

A Decisive Vote for Humanitarian Support in Syria

by [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](/experts/dana-stroul)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](/experts/dana-stroul)

Dana Stroul was the Shelly and Michael Kassen Fellow in The Washington Institute's Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics.



Brief Analysis

Renewing the UN cross-border mechanism is crucial to helping millions of needy Syrian civilians, preventing Russia and Assad from weaponizing aid deliveries, and safeguarding future international assistance efforts.

On December 19, the UN Security Council is expected to vote on the renewal of Resolution 2449, which authorizes the delivery of cross-border humanitarian aid to Syrians without the Assad regime's permission. The outcome will determine whether the regime is allowed to approve and entirely control who receives UN aid, and in what areas of the country it is available. If the resolution is not renewed, aid delivery will become yet another tool for shifting the war's trajectory in President Bashar al-Assad's favor, with dire implications for civilians living in areas not under regime control.

The recent Security Council debate over the resolution reflects broader developments inside Syria. Russia has coordinated with China to argue that current battlefield trends are in the regime's favor, attempting to use the aid debate as a means of coercing political recognition of Assad. Others have proposed adding a fifth crossing along the northern border at Tal Abyad to address the increased needs of Syrian civilians trapped in the latest Turkish military operation. UN Security-General Antonio Guterres has recalled how essential the mechanism is to reaching people in need.

A NECESSARY COUNTER TO FLAGRANT OBSTRUCTION

International law stipulates that humanitarian support should be neutral, need-based, and unhindered. At the same time, however, the UN is legally obligated to cooperate with the government in Damascus and receive permission to operate inside Syria. Thus, UN aid agencies and relevant NGOs operate from offices in Damascus—a situation that has often entailed waiting for the regime to grant access visas, accepting the presence of regime monitors during humanitarian interactions, and suffering frequent denials of aid delivery requests.

Indeed, the humanitarian aid issue has been hijacked throughout the long war as a means of compelling communities to submit to Assad's rule in order to receive assistance. The regime has also coopted the UN and NGOs by forcing them to operate within its administrative structures and demanding that their activities be monitored by its security services. With support from its Russian ally, Damascus has pressured UN agencies, limited their ability to access certain areas, and required them to partner with regime organizations such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent—all toward the broader goal of systematically blocking, obstructing, and diverting international humanitarian support to its benefit.

In this context, the Security Council sought an alternative mechanism for aid by passing Resolution 2165 in 2014. The predecessor to Resolution 2449, it established the framework for the UN to partly bypass Assad and provide some assistance to civilians in Syria directly, relying on four border crossings in Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey.

Since then, the regime has continually threatened to block all cross-border deliveries, to the point where the UN office in charge of these deliveries recently considered centralizing all of its operations in Damascus. Although the UN ultimately abandoned that proposal amid international outcry, member states must not forget the dire practical consequences that unfold whenever Damascus is given more involvement in aid delivery decisions.

For example, after Raqqa was liberated from the Islamic State in October 2017, the Iraqi crossing became the fastest way to send aid to Syrian civilians. Yet Assad and Russia pressured the Iraqi government to block this option, and UN agencies were left with no choice but to access Raqqa from inside Syria. The regime then barred agencies from visiting the city to assess its humanitarian needs until April 2018, a full six months after its liberation.

WHAT ARE THE COUNCIL'S CURRENT OPTIONS?

Today, around 11 million people in Syria—or more than half the country's total population—still need humanitarian assistance. At least 4 million of them live in areas outside regime control, including two active warzones in the northwest and northeast. According to UN undersecretary-general for humanitarian affairs Mark Lowcock, **2.7 million people** (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/sc14020.doc.htm>) in the northwest cannot be reached from within Syria—accessing them requires crossing borders, hence the need for Resolution 2449.

In total, the UN reports that 30,000 aid trucks have entered Syria via the four existing crossing points since 2014. Among these deliveries, 40 percent of medicine used for NGO operations in the northeast is provided via the Iraqi crossing. Around 1,000 trucks crossed the Turkish border last month alone—a record number that further shows the danger is far from over. Indeed, civilian needs remain immense, especially at a time when the UN's \$3.3 billion humanitarian appeal for Syria is only 55 percent funded.

Resolution 2449 is the primary mechanism for addressing these needs via unimpeded cross-border deliveries, but its mandate expires on January 10. In deciding the resolution's fate, the Security Council may move in one of three directions: (1) renew it without changes (i.e., a “technical rollover”), (2) renew it with revisions that reflect changes on the ground, or (3) block or degrade it (Russia's apparent preference).

A technical rollover is the most straightforward path, both to ensure that Syrians in need continue receiving support and to limit Damascus from deciding which communities receive assistance. Yet two contrary dynamics are working against this option.

On the one hand, boundary lines and humanitarian needs in northeast Syria have changed significantly since October 7, when Turkey launched cross-border military operations against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces that controlled much of the area. Ankara is therefore pushing to amend the resolution by adding a fifth crossing point in Tal Abyad, in part to facilitate its plans for transferring Syrian refugees back into the country and providing them with aid thereafter.

On the other hand, Moscow will likely try to degrade the resolution or block it entirely during the next vote. When the resolution came up for renewal last year, Russia and China abstained from the vote. This year, they are circulating a rival resolution that would close the Iraqi and Jordanian crossings and leave the two remaining Turkish crossings open for only six months. To justify this proposal, Moscow claims that the existing mechanism has allowed jihadist groups to divert aid. In response, the UN argues that it has established the strongest monitoring mechanism in the world to prevent such diversions.

More broadly, Russia's position is based on the same argument it made during last year's vote: that the resolution is "divorced from reality" because it does not acknowledge the Assad regime's military victory. In that sense, Moscow is once again using the Security Council negotiations to push for normalization of the international community's relationship with Damascus, along with an end to sanctions against regime members and the return of Syrian refugees. Yet this approach would essentially force the large swath of Syrian communities outside Assad's control to submit to his rule after years of brutal warfare against them. It could also legitimize the Turkish military operation by giving Ankara much greater agency in directing the provision of humanitarian aid to communities on the other side of its border—including communities that have supported its Kurdish militia enemies.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Renewing Resolution 2449 is a critical indicator of whether the international community is not only able to defend basic humanitarian principles, but also willing to push back against actors who would legitimize Assad's rule. If the measure is blocked or substantially diluted, Western countries will face an unpalatable choice: either work through a UN system completely coopted by Damascus, or find less-effective alternative mechanisms for aid delivery.

One such alternative would involve diverting funds to actors outside the UN framework, such as international NGOs that are not registered in Damascus yet still able to reach needy Syrian communities. Another option would be to find and cultivate capable local partners in non-regime areas. The worst choice would be to let Assad expand his manipulation of U.S. and other UN donor funding. Whatever the case, no alternative mechanism could reach as many civilians as the current UN cross-border framework.

The implications for humanitarian assistance in future conflict arenas should not be overlooked either. What happens in Syria will set a precedent—if the UN does not prevent Assad and Russia from using aid delivery as a weapon of war, it will raise deep doubts about the international community's long-term ability to provide life-saving aid in a neutral, need-based, unhindered fashion.

Finally, the aid resolution vote could also affect future efforts to rebuild Syria. Russia and other regime allies have repeatedly called on the West to begin financing postwar reconstruction, since neither Moscow nor Tehran can pay for it themselves. Western governments have correctly attempted to use this as leverage for pushing the regime toward a negotiated solution with the Syrian opposition in exile. Yet preventing the regime from diverting humanitarian aid is the first test of the international community's ability to effectively leverage reconstruction.

Dana Stroul is the Kassen Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. ❖

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