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# The Last Vote? Obstacles to Renewing UN Cross-Border Assistance in Syria

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### Brief Analysis

## Amid talk of a potential new Security Council resolution, veteran diplomats and aid practitioners debate the future of humanitarian assistance to needy Syrians.

**O**n June 15, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Basma Alloush, James Jeffrey, and Carsten Wieland. Alloush is the policy and advocacy advisor at the U.S. office of the Norwegian Refugee Council. Jeffrey served as U.S. special representative for Syria engagement and special envoy to the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS until November 2020. Wieland is the senior Middle East advisor for Germany's Green Party Parliamentary Group and author of *Syria and the Neutrality Trap*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

### Basma Alloush

**T**he cross-border mechanism up for renewal next month remains a vital lifeline for the millions of Syrians who are unable to access aid through other means. In the opposition-held northwest, around 3.4 million people currently need assistance of one type or another, and they are only reachable through cross-border methods. This humanitarian access is now being used as a bargaining chip to extract political concessions, but the United States should not budge in response to that pressure.

Before the cross-border resolution was originally approved in 2014, aid distribution was haphazard and prone to gaps and repetition in coverage. These problems resurfaced in the northeast when al-Yarubiya crossing was shuttered in early 2020, and the closure of Bab al-Salam last July made the humanitarian response even less effective—the amount of aid arriving in Syria decreased, coordination was hampered, and deliveries were delayed. The mechanism's uncertain fate has also forced NGOs to focus an inordinate amount of time on contingency planning and advocacy, detracting from their humanitarian work.

Shutting down Bab al-Hawa, the last open crossing, would be catastrophic. Lives would be lost, and whatever NGOs are able to remain in-country would be much less effective. Without the UN framework, three key elements that support the humanitarian response would be compromised:

1. **Logistics and coordination.** The cross-border resolution created the “whole of Syria” framework that coordinates information and resources between NGOs to ensure that aid reaches everyone who needs it.
2. **Procurement of supplies.** The UN is the sole local provider of vaccines for diseases such as COVID-19 and polio, and the main source for personal protective equipment, COVID testing kits, and other medical supplies. Similarly, the UN World Food Programme provides over 80 percent of humanitarian food assistance in northwest Syria. Without the cross-border resolution, NGOs would only be able to scale up their food supplies to meet the needs of 300,000 people

in the northwest, far short of the 1.3 million who require food assistance.

3. **Funding.** The UN manages a pooled cross-border fund for NGOs, but it will not be able to continue this funding without reauthorization of the cross-border mechanism.

If the resolution is not renewed, international NGOs would be able to maintain their operations in the short term, but the impact would be more dramatic in the mid to long term. All of them would have to scale down their programming, personnel, and partnerships with Syrian organizations. The consequences for Syrian NGOs would be even worse—at least 50 percent of them are completely reliant on UN funding, so they would cease to exist the minute the cross-border mechanism lapses.

## James Jeffrey

**T**he U.S. government feels strongly about keeping Bab al-Hawa open. The problem is that different parties have different interests in Syria, so the decision hinges on more than just the situation of civilians in Idlib. Israel is concerned about Hezbollah attacks from Syria; Turkey is concerned about the Kurdistan Workers Party and its Syrian offshoots; Washington and its European allies are worried about the Islamic State. These are all valid concerns, and U.S. policy needs to account for all of them.

When confronted with Russia's previous veto threats in January and July 2020, Washington rejected them as blatant attempts to blackmail the Security Council and extract concessions. This assertive U.S. position left Moscow isolated enough that it finally acquiesced and allowed the mechanism to continue.

Regarding normalization with Bashar al-Assad, the countries that have gone the furthest in that direction have received nothing in exchange. Jordan has derived zero trade benefits; the United Arab Emirates has seen zero pushback on Iranian involvement in Syria. Giving concessions to Assad does not work, and other countries realize that. Some parties will take further steps toward normalization, but they will be limited.

Accordingly, President Biden should make clear to Vladimir Putin that the United States and its allies will not tolerate the normalization of Assad's approach to internal dissent, which so far has consisted of widespread ethnic cleansing, the deaths of half a million people, and ample operational space for terrorists. Nor will it tolerate the regional security vision that Russia and Iran are advancing in the Middle East.

At the same, Washington should signal that it is willing to compromise on Moscow's key needs in Syria, including a friendly government and respect for Russia's local military commitments. Although the United States will continue sanctioning Assad's horrific behavior, it is not trying to overthrow him.

These considerations necessarily affect the humanitarian question. Washington would like to see some compromises on the border crossings—at an absolute minimum, a twelve-month renewal and an end to Russian veto threats. In exchange, it can take some steps that Moscow would like to see, including minor sanctions changes. But it should not give in to Putin's vision of a total military victory for Assad.

In principle, humanitarian issues like the cross-border mechanism should not be open to negotiation. The problem is that Russia has demonstrated a willingness to shut down crossings, so some deviation from that principle is necessary to keep people alive.

## Carsten Wieland

**W**hy has the international community found itself in this dilemma of relying on cross-border resolutions to deliver aid? The answer lies in three key factors.

First, international aid is generally distributed through a country's central government, based on the assumption that it is the best logistical partner for this task. Hence, the Assad regime has received up to 90 percent of aid

delivered to Syria during the war, even as it has targeted humanitarian infrastructure and indiscriminately killed civilians.

Second, cross-border aid has become necessary in Syria because “cross-line” aid (i.e., from regime territory to opposition territory) did not work. Damascus has systematically barred access and diverted aid because it views such assistance as a strategic tool of war—something that can be punitively withheld from certain areas and used to gain legitimacy in others.

Third, international humanitarian law has yet to settle the debate over how to balance a state’s sovereignty against the humanitarian needs of its citizens. Yet the law is clear on one thing: a host government is not allowed to deny aid for capricious reasons. Based on that principle alone, the cross-border mechanism should not even be necessary.

Realistically, settling the third point in favor of needy citizens would be difficult in Syria, where the “Responsibility to Protect” doctrine has been buried under the rubble of war. More broadly, Russia and China have pushed hard for the idea of sovereignty as an inviolable right regardless of a state’s behavior toward its people.

Indeed, the current climate is not conducive to making deals in Syria. The rifts between the West and Russia have impeded progress on the political front, with Moscow pushing the narrative that compromise is unreasonable because Assad has already “won” the war.

As for the fate of the assistance mechanism, a veto would not stop cross-border aid deliveries entirely. A large portion of this aid would disappear, but the remainder would be distributed under Turkey’s direct oversight. In that sense, a veto push may have the unintended effect of eroding Russia’s overall position in Syria.

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