UN agencies and leaders.

- Privately articulate concerns about individual agencies and leaders to the UN secretary-general.
- Push senior UN leadership in New York to coordinate with donors and NGOs to establish a set of parameters for UN operations in Syria.
 - Establish which kinds of interference from the Syrian government will not be tolerated and under which circumstances UN officials should refuse to complete planned operations in government-held areas as leverage to gain access to other areas.
 - Protect UN field staff in Damascus who insist on acting according to these parameters.
- Strongly encourage all U.S.-funded NGOs operating from Damascus to adhere to these parameters as well as to maximize the potential of U.S. leverage.
- **Strengthen humanitarian access into northwest and northeast Syria.**
 - Increase bilateral funding for NGOs operating in these areas.
 - Create a pooled fund for NGO operations, managed by a third party.
 - Maintain pressure on the SDF and KRG to keep the Faysh Khabour crossing open and upgrade its capacity from a pontoon to a permanent crossing.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 This report uses primary data collected through 20 semi-structured interviews with employees of UN agencies, INGOs, donor representatives, diplomats, and experts conducted by the author in April 2020. Interviewees were promised anonymity to allow them to talk freely. The author is particularly grateful for helpful comments from Jon B. Alterman, Jacob Kurtzer, Natasha Hall, and Charles Thépaut of the Washington Institute.
- 2 “WFP Syria Situation Report #3,” World Food Programme, March 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/wfp-syria-situation-report-3-march-2020>; Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, “Health Workers Describe Mayhem as WHO Delivers Urgent Medicine and Supplies to Ensure Continued Health Services,” World Health Organization, February 28, 2020, <http://www.emro.who.int/syr/syria-news/syria-health-workers-describe-mayhem-as-who-urgently-delivers-medicine-and-supplies-to-ensure-continued-health-services.html>.
- 3 Mark Lowcock, “Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordination, Mark Lowcock – Briefing to the Security Council on the Humanitarian Situation in Syria,” UNOCHA, March 30, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-102>.
- 4 Will Todman, “Isolating Dissent, Punishing the Masses: Siege Warfare as Counter-Insurgency,” *Syria Studies* 9, no. 1 (October 2017), <https://ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/view/1479>.
- 5 Elizabeth Tsurkov and Qussai Jukhadar, “Ravaged by War, Syria’s Health Care System is Utterly Unprepared for a Pandemic,” Middle East Institute, April 23, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/ravaged-war-syrias-health-care-system-utterly-unprepared-pandemic>.
- 6 Mazen Gharibah and Zaki Mehchy, “Covid-19 Pandemic: Syria’s Response and Healthcare Capacity,” Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics, March 25, 2020, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/103841/1/CRP_covid_19_in_Syria_policy_memo_published.pdf.
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- 8 There is a legal debate about which UN activities need to end when the UN mandate for cross-border access expires. UN agencies took a conservative approach in northeast Syria when they lost the use of the Yaroubiyah crossing and halted all aspects of their cross-border activities. Some humanitarian officials believe UN agencies may attempt to continue limited aspects of their current operations in northwest Syria if their cross-border mandate expires, due to the extreme levels of need. However, they agreed that UN agencies would likely cease most aspects of their role. Author’s interviews with UN officials and NGO workers, April 2020.
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