Recasting Syria's Cross-Border Aid Debate

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Brief Analysis

The UN aid mechanism is alive for another six months, but the threat of famine, Russian vetoes, and military escalation will persist unless Washington takes appropriate steps before the next round of renewal negotiations.

When UN Security Council Resolution 2585 was adopted last July, it extended the cross-border aid mechanism **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/un-votes-syria-mixed-success-within-diplomatic-deadlock)** in Syria for one year, contingent on the secretary-general issuing a "substantive report" on the issue at the six-month mark. After the report was submitted **(https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2021_1029_E.pdf)** on December 15, the Security Council renewed the mechanism for the second six-month interval without a vote. Perhaps surprisingly, Russia did not formally dispute the report or demand a vote, instead allowing aid to continue flowing until the resolution expires this July 10.

Moscow's unheralded move was largely regarded as a non-event in Washington policy circles, while some praised it as a victory for the Biden administration's Syria policy. Yet a closer look shows that Russian officials were able to

extract substantial concessions from Washington on the humanitarian file (e.g., a UN resolution endorsing certain "early recovery" projects that were previously contingent on a broader political settlement), as well as a qualified relaxation of U.S. sanctions on the Assad regime.

A Pattern of Concessions and Attacks

The cross-border mechanism was established in 2014 to deliver UN-funded humanitarian aid directly to opposition-held areas of Syria. Although UN aid distribution is usually overseen by host countries, the Assad regime's ruthless politicization of humanitarian assistance meant that supplies routed through Damascus rarely reached the civilians who needed them most.

Initially, the Security Council approved four crossings to deliver authorized aid: one from Jordan, one from Iraq, and two from Turkey. Until December 2019, the council renewed these crossings without incident. Since then, however, the Kremlin has treated every six- to twelve-month approval vote as a diplomatic confrontation—first it threatens to leave millions of civilians without any reliable source of basic aid, then it relents in exchange for concessions, such as decreasing the number of permissible aid crossings to the point where just one is currently active: Bab al-Hawa on the northwest border with Turkey.

Behind the scenes, the Biden administration and its predecessors have engaged repeatedly and directly with Russia on settling the war. And in most cases, both these negotiations and the various diplomatic showdowns over the aid mechanism have been accompanied by intensification of the military conflict. Like clockwork, Russian forces conducted airstrikes in Idlib in advance of the latest crossing renewal, destroying a water pumping station and other civilian infrastructure.

"Cross-Line" Aid Is a Red Herring

The Assad regime has loudly **denounced (https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=241184)** the cross-border mechanism as a violation of its sovereignty and a tool to advance Western agendas in Syria. Moscow has generally agreed. Both governments argue that aid to opposition-held territories should instead be routed "cross-line" from Damascus.

Yet cross-line aid has not shown any sign of being a remotely credible alternative to the Bab al-Hawa crossing. Last June, for instance, the UN reported that over 1,000 aid trucks were entering via Bab al-Hawa every month; in contrast, just two cross-line convoys have managed to reach Idlib in the past year.

The deeper problem is that allowing Damascus to oversee aid deliveries to opposition-held areas would give the regime greater coercive leverage over them. These territories are now home to over 3 million civilians, at least 1.5 million of whom were displaced from elsewhere in the country.

Aid Is Too Low Regardless

The Security Council's long-running disputes over the cross-border mechanism risk obscuring the fact that Syria is simply not receiving enough humanitarian aid to avert disaster, regardless of how the aid arrives. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, international donor funds met just 46 percent of the country's assessed needs in 2021, the lowest proportion since 2015.

Indeed, despite the conflict's relatively static frontlines, the humanitarian situation is the worst it has ever been: the World Food Programme now estimates that 1.3 million Syrians are severely food insecure, meaning they are skipping meals and going hungry due to lack of access to affordable food. Wheat production has **dropped (https://www.fao.org/3/cb8039en/cb8039en.pdf)** to just a quarter of its prewar levels, and organizations are beginning to sound the alarm about a potential famine. Meanwhile, more than half the population has been displaced, and millions are living in makeshift tents, with limited access to food, water, and heating supplies to survive the winter.

Preparing for the July Renewal

Given these dire problems, convincing Russia to renew the cross-border mechanism for another year will almost certainly be necessary once the current term expires in July. The question is what cost will this diplomatic tussle hold for the Syrian people, and for the prospects of reaching a settlement under Security Council Resolution 2254, the only internationally agreed formula for ending the war?

One key tool in Russia's kit is narrative control. Last year, Moscow concentrated on styling itself as a major humanitarian aid provider to Syria, with Russian media outlets increasing their focus on the issue as December drew closer. Numerous stories emerged on the thousands of tons of aid that Russia had sent, along with the many official visits it had conducted to help restore peaceful life in Syria. "The reaction of the local people is simply amazing," one Russian representative said in November after aid was delivered to a hospital in Deraa . "You can see how kindly and warmly they treat the Russian servicemen and the help we provide. You can see the gratitude in their eyes."

By December, senior Russian officials had shifted to publicly and repeatedly expressing concern about the cross-border mechanism. In the UN's December 15 internal report, Secretary-General Antonio Guterres stated that aid "is delivered, and services are provided, in a principled and transparent manner throughout the country" despite various challenges. In Moscow's narrative, however, the mechanism that enabled these deliveries was just the West's way of acquiescing to "terrorists" in rebel-held areas and ignoring the resultant humanitarian suffering. Russia's first deputy permanent representative to the UN, Dmitry Polyanskiy, encapsulated this narrative well: "Our concerns relate to what is happening directly in Idlib, which is overwhelmed by terrorists who have subjugated all spheres of people's lives, including their free movement. What kind of impartial and independent distribution of aid in such conditions can we talk about?" Russia's special envoy for Syria, Alexander Lavrentiev, went further, reiterating that aid should come through Damascus and warning that if Moscow sees no progress, it will "finally close the [cross-border] mechanism."

In other words, Moscow has supposedly shown restraint, acted only when it had no other choice, and complied with international legal obligations, while the West continues to cooperate with terrorists, ignore civilian suffering, and flout its international obligations. According to this narrative, Moscow is the negotiator, and the West is the unreasonable party.

Hence, Russia does not necessarily feel compelled to veto each round of renewal negotiations so long as it can score more concessions from Washington, give little in return, and continue casting itself as the magnanimous party. Even so, Washington should remember that the Assad regime still views cross-border aid as an affront to its sovereignty and will pressure Moscow to veto each round regardless of the Kremlin's views.

Conclusion

As the cross-border negotiations heat up in advance of the July vote, Russia may pursue its past strategy of escalating the military situation for leverage. The United States and its partners should therefore take steps now to deter such escalation and keep civilians in the north safe if Russian and regime bombardment do in fact increase.

First, U.S. officials should consider drafting a joint resolution with other Security Council stakeholders clearly outlining the problem of Russian escalation during cross-border votes. In particular, Moscow has a history of bombing healthcare facilities that are named on the UN's deconfliction list, so highlighting such facilities would be worthwhile. Russia counts on the fact that the Syrian conflict has become a lower-profile issue amid other global challenges. Security Council members should therefore make clear that any new escalation will be met with international scrutiny and outcry.

Second, Washington should remind Moscow that it retains real economic leverage in Syria and is prepared to wield it

in response to Russian escalation. For instance, the Treasury Department could investigate the widespread allegations of corruption in the Assad regime's aid distribution and sanction the officials involved. The Biden administration could also work with Congress to draft additional legislation related to the Caesar Act, clarifying and tightening the language regarding what qualifies as sanctionable activity. Russia has long been interested in the economic prospects of future reconstruction, and it may think twice if it believes renewed bombing will hinder those prospects.

As for countering the Russian narrative, U.S. officials could publicize the Assad regime's ongoing atrocities in greater detail, including its use of humanitarian aid as a tool of coercion. For example, Damascus has forced some Syrian communities to pledge loyalty to the regime in exchange for food; in other instances, it has surrounded towns and used starvation to compel their surrender. Concrete examples can also help show that the United States is still putting humanitarian needs above politics, even as Russia views the entire issue through the prism of securing the Assad regime. Last but not least, Washington must do a better job explaining that it is the Assad regime's actions, not foreign sanctions, that are hurting the Syrian people.

But narrative is only part of the story. Washington also needs to commit to economically and politically isolating the Assad regime until its behavior changes on issues ranging from atrocities to chemical weapons violations to narcotics activities. Recent U.S. efforts to relieve sanctions in order to accommodate **energy transfers through Syria (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/power-people-scrutinizing-us-arab-effort-supply-energy-lebanon-syria)** have yet to yield any discernable concessions from Damascus. Washington should therefore consider targeting certain regime elements involved in atrocities and illicit behavior, even as it loosens sanctions on the national leadership to incentivize a path out of the war.

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