

Another Painful Compromise on Humanitarian Assistance in Syria

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Russian and Chinese vetoes have once again exposed the vulnerability of the UN system for handling the country's humanitarian crisis, so Western donors should explore innovative alternatives for channeling assistance.

When the UN Security Council belatedly renewed the mechanism for cross-border humanitarian assistance to Syria on July 11, the result was a diluted resolution that required painful negotiations to reach, including two pairs of vetoes from Beijing and Moscow and the rejection of two Russian draft proposals that were even more problematic. The United States, Europe, and the large majority of other council members favored renewing the border crossings from Turkey (Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam) and reopening al-Yarubiya crossing from Iraq, whose closure since the January renewal process has impeded the COVID-19 pandemic response in Syria. Yet Russian and Chinese officials were unwilling to accept anything more than the renewal of Bab al-Hawa. They also demanded a report from the UN secretary-general on how Western economic sanctions are affecting the humanitarian situation.

In the end, the only way to avoid a third pair of vetoes was to adopt a new resolution (UNSCR 2533) accepting Bab al-Hawa as the only crossing for UN aid over the next twelve months and closing Bab al-Salam. Al-Yarubiya will remain closed, as will Ramtha, the Jordanian crossing that was likewise shuttered in January.

Although the renewal of Bab al-Hawa is essential, the international community will now have to work quickly to find solutions for reaching the 1.3 million Syrian civilians who relied on Bab al-Salam for their basic needs—especially now that the first COVID-19 cases in northwest Syria have been confirmed. The issue of access to the northeast must also be resolved given that al-Yarubiya will remain closed.

WHY THIS NEGOTIATION WAS SO IMPORTANT

More than half of Syria's population still needs humanitarian assistance, including at least [2.8 million](#) people in northwestern territories controlled by jihadists or pro-Turkish groups, and [1.8 million](#) in northeastern areas controlled by the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces. Since the war began, the international humanitarian response has been plagued by over-centralization in Damascus and the subsequent tendency of UN agencies to accept conditions set by Bashar al-Assad's regime. International law requires coordination with the national government, but it also forbids Syrian officials from blocking assistance, which they have done repeatedly on a large scale. Accordingly, the cross-border mechanism was created in 2014 so that UN agencies could deliver assistance directly from neighboring countries, informing Damascus but not waiting for its approval.

This mechanism proved vital. As shown in UN reports [and maps](#), more than 30,000 aid trucks have entered Syria via the four approved crossings since 2014, and the number of trucks bringing assistance from Turkey has increased by [130 percent since 2019](#). Al-Yarubiya alone was the gateway for more than 40 percent of all medicine used by NGO operations in the northeast before its closure.

CONTRADICTIONS AND SHORTCOMINGS

The result of the vote confirms the steady dismantling of the cross-border mechanism. For years, Russia has claimed that the mechanism lacks transparency despite the UN setting up a robust monitoring system. Moscow has now managed to close Bab al-Salam under these false pretenses, only months after blocking the renewal of al-Yarubiya and Ramtha. When Bab al-Hawa comes up for renewal again in twelve months, Russia will likely aim to close it as well.

Europe and the United States fund 90 percent of humanitarian assistance in Syria while Moscow funds less than 1 percent, but the Russians still have outsize veto power to shape humanitarian conditions. For major donors, who recently committed another \$7.7 billion to alleviate Syrian suffering, this raises the question of who exactly is controlling the money they are providing. British officials have already indicated that they would not reallocate funding if the cross-border mechanism was not renewed; now that the mechanism has been further diluted, it is unclear how London and other donor capitals will react.

For their part, Beijing and Moscow have demonstrated their ability to selectively insist on some international principles (e.g., national sovereignty; the need for coordination between local and UN authorities) while denying others (e.g., unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance). Russian officials often take the same approach to

UN reports. In the latest debate, they cherry-picked UN figures to claim that humanitarian convoys from Damascus to the northeast are increasing, even as they pushed for a UN investigation on sanctions. Meanwhile, they have dismissed other UN findings, including an investigatory conclusion confirming regime airstrikes on humanitarian actors, various assessments regarding humanitarian needs in northwest Syria, and numerous reports about the regime impeding humanitarian access.

More broadly, Russian priorities in Syria remain quite different from the donor community's. Moscow may have accepted the renewal of Bab al-Hawa as a tactical move to avoid a humanitarian disaster that could spur a new wave of migration to Turkey—its latest way of protecting its relationship with Ankara. At the same time, Russia's vetoes were rooted in its fundamental support for the Assad regime, which has not wavered despite recent speculation about tensions between the two governments.

Given all these factors, the good news emerging from the UN debate is not good enough. Yes, the Security Council reached a compromise to keep one crossing open, thereby avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe. But it is deeply worrisome that Syria's biggest humanitarian donors could not create more leverage on Russia and China since the closure of al-Yarubiya and Ramtha six long months ago.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The adoption of UNSCR 2533 not only lays bare the international community's weakening capacity to defend basic humanitarian principles, but also shows Russia's successful attempt to legitimize Assad's rule and increase its control over humanitarian assistance. Since Bab al-Hawa is insufficient to cover current humanitarian needs, donor countries will need to explore other avenues:

Fix the UN system in Damascus. Top donor governments should more strictly condition their funding to UN and NGO agencies based in Damascus and disburse their funds differently, depending on how the organizations in question respect humanitarian standards. For instance, if the World Health Organization does not clarify its relationship with the Assad regime, donors should shift their funding to other agencies, including NGOs outside the UN framework if necessary. The UN secretary-general could then use this sense of competition to strengthen internal accountability and help NGOs negotiate higher humanitarian standards with Damascus.

Find mechanisms that complement the UN effort. Although no alternative mechanism could reach as many civilians as the current UN framework, coupling it with efforts outside the UN can still be a vital force multiplier for many Syrian NGOs. In the same way that the humanitarian hub in Gaziantep, Turkey, supports northwest Syria, various actors could pool funds outside the UN system to increase direct assistance to the northeast, using Erbil, Iraq, as a hub and Peshkhabur as the crossing.

Develop innovative financial tools. The most direct, need-based assistance that Syrians receive is funded by direct transfers from the Syrian diaspora in Europe, the United States, and the Persian Gulf. Using hawala systems to transfer funds informally has been a key tool for avoiding regime diversion of such aid, but Damascus has been cracking down on this system, and international banks concerned about sanctions risks tend to block more standard transfers to Syria. Accordingly, Western countries should work on targeted financial tools that Syrian NGOs in Europe and the United States can use to directly support Syrian households and communities.

Improve communication and management regarding sanctions exemptions. The U.S. Caesar Act and other sanctions laws have humanitarian exemptions built in, but many foreign NGOs do not have enough information about how they work. Likewise, many Syrians are confused by Assad's propaganda, which implies that the West is somehow responsible for the current economic collapse while shifting blame away from the regime's own corruption and systematic destruction of economic infrastructure. Western officials should therefore be more proactive in setting up coordination mechanisms with NGOs to ensure that sanctions do not hinder their activities.

Prepare for the next negotiation. The vote on Resolution 2533 showed that substantial political capital will be needed to protect humanitarian principles in the mid-term. Humanitarian assessments and last-minute bargains are not enough to shape a more favorable outcome at the Security Council, especially since Russia is betting that major donors will buckle under Syria fatigue. In order to implement the options described above and avoid further deterioration of the humanitarian system, foreign ministers in the relevant governments will need to be directly and continuously involved.

The worst choice would be to let Assad expand his manipulation of UN agencies. Preventing the regime from diverting aid money is the first test of the international community's ability to leverage the promise of future reconstruction.

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