

SYRIA

Cross-border resolution expiration



KEY FIGURES

4.5M

POPULATION
IN NWS

4.1M

PEOPLE IN NEED
IN NWS

2.9M

PEOPLE DISPLACED
IN NWS

3.3M

FOOD-INSECURE
PEOPLE IN NWS

CRISIS OVERVIEW

On 11 July 2023, the UN Security Council failed to reauthorize the cross-border mechanism for delivery of humanitarian aid into NWS after the mandate's expiry on 10 July. This came after two draft resolutions that aimed to renew cross-border humanitarian operations in NWS were rejected (UN 11/07/2023). Russia, a key Government of Syria ally, seems determined to ensure any mechanism for aid delivery through Bab al-Hawa is under GoS control, while the US and its allies are strongly opposed to that proposal. The cross-border aid mechanism has been crucial in ensuring the flow of assistance into NWS, a region under the control of jihadist and Turkish-backed forces opposed to the GoS, without requiring the consent or cooperation of the GoS. The Bab Al Hawa crossing point, at the centre of UN cross-border activities, has the strategic advantage of being close to Idlib, which is where the majority of NWS's people reside (The Guardian 11/07/2023). The absence of any prompt solutions will lead to increased humanitarian needs and the depletion of potentially life-saving services, making the future of the 2.7 million people in need reached via the Bab Al Hawa crossing point uncertain (ECHO 12/07/2023).

About this report

Aim: this report aims to provide an overview of the humanitarian impact of the failure of the UN Security Council to renew the mandate for cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid into Northwest Syria (NWS) after its expiry on 10 July 2023 and the contextual dynamics around this. The report is part of a longer forward-looking analysis report focusing on 'Crises to Watch in Northern Syria' that will be published at the end of July.

Methodology: this report is based on a secondary data review of public sources and input from experts on the Syrian crisis as of mid-July 2023.

CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION

A series of UN Security Council resolutions governs the present structure of humanitarian aid in NWS. Since 2014, these resolutions have allowed the UN to operate cross-border aid from Türkiye into NWS without the explicit permission of the GoS (UNSC 12/12/2022). These resolutions are renewed periodically every 6–12 months and often result in intense discussions between the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council.

On 11 July 2023, the UN Security Council failed to authorise an extension of the cross-border mechanism for humanitarian aid delivery into NWS after the last six-month mandate expired on 10 July. This is after the rejection of two draft resolutions that aimed to renew cross-border humanitarian operations (UN 11/07/2023 a).

Brazil and Switzerland, the co-penholders of the Syrian humanitarian file at the Security Council, submitted the first draft. In an attempt to reach consensus, they sought to extend the use of the Bab Al Hawa crossing point by nine months after the shelving of their initial 12-month proposal. The Russian Federation vetoed this proposal despite 13 of the 15 members voting in favour, with one abstention by China (UN 11/07/2023 b). The Russian Federation's competing draft, which sought a six-month extension, was defeated by a vote of three against (from France, the UK, and the US) to two in favour (the Russian Federation and China) (UN 11/07/2023 a). The GoS praised Russia's decision to veto the first resolution, referring to it as "a Western UN Security Council draft resolution violating Syria's sovereignty under the pretext of delivering cross-border aid" (CNN 11/07/2023).

Two days after the vote, Syria's permanent representative to the UN, Bassam Al Sabbagh, transmitted a letter to the Security Council announcing the decision of the GoS to grant a six-month permission to the UN and its specialised agencies to use the Bab Al Hawa crossing to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery to civilians in need in NWS starting 13 July. This, however, came with conditions, including "full cooperation and coordination with the Syrian

government”, and emphasised that the UN, its representatives, and its staff should not communicate with “terrorist organizations” as well as “groups and their affiliated illegal administrative entities in northwestern Syria”. The GoS also repeated its demand for the International Red Cross Committee and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to oversee and support the distribution of humanitarian aid in NWS (Security Council Report 16/07/2023). In response, UN OCHA sent a letter to the Security Council calling two of those conditions unacceptable. The letter said that the prohibition on communicating with groups considered as “terrorist organizations” would hinder the UN and affiliated organisations involved in aid distribution from engaging “with relevant state and non-state parties as operationally necessary to carry out safe and unimpeded humanitarian operations”. In response to the demand that the Red Cross or Syrian Arab Red Crescent must oversee aid delivery, the letter said that the demand is “neither consistent with the independence of the United Nations nor practical”, as those organisations “are not present in north-west Syria” (AP 15/07/2023).

CRISIS IMPACT

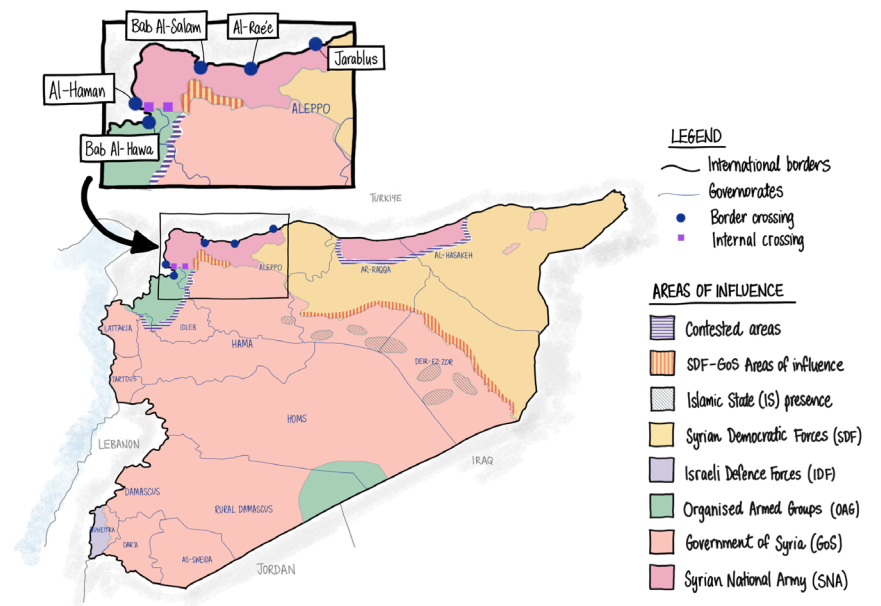
Since the expiry of the mandate on 11 July 2023, UN agencies have not accessed the Bab Al Hawa crossing point and cannot do so without a UN Security Council mandate. This means that aid has not gone through the crossing since 11 July. The other two crossings, Bab Al-Salam and Al-Rae'e, which were opened to facilitate the flow of assistance in the aftermath of the earthquakes that hit southern Türkiye and NWS in February, will continue to be operational until 13 August 2023 (NYT 11/07/2023). None of the two, however, are as significant as Bab Al Hawa. While there are no current reports of needs stemming from the closure of the border crossing, if the stalemate persists, especially after the UN's prepositioned supplies run out, people in need in NWS could go without life-saving humanitarian aid.

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

February earthquakes

Aggravating the overall humanitarian situation in NWS has been the aftermath of two major earthquakes. On 6 February 2023, a 7.8 and a 7.7 magnitude earthquake hit southern Türkiye and NWS, followed by two other major earthquakes on 20 February and thousands of aftershocks. The earthquakes left 4,500 people dead and over 10,400 people injured in NWS. They also damaged at least 10,600 buildings, with 1,870 completely destroyed, compounding a complex humanitarian crisis (OCHA 28/04/2023). The earthquakes also struck a part of NWS that had experienced significant conflict activity and economic crisis over the last few years, as well as Gaziantep, a key hub of the humanitarian response to NWS in southern Türkiye.

Syria's areas of influence and Northwest Syria border crossings



Source: ACAPS using data from “Northwest Syria – Areas of Influence and Border Crossings” International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) maps, 2023

See full map on page 4.

RESPONSE CAPACITY

Contingency planning

The question of a possible failure of the cross-border mechanism has been a pervasive part of the wider architecture of the humanitarian response in NWS for some years. As such, the main question that has ghosted much of the contingency planning has been the scope of what the UN may be allowed to do. From at least the summer of 2021, contingency planning has focused on four critical pillars:

- funding
- logistics
- coordination
- access negotiations.



At present, these four pillars are concealed within the UN architecture, as the UN oversees the funding structure with the Syrian Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF), the WFP oversees the logistics structure, and OCHA leads the coordination and access negotiations structures (OCHA accessed 19/07/2023; Logistics Cluster accessed 19/07/2023). Leading up to the vote on 11 July, there was significant speculation that the UN could continue to gain access into NWS for six months after any resolution failure. While the UN still has access through the border crossing points granted by the GoS after the February earthquakes (which are due to remain open until 13 August), access has halted with immediate effect through Bab Al Hawa, the crossing governed by the UN Security Council resolution (BBC 11/07/2023). As such, the situation remains deeply uncertain.

Regardless, there were some principles of contingency planning publicly available prior to 11 July, though these may have become outdated as the situation rapidly evolves. In terms of funding, a new donor-driven fund – the Aid Fund for Northern Syria (AFNS) – that was set up in October 2022, provides an alternative to traditional funding mechanisms and entails working closely with national stakeholders, which could ensure business continuity in the absence of a resolution (AFNS accessed 19/07/2023). It is assumed that the AFNS could support the SCHF in any of the complex potential outcomes expected, including aiding a full transition. By and large, OCHA is expected to continue its role as the key coordinating institution, since much of the humanitarian response coordination is being done remotely in Gaziantep. The UN is also presumably expected to maintain some form of role in both access negotiations and logistics, as there has not been much publicly available discussion on either of these pillars.

Local and national response capacity

Turkish and Syrian-based NGOs will still have access to the Bab Al Hawa border crossing point, as they are not dependent on the resolution to cross into Syria. That said, many insist that they need the logistical support provided by the UN (TNH 12/07/2023). For a chance at an effective response without the UN, local NGOs must be provided with rapid funding and support to increase their operational capacity.

International response capacity

France, the UK, and the US could continue to pursue a renewal of the cross-border mechanism in the UN Security Council, which could return some sense of normalcy, even though Russia is likely to veto such proposals. The UN could also execute non-renewal contingency plans and aid architecture in partnership with international and Syrian NGOs. International donors and aid organisations could also rapidly shift funding to Syrian NGOs with a presence in NWS as part of the localisation agenda. This could involve combined efforts between the UN-led SCHF and the AFNS to promptly transfer funding and operations to AFNS, which can operate without a UN Security Council mandate (Refugees International 15/07/2023).

ANTICIPATED DEVELOPMENTS

The cut-off of supplies through the Bab Al Hawa crossing point is unlikely to have an immediate impact, as the UN had prepositioned supplies in NWS ahead of the UN Security Council vote (AP 11/07/2023). That said, a long stalemate could mean dire consequences for Syrians in this region.

There is international pressure and intention from some members of the UN Security Council, INGOs, and local organisations to extend the mandate and resume cross-border aid delivery, including the UN Secretary General urging members to “redouble their efforts to support the continued delivery of cross-border assistance” (UN 11/07/2023 b). That said, Russia is determined to ensure that this happens strictly on the Syrian Government’s terms. A UN General Assembly meeting took place on 19 July 2023 discussing Russia’s veto of the resolution (AI 19/07/2023). Following this, despite a majority of states emphasising the importance of the resolution, Russia has remained bent on continuing to veto such resolutions and ensuring that the Syrian Government carries out any mechanism agreed upon (UN 19/07/2023).

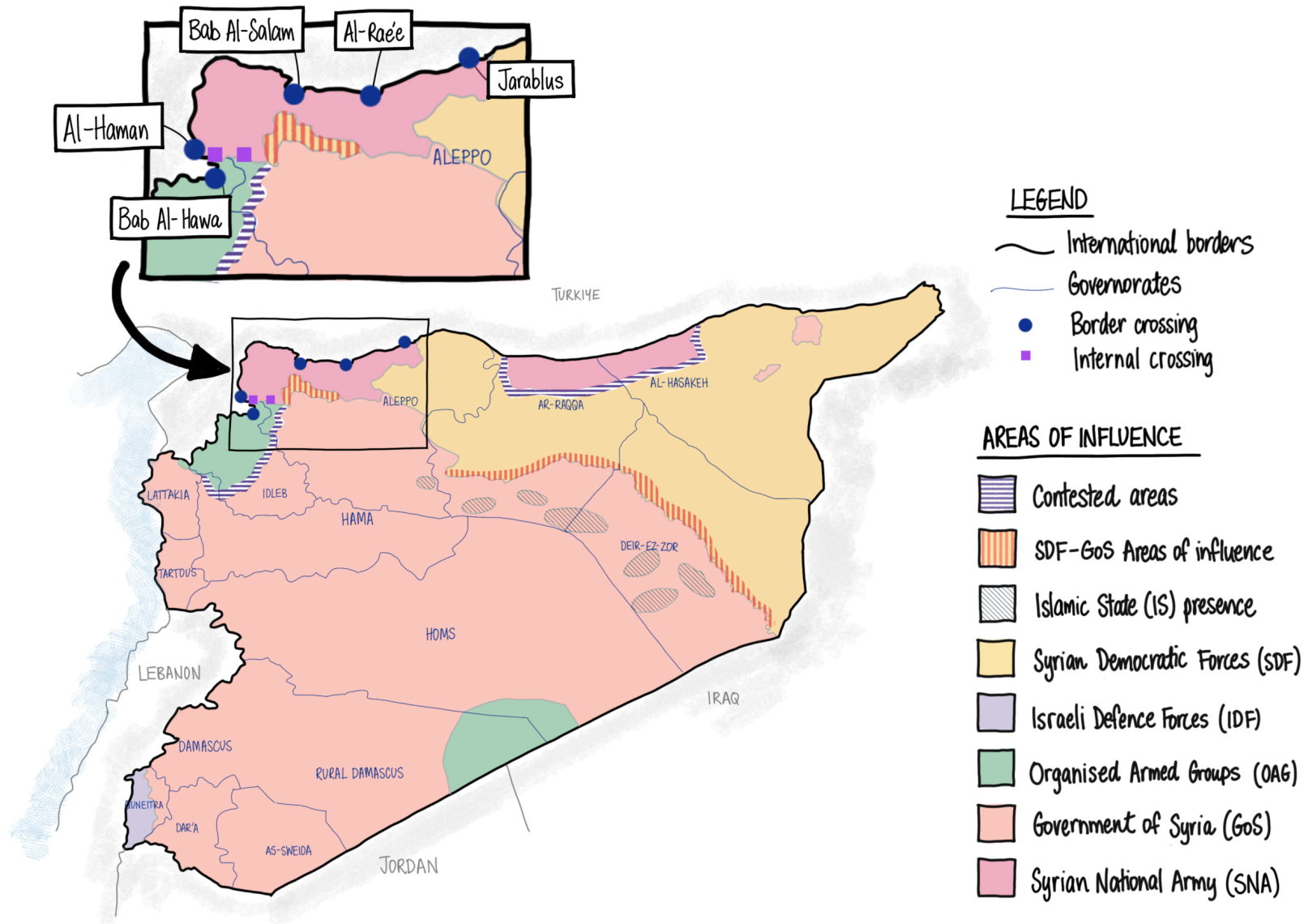
Failure to find a solution will lead to significant disruptions in the delivery of life-saving assistance (ECHO 12/07/2023). This would result in increased humanitarian needs and undermine recovery efforts from the recent earthquakes (Islamic Relief 13/07/2023). Essential goods and services will become scarce and even more expensive (The Guardian 11/07/2023). This will likely lead to an increase in the adoption of negative coping mechanisms, such as early marriage and child labour. Non-UN agencies (local and international) present in NWS will face massive challenges in responding to needs, as the UN provides 80% of food aid in this region, with over 70,000 young children relying on UN-funded nutrition programmes for their survival (CARE 11/07/2023). Public health systems are likely to face severe disruptions, as they highly rely on UN aid for medical supplies and equipment (AP 12/07/2023).

The UN has said that it would “continue to advocate for expanding all avenues to deliver humanitarian assistance to millions of people in need in north-west Syria” even though the mechanism is yet to be decided (The Guardian 11/07/2023). A spokesperson has admitted to considering the GoS proposal (UN 14/07/2023). If the UN agrees to the conditions of the GoS, it would be the end of the current cross-border mechanism, leaving aid delivery in NWS in the hands of the GoS. With Syria’s long history of politicising aid, this move could put the lives of millions of Syrians at risk. There are also concerns that the GoS will divert some of the aid for its own benefit (TNA 14/07/2023).

Information gaps and needs

The current impact of the halted delivery of aid through the Bab Al Hawa border crossing since 11 July on NWS remains unclear.

SYRIA'S AREAS OF INFLUENCE AND NORTHWEST SYRIA BORDER CROSSINGS



Source: ACAPS using data from "Northwest Syria – Areas of Influence and Border Crossings" International NGO Safety Organisation (INSO) maps, 2023