

Time to Develop a Plan B for Syria Aid

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Brief Analysis

Although alternatives to the UN mechanism carry uncertainties of their own, continuing the broken status quo will only boost Moscow, endanger Syrian civilians, and help the Assad regime avoid sanctions—not to mention whetting his appetite for natural gas shipments.

On July 12, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2642, approving another six months of cross-border aid to areas of Syria not controlled by Bashar al-Assad's regime. Although this arrangement will keep much-needed humanitarian assistance flowing through the Bab al-Hawa crossing into Idlib province until January 10, 2023, the extension came at the cost of considerable concessions to Russia. Days earlier, Moscow had vetoed a resolution put forward by Ireland and Norway that would have extended these deliveries for a full year. Although a second six-month extension is included in the current resolution, it will require the adoption of yet another new resolution in January before it can take effect. Such concessions will likely be that much more biting for civilians in north Syria if another round of contentious UN negotiations unfolds just as they are struggling in the depths of

winter.

Particularly noteworthy was the resolution's outlining of activities related to electricity. Damascus, Moscow, and other actors have argued that recent efforts to provide electricity and natural gas via regime-controlled territory should be exempt from U.S. sanctions mandated by the 2019 Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act. The language in Resolution 2642 could bolster those arguments, potentially empowering regime plans to reconstruct the country without the political negotiations required by Resolution 2254, the agreed formula for a just and viable settlement to the war. To prevent this, Washington and its allies should develop their much-talked-about but never-unveiled "Plan B" for getting aid into Syria without a Security Council resolution.

A Net Win for Russia

The West has a history of relenting to Moscow's Syria demands in exchange for maintaining a steadily diluted aid mechanism. Since July 2014, when the UN authorized cross-border aid through Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey without the Assad regime's consent, Russian officials have consistently characterized it as an "emergency temporary measure" that should be rolled back as more areas come under Assad's control. In December 2019, Moscow began to methodically reduce the number and scope of permissible aid crossings via new resolutions, which the West ultimately accepted because the threatened alternative was a veto on all aid. Russia used the same tactic this summer, warning that it saw little reason to renew the aid mechanism at all unless the West loosened sanctions against the Assad regime and redirected more aid through the "legitimate" government in Damascus.

Moscow's negotiating position on this matter is strong in both the local and geopolitical sense. In Syria, Russia has not withdrawn in any meaningful way aside from tactically repositioning its Wagner Group private military company (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russian-private-military-companies-continuity-and-evolution-model>) and perhaps some military police forces. In fact, it reportedly (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-escalations-in-syria-risk-direct-conflict-with-u-s-military-officials-warn-11655504591>) conducted a series of operations against the U.S.-led coalition in June. On the wider international stage, Moscow continues to settle in for a long-term confrontation with the West. The Kremlin likely saw no need to be conciliatory on Syria in part because the Russian military is making gains in the Ukraine war despite suffering massive losses. Western officials acknowledged (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2022/jul/06/russia-ukraine-war-live-news-donetsk-governor-urges-evacuations-amid-russian-offensive>) this "genuine headway" last week.

From a strictly humanitarian perspective, the new resolution likely had Western negotiators breathing sighs of relief. Ending the cross-border mechanism would have been a disaster for northwest Syria, where 4.1 million of the area's 4.4 million inhabitants are categorized as being in need—an increase of 20 percent since 2021. The mechanism assisted 2.4 million people per month over the past year, representing 80 percent of overall assistance to the northwest and highlighting the limits of "cross-line" aid from regime-held areas. Moreover, the mechanism relies on strict UN controls, in contrast to the misappropriation of aid reported in Assad's territory.

Yet beyond this short-term relief, the outlook is grim. Moscow secured a diplomatic win by limiting the extension to six months and requiring a new resolution to trigger the additional six months. The Kremlin will no doubt use this same tactic in future negotiations, deliberately ignoring the fact that humanitarian organizations and the UN secretary-general have repeatedly noted that a longer extension is required to operate effectively (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/recasting-syrias-cross-border-aid-debate>).

Electricity Projects Could Empower Assad

As noted previously, the mention of electricity under the label of humanitarian activities stands to benefit Assad, even though the resolution's final wording limits the scope of such projects. According to the relevant passage,

“humanitarian activities are broader than solely addressing the immediate needs of the affected population and should include support to essential services through water, sanitation, health, education, [and] electricity where essential to restore access to basic services and shelter early recovery projects.” Such language indicates that Moscow is keen to help its client in Damascus take advantage of recent regional plans to transfer electricity through Syria.

Over the past year, Washington has worked with Egypt and Jordan to [design a plan \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/power-people-scrutinizing-us-arab-effort-supply-energy-lebanon-syria\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/power-people-scrutinizing-us-arab-effort-supply-energy-lebanon-syria) for moving electricity and gas across Syrian territory into Lebanon, aiming to avert the collapse of the latter’s imperiled power sector. By ensuring that language about “essential services” was included in Resolution 2642, Moscow and Damascus may now have a humanitarian pretext for exploiting Jordanian electricity transfers originally intended for Lebanon—and thereby seeking exemption from U.S. sanctions applied to electricity consumed via the Assad regime’s grid.

The Jordanian transfers in question are not sent via separate transmission lines between individual nations, but rather through the Eight Countries Electric Interconnection Project, which links a number of national grids in the East Mediterranean. When Amman first proposed the plan to conduct these transfers through Syria in 2021, the immediate policy question for the United States was whether electricity (or the gas used to generate it) could be moved across Assad’s territory without violating sanctions stemming from his regime’s massive war crimes. The Syrian electrical grid feeds power directly to civilian and security facilities alike, including the types of detention centers whose rampant abuses spurred legislation like the Caesar Act in the first place. So while electricity entering from Jordan could in theory be allocated to hospitals and other humanitarian sites providing essential services, it could also be diverted to regime military sites on the same grid, which reportedly include airbases, helicopter launch points, and chemical weapons facilities. Even if infrastructure upgrades and monitoring mechanisms are put in place, the international community’s ability to prevent the regime from reaping the benefits of avowedly humanitarian electricity projects will be profoundly limited.

Plan B?

An alternative to leaving humanitarian aid hostage to Russia is long overdue. Given the constant degradation of UN resolutions, the string of concessions to Moscow, and the difficulties that vulnerable civilians in northwest Syria will face if diplomats are once again forced to haggle over the next aid renewal this winter, the West needs to accelerate its efforts to formulate a Plan B.

One proposal long in the cards is to establish a trust fund run by the main donor countries. Yet while this route could help allies bypass Russian obstructionism, it is paved with uncertainties. First is the question of its geographical scope, particularly whether it would include northeast Syria at some point. Turkey’s deep interest in that part of Syria and the wider question of Kurdish autonomy raise serious questions about how Ankara might view such an initiative—and attempt to leverage it. In addition, current economic trends and other factors make it uncertain whether this fund could match the current level of UN assistance and consistently meet the population’s needs.

Accordingly, until Washington and its partners can formulate a viable alternative plan, they must devote considerable work to keep Russia from expanding the humanitarian loophole into a torrent of electricity and gas transfers for the Assad regime. Although natural gas is not mentioned directly in Resolution 2642, the language about electricity opens the door to such discussions. If plans to move gas across Syria for use in Lebanon are set in motion, these supplies would run a serious risk of becoming feedstock in the Assad regime’s host of dormant or partially operating power stations. According to initial agreements, the regime stands to take up to 8 percent of gas transiting its territory as a transit fee—a scenario that has attracted considerable attention in committee hearings on Capitol Hill, where U.S. legislators have sharply criticized the Biden administration’s efforts to pursue projects that

may violate the Caesar Act as much as help Lebanon.

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