



The Implications of the UN Cross-Border Vote in Syria

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THE ISSUE

- The Syrian government has restricted 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 (UN) designated four border crossings for delivering aid to those in need without government approval. Russia and China blocked the UN from using all but one border crossing, which serves northwestern Syria, and its mandate is set to expire on July 10, 2021.
- The end of UN cross-border aid would pose severe risks not only to the population of northwestern Syria, but also surrounding states and the broader region, since there is no reliable aid alternative.
- Major donors to the Syria response—five of them UN Security Council members—should seek to reopen closed crossings and lengthen the mandate, making it clear that a Russian veto would obstruct future negotiations on reconstruction, sanctions, and additional aid through Damascus.
- The cross-border issue should prompt more consistent high-level negotiations and coordination among donors to expand access in Syria and ensure that warring parties cannot use aid as leverage.

INTRODUCTION

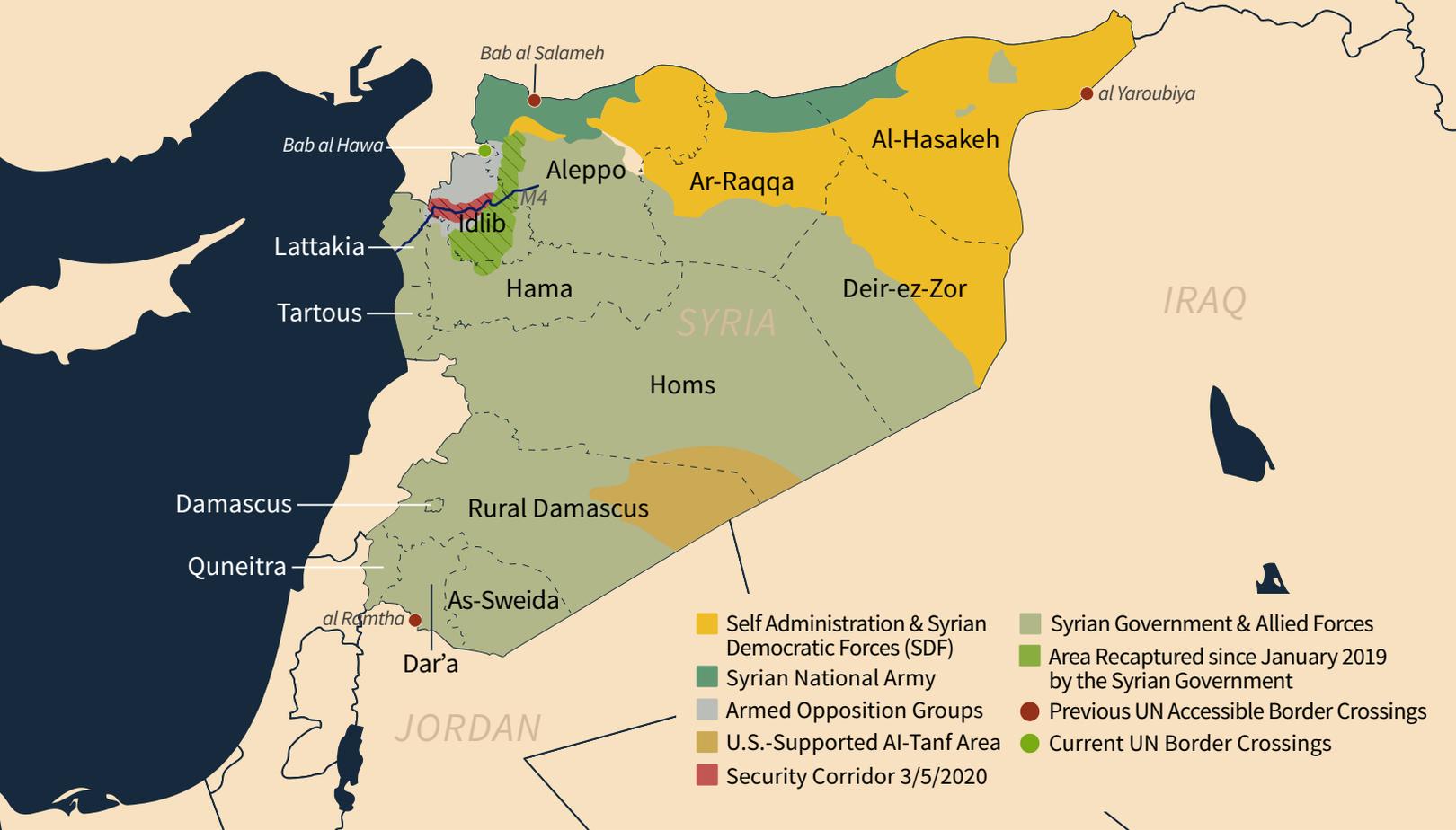
In July 2021, the attention of four million people in northwestern Syria will be drawn to a drama unfolding thousands of miles away in New York City.¹ The UN Security Council is considering whether UN agencies can continue to deliver humanitarian assistance across the border into Syria. The Damascus-based government, which considers that region to be in rebellion, says that it should coordinate all UN aid to Syrians inside the country's borders. Since 2014, it has not.

Beginning that year, the UN began delivering, funding, and coordinating assistance to Syrians living in areas outside of government control through four international crossings. Only one of those crossings, Bab al-Hawa on

the Turkish border, remains open for UN humanitarian operations to northwestern Syria. However, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2533—which authorizes the UN to use that crossing—expires on July 10, 2021.

Russia—a permanent member of the Security Council and key military ally of the Syrian government—has signaled its intention to veto the resolution's renewal, shutting down UN cross-border operations.² Major donors to the Syrian aid response, some of whom are also Security Council members, have reiterated their commitment to extend or even expand the cross-border mandate. The outcome remains uncertain, and Syrians in the northwest see their lives and livelihoods hanging in the balance.

Areas of Control in Syria and UN Border-Crossings as of June 2020



Source: Based on author's previously created map and original research and analysis derived from several external sources. Please see endnote section for the list of external sources referenced.

UN operations through Bab al-Hawa support civilians in parts of Idlib and Aleppo provinces, which comprise the last major rebel bastion outside of government control. Over two-thirds of the four million people living there were forcibly displaced from other parts of Syria, and conditions have been worsening. Of the people in this territory, 75 percent now depend upon the UN to meet their basic needs, and cross-border operations reach nearly 85 percent of them every month.³ Humanitarian organizations operating in the northwest assess that the region's degraded infrastructure after a decade of war and closed borders make them exceptionally vulnerable to any cut in aid or uptick in violence.

For the past year, there has been a détente between Turkey and Russia, with each supporting opposing sides of the conflict in Syria. However, an increase in attacks would have significant repercussions on humanitarian aid. Bab

al-Hawa lies a mere 15 kilometers (9 miles) from the front lines. The Russian and Syrian governments could move northward and seize the strategic M4 highway in Idlib if they believe Turkish actions jeopardize their interests, placing millions of civilians in the crossfire.

Drawing on almost 100 interviews with diplomats, humanitarian workers, affected Syrians, and others, this paper will argue for expanding UN cross-border operations and improving coordination of cross-border aid, with the goal of increasing access to all Syrians in need. The report begins by outlining the development of UN Security Council resolutions regarding cross-border access in Syria. It will then demonstrate the difficulty of finding any substitute for UN cross-border operations, given the impediments aid agencies have faced—and continue to face—in providing cross-line assistance instead. By assessing the current situation in Syria and the capacity

of current UN cross-border operations, the report will evaluate the potential impact of a veto and the likely gaps in the aid response if the UN authorization expires. It will conclude with the broader implications of this vote and how it is negotiated, providing recommendations for how donors and Security Council members should approach the negotiations to benefit Syria's civilian population, as well as regional and global stability.

EVOLUTION OF UN CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS

"Deploring the fact that previous demands for aid access in Syria had not been heeded," the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2165 on July 14, 2014, providing humanitarian access to opposition-held areas of Syria.⁴ UNSCR 2165, which required the notification but not the permission of the Syrian government, gave the UN a mandate to use four border crossings. The Security Council designated the Ramtha crossing from Jordan for access to southern Syria, the Yaroubiya crossing from Iraq for northeast Syria, and the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salameh crossings from Turkey for northwestern Syria.^{5,6} In addition to simply delivering aid, the resolution authorized UN agencies to provide bilateral and pooled funding to nongovernmental organization (NGO) partners, coordinate relief efforts, provide technical assistance, and advocate and negotiate on humanitarians' behalf.

That cross-border mandate provided a lifeline to millions of civilians as the Syrian government obstructed aid to opposition-held areas as part of its military strategy. Since early in the war, the Syrian government has consistently combined sieges with aerial assaults to force the surrender of areas outside of its control. The UN cross-border mechanism also improved the efficiency and predictability of international aid delivery and avoided the need to cross dangerous front lines.⁷ As the cost of humanitarian assistance rose, with the conflict dragging on and the number of Syrians in need rising, reducing the cost of aid delivery through multiple crossings and diverse supply chains became increasingly important.

However, in 2015, the Russian military intervened to save the flailing Syrian government. With military assistance from Iran and Russia, the Syrian government began to turn the tables in its favor, and the UN cross-border mechanism—which had grown and become more essential than ever—became more politicized. By December 2017, China and Russia (joined by Bolivia) abstained on a vote to renew it.⁸

In 2019, the renewal vote coincided with a major joint

Syrian-Russian military offensive on the northwest. That assault displaced one million people from northern Hama, southern Idlib, and western Aleppo.⁹ Russia and China vetoed the renewal of UN cross-border operations that December, and the Security Council then passed UNSCR 2504 as a consensus resolution in January 2020. It removed authorization for the Yaroubiya and Ramtha crossings while renewing the use of the Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salameh crossings into northwestern Syria for only six months, rather than the year-long period used previously.¹⁰ When the resolution came up for renewal in July 2020, Russia chipped away at the cross-border mechanism once again. UNSCR 2533 closed Bab al-Salameh and extended the last remaining border crossing, Bab al-Hawa, for one year.¹¹ Russia and China have argued that cross-border aid operations are an unacceptable infringement on Syria's sovereignty, stating that the Syrian government should approve all aid operations in the country.

Many Syrians say they fear Russia seeks to close Bab al-Hawa to assist the Syrian government's efforts to subjugate the northwest. Elsewhere in the country, Russian and Syrian troops have sought to deny aid to opposition-held areas, step up aerial bombardments, and force desperate populations into so-called reconciliations with the Syrian government.¹²

The militaries' activities in recent months have reinforced these fears. On March 5, 2021, Syrian and Russian forces targeted oil refineries in opposition-held areas of the northwest. Not only did they destroy millions of dollars in infrastructure, they also cut fuel supplies supporting bakeries, hospitals, and other facilities in the area.¹³ Two weeks later, the militaries attacked the Bab al-Hawa crossing itself, destroying aid intended for 4,000 people, and struck a UN-deconflicted hospital in Atareb, killing seven people—including two young boys.¹⁴ These attacks suggest that the Syrian and Russian governments may continue to weaken opposition-held areas through bombardment of critical civilian infrastructure despite a ceasefire with Turkey.

While Russia's priority is not cross-border assistance, it seeks to use its veto power at the Security Council to build its leverage on other issues. In order to gain support for its position on Syria, Russian diplomats have sought to tie unrelated issues such as sanctions relief, reconstruction efforts, and terrorism concerns to the vote.¹⁵ Russia frames many of its moves in Syria in terms of counterterrorism. In the northwest, Russia says that cross-border aid boosts Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a designated terrorist group

centered in Idlib, with which Turkey appears to have a working relationship.¹⁶ While UN officials have repeatedly noted that the UN's cross-border operations are among the most heavily scrutinized mechanisms in the world,¹⁷ the counterterrorism argument still resonates with some Security Council members. Beijing, New Delhi, and Nairobi have all struggled with domestic terrorism, and China and India have treated Muslim communities within their borders as threats.¹⁸

Turkey and Russia are bound to negotiate on aid, but each country sees its own security and strategic interests as paramount. Ankara needs to ensure that a humanitarian crisis in northwestern Syria does not provoke mass displacement on its southern border while also keeping pressure on the Kurdish-led government in the northeast, where it has expressed concerns with aid. Ankara suggests that UN operations have benefited the northeast's Kurdish-dominated autonomous government, which it sees as a mere extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a designated terrorist group that the Turkish military has battled for decades.¹⁹ This is likely why Moscow believed that vetoing the extension of UN cross-border operations at the Yaroubiya crossing in 2020 would not risk its relationship with Ankara. However, Russia may continue to insist that Turkey address the presence of HTS.²⁰ As negotiations progress, it is unclear whether Russia or the Syrian government can ever be satisfied with Turkey's handling of armed groups in the northwest. Such uncertainty is a stark reminder that any disturbance could spark further violence, which would have widespread ramifications for the region.

Meanwhile, Russia will continue to use the threat of a Security Council veto to enhance its position in Syria and beyond. Ahead of the 2020 renewal vote, Russia began posturing by withdrawing from the UN deconfliction mechanism and making it clear that UN cross-border



Syrians from the country's northern countryside run for cover from tear gas canisters fired by Turkish border guards following a demonstration by the Bab al-Hawa crossing between Turkey and Syria's northwestern Idlib province on August 30, 2019, demanding Ankara help stop a deadly Damascus regime offensive in Idlib.

Photo by OMAR HAJ KADOUR/AFP via Getty Images

operations were on the chopping block unless significant concessions were made.²¹

Moscow's threat to veto cross-border operations is real, and it would arguably advance several Russian interests. First, by portraying a veto as advancing international respect for sovereignty, Russia seeks freer rein regarding its own domestic affairs. Second, Russia wants to hasten the world's normalization with the Syrian government, giving it an avenue to lock in gains while not being burdened with the cost of rebuilding Syria. Some Gulf governments have signaled that they are ready to reopen relations with the isolated Assad government, bolstering Russia's confidence ahead of the Security Council vote.²² Rerouting aid through Damascus would also allow the Syrian government to punish behavior by denying assistance and reward behavior through aid allocation and contracts to friends.²³

Major donors to the Syria response—five of them Security Council members—are at risk of losing UN cross-border operations and consenting to Russia's demands, to Syrians' detriment. Past and current examples from ten years of conflict point to the absence of reliable alternatives to the cross-border operations that have allowed the UN to mitigate some of the suffering and fallout of war.

THE CHALLENGES OF CROSS-LINE ASSISTANCE

Although all avenues for aid should be exploited, cross-line assistance—that is, across the front line between different areas of control—has not been a viable alternative to UN cross-border operations. Such assistance would require the permission of the Syrian government, which insists that aid be delivered by a government-affiliated entity—typically, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC). Negotiations are reportedly ongoing, but cross-line delivery into the northwest has not begun. As Mark Lowcock, the UN under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, said, “While we deliver 1,000 trucks a month of aid cross border into the northwest, we have yet to see even a single truck just once cross [the] line.”²⁴

Safety is also a concern when crossing the front line.²⁵ The Syrian government has repeatedly attacked aid convoys, including those to which it granted permission. On September 19, 2016, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry reported that the Syrian Air Force “meticulously planned and ruthlessly carried out” an attack on a joint UN/SARC convoy, killing 18 civilians and destroying \$650,000 worth of supplies destined for opposition-held areas in Aleppo.²⁶

Humanitarian agencies also report that those living in the northwest fear that Syrian government entities involved in aid delivery will coordinate with the government’s security apparatus, thus endangering aid recipients.²⁷ Two-thirds of the population there have already fled government-held areas, and many still have relatives who are at risk of arrest.²⁸ As it is likely that the Syrian government would want a list of beneficiaries, people in the northwest fear that sharing this information could allow the Syrian government to persecute their relatives or to justify cutting off assistance.²⁹

The fear is not an idle one. The Syrian government has employed aid as an instrument of war throughout the conflict, repeatedly denying it and diverting it to advance military aims. In 2016, Doctors Without Borders estimated that between 1.8 to 2 million people were living under “various degrees” of siege in the country.³⁰ Hundreds of people have died from treatable diseases, injuries, and hunger as a result.³¹ When the government did approve aid convoys, they were frequently stripped of supplies before reaching those in need. Soldiers would, for example, remove baby formula from trucks and dump it on the ground or spoil it with glass and bird waste.³² Leaked

government documents reveal that security officials were told to remove medical items from convoys on their way to opposition-held areas.³³ The sieges ended when the government forcibly retook those areas and displaced many of the survivors.

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The Syrian government’s use of aid as a weapon has continued to this day. Numerous reports suggest that the Syrian government has continued to interfere with aid in newly conquered areas, many of which remain largely isolated from international access.³⁴ In 2020, two years after reconciliation, most of Daraa’s population still had no access to adequate health services.³⁵ In 2018, just after the five-year siege of the Damascus suburbs of Eastern Ghouta ended, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the *International Committee of the Red Cross* said that the government stripped aid convoys of 70 percent of their medical supplies, including trauma kits, surgical kits, insulin, and other vital materials.³⁶ Security personnel reportedly purge beneficiary lists of families blacklisted by the government before sharing those lists with the SARC.³⁷ Humanitarians and Syrians alike see little reason the Syrian government would take any other approach to delivering aid to the northwest.³⁸

SHIFT TO CROSS-LINE ASSISTANCE IN THE NORTHEAST

Another worrying example of what might happen in the northwest is what happened in the northeast after the UN halted cross-border operations. While the UN’s cross-border operations into northeast Syria were modest in comparison, the Yaroubiya crossing still facilitated the delivery of two million treatment courses for illnesses such as pneumonia and diabetes in 2019 alone.³⁹ Since the cross-border operations ended in January 2020, cross-line missions to the northeast have fallen short in terms of both quantity and quality. Furthermore, NGOs working in the area have been hard-pressed to ensure delivered assistance matches needs on the ground.⁴⁰

Before Russia vetoed the UN’s use of the Yaroubiya crossing, the WHO reliably provided supplies to the northeast every three months based on need, by mutual

agreement between the UN and NGOs serving local communities.⁴¹ The new arrangement has effectively barred UN agencies operating out of Damascus from communicating freely with NGOs working in the northeast and allowed the Syrian government to interfere with deliveries. The resulting problems have been even more serious than anticipated. As soon as the Yaroubiya crossing was closed, 85 metric tons of medical supplies had to be rerouted from Iraq to Damascus by plane. The supplies then sat in Damascus for months and only shipped to Qamishli in northeast Syria on the eve of the next cross-border renewal vote.⁴² Once they arrived in Qamishli, the supplies were held up again. They took over nine months to reach healthcare facilities; in the meantime, some of the medications had expired and had to be disposed of. Many surgical and trauma supply kits delivered in this shipment were also missing around 20 percent of their contents, rendering some of the kits useless to performing certain procedures.⁴³ Without coordination with humanitarian organizations on the ground, supplies themselves have been distributed haphazardly.⁴⁴

The experience of northeast Syria in 2020 also exposed how reliant aid organizations had grown on the UN for procurement. UN agencies' diverse and cost-efficient supply chains are especially vital in times of crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Without the UN, bureaucratic delays meant large shipments of critical medical supplies destined for the northeast were stuck overseas, creating shortages of life-saving medicines—such as insulin⁴⁵—and delaying shipments of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other Covid-19-related supplies. The loss of access to the UN pooled fund has compounded shortages still further.⁴⁶

Over the longer term, these issues could undermine stability and security in an area once dominated by the Islamic State. Conditions in camps for family members of former Islamic State fighters are growing increasingly dire. In al-Hol camp, the under-five mortality rate tripled in the eight months after the UN lost cross-border access. In less than a week, eight children in the camp died of heart failure, internal bleeding, and severe malnutrition, which could have been treated at field hospitals. NGOs report that Covid-19 restrictions and reduced humanitarian access due to UNSCR 2504 limited the capacity of operational health facilities by 40 percent.⁴⁷

The UN's loss of cross-border access to the northeast also has rendered the area more vulnerable to Covid-19. When the first case emerged in northeast Syria, the WHO office

in Damascus failed to share the results of the positive cases for nearly two weeks. By the time test results were delivered, the patients had died.⁴⁸ Today, communities in the northeast are constantly on the brink of running out of polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests.⁴⁹

According to the UN, there are plans to allocate 100,000 or more doses of the Covid-19 vaccine to reach some of the most vulnerable Syrians in the northeast.⁵⁰ However, some NGO workers and WHO officials reportedly fear that Damascus may not deliver the vaccinations and that there may be a need for a "Plan B."⁵¹ Thus far, Damascus has shared little information about the vaccine rollout plan with potential implementers.⁵² Fear of any engagement with Damascus-based institutions has had a further chilling effect. Since the WHO is working closely with the Syrian government's Ministry of Health on vaccine rollout, many healthcare workers in the northeast say they are concerned about identifying themselves to the government, lest they be labeled as terrorists.⁵³ Such a label could subject them—and their family members in government-controlled areas—to retribution. As a result, many report they are reluctant to register for a vaccination or to participate in vaccine administration.⁵⁴

The experience in the northeast since the Yaroubiya crossing was closed provides little reassurance that cross-line assistance can replace cross-border aid, especially at the scale of UN operations for northwestern Syria. Instead, it is a reminder that vulnerable populations become even more vulnerable when they need to rely on one border crossing or on cross-line assistance from Damascus.

DRIVERS OF DEPENDENCE ON UN OPERATIONS

Even without a cutoff in cross-border aid, the unmet needs in the northwest have been growing in the last two years. While active hostilities are an all-time low, the need for assistance has skyrocketed due to prolonged displacement without possibility of return, a growing Syrian economic crisis, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Over two-thirds (2.7 million) of the people in the northwest today are internally displaced persons (IDPs).⁵⁵ More than a million of those remain in tent encampments, suffering from flooding and frigid temperatures that take lives every winter.⁵⁶

As newly displaced communities struggled to find shelter in the northwest, the Lebanese economy (to which Syria's is closely tied) crumbled, sanctions on Syria expanded, and the value of the Syrian pound



Syrian children play among flooded tents at a camp for displaced Syrians near the town of Kafr Lusin by the border with Turkey in Syria's rebel-held northwestern province of Idlib on January 19, 2021.

Photo by AAREF WATAD/AFP via Getty Images

plummeted.⁵⁷ Many basic commodities are out of reach for most Syrians. In Idlib, the cost of feeding a family of five for a month increased 352 percent between 2019 and 2020—the highest increase of any of Syria's 14 governorates.⁵⁸ For those able to find work, the median daily wage for unskilled labor in the northwest is insufficient to cover just the cost of food for a family of five.⁵⁹ Even before the recent economic downturn, the northwest had the highest rates of hunger in the nation. The share of acutely malnourished pregnant and lactating women rose from 5 percent to 40 percent between 2019 and 2020.⁶⁰ Over one-third of children under the age of five in the northwest suffers from stunted growth.⁶¹

Northwestern Syria is also exceptionally vulnerable to Covid-19 due to the degradation of its health system and the overcrowding, lack of water, and poor sanitation in IDP camps. The number of positive tests quadrupled between November and December 2020, leading to shortages of oxygen and hospital beds.⁶²

Politics in the northwest have also taken a toll. Since HTS expanded control over Idlib province in 2019, international

donors shifted from supporting the resiliency of communities through stabilization aid and other programs to providing purely humanitarian support.⁶³ NGOs that feared the legal consequences of coordination with local authorities limited their work in the area. As a result, Syrians' dependence on the UN's basic lifesaving assistance grew, and aid organizations became more reliant on the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) to negotiate with local authorities for access.

Given the heightened dependence on humanitarian assistance, many local aid workers say they fear any cuts in aid now would lead to further instability and protests.⁶⁴ Those working in Syria believe they would be the first targets of grievances, and extremist groups could further fuel that anger.

THE IMPACT OF ENDING UN CROSS-BORDER OPERATIONS

UN cross-border operations from Turkey have grown in size and complexity to meet an increasing need since 2014, and ending them would significantly worsen conditions in northwestern Syria.⁶⁵

The United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) provides water through trucking and water stations to over 1.3 million people in the northwest, in addition to maintaining the latrines and sewage networks in the camps.⁶⁶ Without that assistance, people would likely resort to drinking untreated water and reducing basic hygiene practices, increasing the potential for water-borne illnesses.⁶⁷ UNICEF also provides treatments for malnutrition, which would be difficult for NGOs to acquire at scale.⁶⁸ The World Food Programme (WFP), which provides food baskets for between 1.3 to 1.5 million people monthly, would also have to halt its operations.⁶⁹ As one international nongovernmental organization (INGO) worker said, "Resources will run out by the fall, just in time for winter, when fuel prices rise and the camps flood."⁷⁰

The loss of the WFP’s food basket program would devastate the finances of poor families. Ibrahim, an NGO worker and displaced person in Idlib, explains, “Many have to sell their food baskets to be able to afford medicine for their family members and eat less. One father I know has a two-and-a-half-year-old boy with hypoxia [a serious condition that can lead to organ damage or even death if left untreated]. The monthly price of the medicine is 250 Turkish lira. The food basket price is 200 Turkish lira, so he sells it to get this medication if he can. There are so many cases like this.”⁷¹ Many of those remaining in the northwest are unable to flee because they suffer from sickness and injuries due to the war and the degraded health system.

The scale of UN cross-border operations and the complexity of working in Syria make the UN’s role difficult to replicate. Last year, UN support to individual agencies and the UN Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) for the northwest amounted to around \$300 million.⁷² In 2020, the SCHF alone was valued at over \$190 million—making it the largest cross-border pooled fund in the world.⁷³ This amount of funding would be difficult to shift to other organizations and reprogram, for several reasons.

Through the SCHF, UN agencies are able to subcontract local NGOs to carry out the majority of implementation and delivery. As a result, 50–80 percent of many local organizations’ funding comes from the UN.⁷⁴ Without

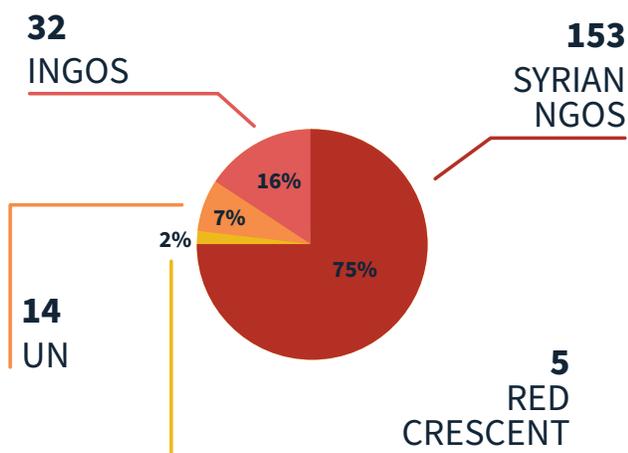
the UN as an intermediary, Western governments may consider directly funding these local NGOs to be too risky, whether because of potential sanctions or the security concerns of operating in areas controlled by proscribed terrorist groups. Because many donors have different vetting requirements for INGO partners and UN partners, INGOs are unable to simply subcontract with local NGOs that previously received UN funding.⁷⁵ A drop in donor funding would jeopardize salaries for teachers, doctors, nurses, and midwives. In a country where 70 percent of healthcare workers have fled since 2011, losing additional staff would further degrade the healthcare system.⁷⁶

If cross-border operations end, the UN would also lose its authorization to be a “provider of last resort” in the northwest.⁷⁷ In cases of a famine, pandemic, or hostilities that drive further sudden displacement, the UN could be authorized to organize an immediate emergency response to fill the gaps. Without this role being filled by such an actor, emergency aid will be unpredictable, and any compounding crises—such as the Covid-19 pandemic—could spiral out of control.⁷⁸ As UN secretary general Antonio Guterres said in March 2021, closing the last remaining border crossing into Syria would halt the distribution of Covid-19 vaccines across the northwest of the country, with serious consequences for the broader region.⁷⁹

UN officials in Turkey have also played a vital role in informing the world about humanitarian conditions in Syria. Throughout the past decade, UN offices in Damascus, Gaziantep, and Amman debated how to describe conditions in various parts of Syria.⁸⁰ The interests of the Syrian government have heavily influenced the arguments of the UN’s Damascus office. UN officials in Turkey have asserted they will continue to advocate on the northwest’s behalf. However, with the loss of the UN cross-border operations, many NGOs say they fear that the Syrian government’s views will systematically color UN assessments and de-emphasize the needs of people in the northwest.⁸¹

INGOs in Turkey have already reduced their operations supporting northwestern Syria, due in part to the constrained operating environment.⁸² Consequently, the population in the northwest has grown even more dependent on the UN. While NGOs could fill some of that role given time and greater interorganizational coordination, the end of UN cross-border operations would

Projects by Partner Type for the Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund 2020 Allocations



Source: UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), “Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund: 2020 Allocation Dashboard (Cumulative) – 2020, as of 31 December 2020,” reliefweb, February 12, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-cross-border-humanitarian-fund-2020-allocation-dashboard-0>.

have a devastating effect on the northwest in the meantime. Lives would be lost, and many local NGOs could be forced into bankruptcy.⁸³

MOVING FORWARD

It is hard to say exactly what will happen in the northwest if UN cross-border operations were to end. In the near term, some food and equipment could be stockpiled. Life-saving programming will need to be identified and prioritized. Over a longer term, new funding pathways would be created, many organizations would create new processes, and legal constraints would be understood better. At the same time, however, the absence of UN cross-border assistance will incur a very real price, both immediately and over months and years. Losing UN cross-border operations would leave funding and operational gaps, increase costs, and endanger capacities to acquire certain lifesaving supplies or mobilize resources quickly in the event of another crisis.

Moving forward, donors and aid actors need to expand modalities for assistance. Donors should work with neighboring countries to ease restrictions on NGOs and facilitate their movement at border crossings, expanding them as necessary to improve the flow of aid and trade. Additionally, reevaluating vetting requirements to allow donors to directly fund local NGOs could decrease dependence on the UN and INGOs and help localize the aid industry—thus getting more assistance into the hands of those in need.

Donors with clout in different parts of Syria—for example, the United States in the northeast—could improve the operating environment for all implementers. Working collectively would minimize local interference in programming, and shifting to more resilient, long-term programming would cut back on unsustainable short-term aid. Regardless of whether there is a veto of UNSCR 2533, better coordination and information sharing among implementers and donors would help identify gaps and mitigate future blows to aid operations.

CONCLUSION

Conditions in northwestern Syria are fragile, and the withdrawal of UN cross-border assistance could easily push them toward crisis. A humanitarian disaster amid a global pandemic would put immense pressure on neighboring Turkey, and its effects could easily spread to the rest of the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. Desperation could drive further displacement and strengthen nefarious or violent actors seeking to exploit the situation.

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UN cross-border operations have played a vital role in ensuring that aid to vulnerable Syrians is provided based on their need, not on the limited access granted by the government in Damascus.⁸⁴ However, as we pass the 10-year mark since protests first broke out in Syria, continual votes to renew UN cross-border operations should not obstruct broader negotiations for aid access.

Governments, non-state armed groups, and their allies have constantly adapted to the new terrain. They have learned—and are learning still—how to divide and conquer humanitarian actors and use aid to their benefit. The aid community and their major donors have been less agile and, too often, reactive. They have performed miracles delivering assistance to desperate populations, but despite extensive reporting that aid is being systematically manipulated and instrumentalized, the focus remains on negotiating access for each project.

The cross-border issue should prompt more consistent high-level negotiations and coordination among donors on how best to assist civilians in conflict environments. That question will likely not be answered by July 2021, but the vote presents an opportunity for stakeholders to begin thinking about their goals. If they aim to improve international and human security, biannual battles in the Security Council to sustain UN cross-border operations are not the answer. At the same time, acquiescing to Russia's demands without negotiating for greater access to all Syrians in need would deprive certain segments of the population for years to come. Geopolitically, allowing Russia to control the conversation over humanitarian operations in Syria every six months is not in anyone's interest. Donor governments will either need to reduce overall dependence on UN cross-border operations—ensuring greater resilience to obstruction at the Security Council—or extend the mandate indefinitely.

Operating in an environment where assistance is regularly obstructed or threatened perpetuates aid

dependency and entrenches a war economy at the expense of civilians and regional stability. It contributes to a scenario in which the conflict and the emergency humanitarian response never end.

RECOMMENDATIONS ON CROSS-BORDER NEGOTIATIONS

- The Security Council’s penholders, Norway and Ireland, should ensure that all stakeholders are acting with urgency and unity to continue UN cross-border operations and:
 - Make the case that UN cross-border operations are the most cost-effective, coordinated, and pragmatic way to prevent and mitigate crises from spilling over.
 - Ensure that China and nonpermanent Security Council members understand that cross-border access is not an infringement on sovereignty, but rather an issue of meeting humanitarian needs and providing an adequate and reliable pandemic response.
 - Provide all stakeholders with the necessary information to assess the reliability of cross-line operations.
 - Emphasize how the end of cross-border operations in the northeast have stymied the Covid-19 response and relay concerns regarding the response in the northwest.
 - Highlight the potential spillover effects of worsening conditions in the northwest, including instability and refugee movements, using history as a guide.
- The penholders, the United States, the United Kingdom, and France should be unified in their goals to expand UNSCR 2533 and:
 - Push to reopen the Yaroubiya and Bab al-Salameh crossings while extending the mandate for UN cross-border operations beyond a year, pointing out the vulnerability of relying on a single crossing (such as Fish Khabour in the northeast and Bab al-Hawa in the northwest), especially during a pandemic. Stipulate that the UN can be a provider of last resort.
 - Highlight cross-line operations’ failure to meet the northeast’s needs during the past year and a half. UN secretary general Guterres noted in May 2020 that “should adequate steps not be taken for cross-line deliveries to work effectively . . . the Security Council would need to authorize the United Nations and its implementing partners to use additional crossings.”⁸⁵
- Engage diplomatically at the highest levels with all stakeholders, especially Russia and Turkey.
- Ensure that negotiators are not trapped in a cycle wherein Russia continues to make additional demands in return for its vote or abstention on this matter. Carrots are not—and should not be—the only item in the negotiator’s toolbox. The strongest leverage is donors’ unified response to a potential veto.
- All major donors and potential donors to Syria—including Western and Arab states—should be unified on the need for UN cross-border operations and greater genuine access to people in need. With one voice, donors should:
 - Emphasize that a Russian veto would sabotage future negotiations on reconstruction, sanctions, and additional aid through Damascus.
 - Make it clear that, if UNSCR 2533 is vetoed, aid or funds directed through cross-border operations will not be shifted to Damascus.
 - Work with Gulf states to ensure they understand the short and long-term ramifications of investing in the present environment. In the current context, additional investments are unlikely to counter Iranian influence or stabilize the region (just as the hundreds of billions of dollars invested in Iraq did not).
- Security Council members should coordinate at the highest levels with Turkey, a crucial stakeholder and the country most affected by the vote outside of Syria. They should:
 - Engage with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to ensure stronger coordination and support on cross-border operations, which the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is calling to extend. Erdoğan’s unique relationship with Russian president Vladimir Putin could be beneficial for the continuation of cross-border operations and the ceasefire.
 - Understand and appreciate Turkey’s concerns—particularly regarding security and stability in northeastern Syria—to ensure that Ankara does not act as a spoiler in any agreement with Russia.
 - Work with Turkey to facilitate NGO operations in the country, whether UN cross-border operations are extended or not.

BEYOND THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION

Extending UN cross-border operations is only part of the equation for achieving clear objectives to mitigate human suffering, improve regional stability, and contain future crises. These negotiations should be a wake-up call for like-minded donors to ensure that aid programming is needs-based rather than access-based and to reduce dependence on any one modality for assistance. Specifically, donors to the Syria response should:

- Gather extensive data in an independent way to identify consistent gaps and fund comprehensive needs assessments.
- Coordinate with each other and local authorities to reduce aid diversion and impediments to access.
- Shift to multi-year, resilience-oriented funding in areas where humanitarian principles can be achieved in programming.
 - Work with the Kurdish Regional Government and Turkey to facilitate assistance to Syria.
 - Reevaluate legal or political obstacles to funding programming in the northwest, acknowledging that some local authorities may be amenable to negotiations. For example, HTS minimally interferes in education and healthcare.⁸⁶ Ensuring projects' independence could facilitate a shift to more resilient programming in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) and other sectors that are essential for reducing dependence on water trucking and aid delivery.
- Strengthen partnerships with local NGOs, who have been the primary implementers in the northwest, and establish clear and achievable vetting requirements for them. UN agencies should provide letters of support for local NGO partners to better enable them to acquire funding from other sources. This will allow aid to become more localized and reduce NGOs' dependence on the UN. ■

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