

When Humanitarian Aid Becomes a Bargaining Chip

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Articles & Testimony

Cross-border access into Syria has become a stress test for Putin and Biden's nascent relationship, so what exactly will it take for their governments to reach a durable agreement?

Each year, the U.N. Security Council resumes negotiations to renew its resolution to allow cross-border assistance into Syria via Turkey and Iraq. U.N. agencies count on this mandate to work in Syria without being constrained by Bashar al-Assad's regime, which rarely allows aid to reach opposition areas. These negotiations have become a recurring flash point of the Syrian war drama: While the council's members generally support the mandate, Russia has regularly used its veto power to decrease the number of border crossings U.N. agencies can use, to the point where only one, Bab al-Hawa, remains open today.

Although the Biden administration has signaled that Syria will no longer be a priority for Washington—for instance, it has not yet appointed a special envoy to the country, as the two previous administrations have done—it has spent significant time and political capital on this aspect of the conflict. Recently, in his June meetings with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin, President Joe Biden made sure to bring up the long-fraught issue of getting aid to the country, where the war is winding down after 10 years but humanitarian needs are on the rise.

Yet, so far, nothing is guaranteed about cross-border humanitarian access into northern Syria, where the final stronghold of Turkish-backed, anti-Assad civilians and militants continues to face attacks from the Russian-backed Assad regime. The Biden administration has turned this year's Security Council negotiations over the border crossing, whose mandate is set to expire on July 10, into a **strategic test** (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/06/09/biden-putin-syria-united-nations-relief-aid/>) of Russia's appetite for compromise. In turn, that makes the current negotiations a moment of truth for the administration's approach to

diplomacy in the Middle East. Specifically, the negotiations will be a test of whether the administration's high-level outreach is enough to keep one or more of the crossings active, what kinds of concessions Biden is willing to give Russia and the Assad regime in order to sustain aid access, and whether it can create the momentum it needs to pursue larger objectives in Syria.

This issue of getting humanitarian aid to Syria is both immensely complicated and quite simple. On the one hand, the system of aid delivery used by the United Nations since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011 is one of the largest and most sophisticated in history. The U.N. oversees **between \$2 billion and \$4 billion** (<https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/924/summary>) in aid to Syria each year, which goes through hundreds of humanitarian agencies and NGOs that receive funding from mostly Western donors. This work is more crucial than ever as the number of Syrians in need has increased by 20 percent since 2020, now totaling **13 million people** (<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-factsheet-31-march-2021>).

On the other hand, it's all relatively straightforward. The **only way** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey-usa-idAFKCN2DF1E8>) to provide enough aid to the people who need humanitarian assistance in northwestern and northeastern Syria is through border crossings. The key diplomatic question now is whether Russia, which is allied with Assad, will allow U.N. agencies to use one or more of those crossings, since it has veto power in the Security Council. Russia has already used its veto power as a permanent member of the council 16 times in favor of Assad, and the Russian ambassador to the U.N. already **made clear** (<https://theglobepost.com/2021/06/30/cross-border-aid-to-syria-ends/>) he would do it again if necessary.

Without a U.N. resolution, aid providers would lose funding, and many would have to shut down, since the U.N. channels necessary funding to smaller Syrian NGOs and also helps them navigate the bureaucracy of donor organizations. The U.N. also plays an important transportation role by facilitating aid trucks, has unique access to goods in bulk, and has established mechanisms to prevent aid diversion by armed groups.

At the least, the Bab al-Hawa crossing needs to remain open. But that's not guaranteed, since the humanitarian nature of the crisis is being weaponized. Russia knows that the United States—and Europe—cares about this humanitarian issue, so it's using cross-border aid as an opportunity for leverage. In the past, it has tried unsuccessfully to push the United States and its allies for sanctions relief. The United States and its European allies ended up managing to build a coalition at the Security Council that outvoted Russia six times, but Moscow still succeeded in shutting down three of the four border crossings, with devastating impact on humanitarian access.

This year, the negotiations are different for a few reasons: The area for compromise is smaller (since there's only one crossing left), Washington sees the negotiations as a test of Russia's willingness to engage in other meaningful compromises, and the new Biden administration has a somewhat undefined Syria policy.

The negotiations process began in earnest on March 29, when U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken attended a Security Council briefing on Syria. Since then, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the U.S. ambassador to the U.N., has made numerous speeches on the importance of cross-border aid in Syria and even traveled to Bab al-Hawa herself to announce **nearly \$240 million** (<https://usun.usmission.gov/special-briefing-with-jeffrey-prescott-deputy-to-the-u-s-ambassador-to-the-united-nations/>) in new U.S. humanitarian funding and to push for a renewal and expansion of the cross-border mechanism to include two previously closed crossings.

Through high-level meetings and forceful public statements, the administration is investing significant political capital to get the attention of the Kremlin. One assumption of U.S. officials is that while Russia will try to squeeze these negotiations to achieve political gains, it does not actually want to close the border. They believe the Russian negotiators know that if the border closes, resulting instability could tank the fragile cease-fire in Idlib, a province in the northwest. Such a scenario would be bad for both Moscow and Damascus: Neither wants to deal with the

dissidents among the province's 3.5 million residents.

Washington has a few options to force Moscow's hand. It could take an aggressive stance and threaten to use its leverage in case of a Russian veto by, for instance, increasing sanctions on the Assad regime or pressing the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which work with the United States against the Islamic State, to reduce their **cooperation** (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/amid-us-uncertainty-in-syria-kurdish-yppg-eyes-bolstering-ties-with-russia>) with Russian forces in northeastern Syria. Washington could also pursue a defensive strategy that would reward Russia for cooperation by, for example, increasing COVID-19 aid to regime-held areas, permitting assistance to smaller humanitarian organizations that operate in those areas, and hastening license approvals for humanitarian items that are needed there.

What the United States should not use to negotiate are the tactics of normalization and reconstruction. It should forcefully reject attempts for normalization with the regime that have launched in the Gulf. Russia's goal is to restore Assad's international reputation and claim the Syrian conflict is over, and normalizing the regime would just validate Assad's strategy of hijacking international humanitarian assistance. In addition, Russia wants sanctions against Assad to be lifted to allow reconstruction funding to come from Europe, the Gulf, and the United States. But most of this money would serve to reimburse Moscow and Tehran for their support and to invest in **luxury projects** (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1399411/middle-east>) for **regime affiliates** (https://carnegieendowment.org/files/7-17-19_Daher_Syria.pdf), not lead to the genuine reconstruction of the war-torn country.

The United States cannot do this alone. It needs to depend on reliable partners. As Biden already knows, Turkey may be one such ally, since Ankara has been instrumental in advocating for the Bab al-Hawa crossing at the U.N. Meanwhile, Russia wants to preserve its partnership with Turkey, and Turkey wants to repair its fraught relationship with the United States. Moscow might not want to create another refugee wave into Turkey at a time when Ankara and Washington are trying to mend their ties to contain Russian influence. This dynamic could be crucial to joint humanitarian collaboration.

If Turkey supports the United States' efforts to open the crossing, Moscow is likely to demand two things from Ankara: for it to carry out its commitments in the **latest version** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/05/russia-and-turkey-agree-ceasefire-in-syrias-idlib-province>) of the Idlib cease-fire, including joint patrols that have been stymied by extremist attacks; and for it to withdraw its proxy forces south of the main road into the city, which would be a major concession of terrain. While these points will not be formally part of the U.N. resolution under negotiation, they are the **elephant in the room** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-security-un-turkey-int/turkey-says-in-talks-with-russia-on-extending-syria-aid-idUSKCN2E61YI>) in New York and the subject of intense parallel diplomacy with Ankara.

Europe will also be a key ally. Alongside North America, European countries provide around **90 percent** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/expanding-humanitarian-assistance-syrians-two-deadlines-approaching>) of the funding that enters Syria's humanitarian system. Germany and Belgium drafted last year's resolution at the Security Council, and other like-minded countries, such as France and Britain, have previously played an important role in shaping compromises at the Security Council while supporting humanitarian actors on the ground. This small coalition is a natural partner for Washington, but it needs to push back against recurring attempts from other European countries, including Greece, Cyprus, and the Czech Republic, to normalize relations with the Assad regime and thus weaken European unity.

Washington should connect the dots and work with all the partners it can to renew the cross-border mandate, which has never just been about humanitarian needs. Northern Syria is too strategically important in the Middle East for the United States to treat it as solely a humanitarian issue. If Washington acknowledges this, it can turn the current

negotiation into a confidence-building measure with Moscow, opening the door for further political negotiations in Syria and for renewed U.S. diplomatic credibility in the region. But if Washington does not sufficiently pressure Moscow, it risks leaving millions of people in northern Syria in further peril.

Jomana Qaddour is head of the Syria program at the Atlantic Council and cofounder of Syria Relief & Development, a humanitarian organization in Idlib. ❖

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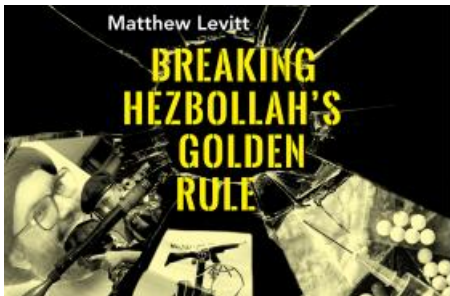
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