



THE DILEMMA OF HUMANITARIAN AID IN NORTHWESTERN SYRIA



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SUMMARY

With the escalation of the conflict in northern Syria, namely Idlib, international humanitarian institutions are expressing concern over delivering humanitarian aid to Syrians. According to aid and relief organizations working in Syria, the vulnerability of humanitarian access poses a direct threat to the lives of civilians. This policy brief analyzes the current state of humanitarian aid distribution operations in Syria and identifies the main problems and constraints on aid organizations. Moreover, this brief emphasizes the need to reach sustainable and realistic solutions through the involvement of all responsible actors to support humanitarian assistance operations and provide humanitarian agencies with longterm access to achieve their goals of providing relief for all civilians affected by the conflict.

INTRODUCTION

In its tenth year, the Syrian Civil War involves multiple regional and international actors, which has escalated and increased the intensity of warfare. The outcomes of this conflict constitute a massive burden on Syrian civilians. The detrimental results on Syria include civilian suffering from widespread indiscriminate violence, poverty, collapsed infrastructure, and increasing forced migration from and insecurity in the country. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the poverty rate continues to rise, reaching around 80% and leaving a population of 11.1 million in need of humanitarian assistance (Hubbard, 2020). Due to the escalating hostilities, since December 2019, UNOCHA estimated that 2.8 million of the four million people comprising the current population of Idlib and north Aleppo are entirely depending on humanitarian assistance (UN News, 2020).


Since 2011, billions of dollars have been invested in humanitarian aid for Syria. The rapid decline of the Syrian Pound, especially after the enactment of the Caesar sanctions by the United States, in addition to the economic consequences of Covid- 19, have increased the need for humanitarian aid (UNOCHA, 2020b). Humanitarian organizations expressed their concerns regarding the continuity of this aid and its reaching all civilians in the country (UNOCHA, 2020b). The concern regarding the continuity of humanitarian assistance is not limited to civilians in Syria but also Syrian refugees

in neighboring countries (German Federal Foreign Office, 2020).

The increase in Syrians' dependency on humanitarian aid paired with the increasing involvement of international actors in the conflict has contributed to the current dire situation. The flow of humanitarian aid into Syria is hindered by Russia, and to some extent China, through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Within Syria, the operational distribution process of humanitarian aid agencies is manipulated by the Syrian state and other conflict parties (Marks, 2020). Governments and non-state actors in Yemen, South Sudan, and Syria deny civilians' needs using sieges as weapons of war and hindering access to humanitarian aid to pressure their opponents (Kurtzer, 2019).

Despite the tough circumstances and the security situation, humanitarian agencies persist in trying to cover civilians' needs while the points of access have decreased continuously¹. Humanitarian operations provided civilians with 27,717 metric tons of food, shelter, hygiene, and health items (UNOCHA, 2020a). However, airstrikes from the Russian and Syrian air forces have targeted schools, medical facilities and even aid deliveries (Semaan, 2020), undermining efforts to improve the health care situation in Syria. Covid-19 has made the situation even more challenging due to a general lack of hygiene products and personal protective equipment for health workers.

1-UNOCHA stated in its report a delivery of 1,277 trucks with 1,023 accessed through Bab Al-Hawa entry point and 254 through Bab Al-Salam (UNOCHA, 2020a).



The UNSC has issued several resolutions aimed at the facilitation of unhindered humanitarian access and cross border access aid in Syria. UNSC Resolution 2533 was amended several times in the past six years enabling humanitarian operations through fewer border crossings over time (UN News, 2020). Resolution 2504, which preceded Resolution 2533, allowed crossing of humanitarian assistance for six months through Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam cross borders (UNOCHA, 2020c). As a result of the 2020 UNSC negotiations the UNSC Resolution 2533 only authorizes the continued use of Bab al-Hawa border crossing for delivering food, medicine and any other basic needs into northwest Syria for one more year (UN News, 2020). The resolution came after months of negotiations between different international actors. It gained the votes of several countries such as Germany, Belgium, United States, and the United Kingdom, whereas China, Russia, and the Dominican Republic abstained.

EXPLOITATION OF AID FOR POLITICAL GAIN

The divergence of international actors' positions on Resolution 2533 during the negotiations is a reflection of their different interests in the Syrian conflict. Russia and Iran support the Syrian regime in their offensive to regain control over Idlib. The regime and its allies are using negotiations to exploit cross-border humanitarian aid as a pressure tool by limiting access to the remaining opposition forces (Petillo & Wildangel, 2020). For example, instead of cross-border access to the Idlib enclave, Russia argued for delivering all humanitarian aid via Damascus to control the humanitarian aid delivery into Idlib (Petillo & Wildangel, 2020). During the negotiations, multiple humanitarian organizations warned against humanitarian aid deliveries via Damascus, stressing the necessity of relying rather on direct entry points into the areas outside the control of the regime (Petillo & Wildangel, 2020).

The ongoing humanitarian catastrophe in Idlib is the result of a military escalation driven by external actors' interests in Syria. Given the significant number of refugees in Turkey, it is the latter government's priority to create a stable zone in Idlib to provide a possibility of returning Syrian refugees there (Üstün, 2018). Thus, providing humanitarian aid to Idlib is in Turkey's interests. At the same time, Turkey has closed its border to Syrian refugees in order to avoid any further influx of Syrians into its territory (Üstün, 2018). Thereby worsening the situation of many civilians in that area.

During the negotiations at the UNSC, the resolutions regulating cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria were politicized by the represented governments. For example, the Russian proposal of humanitarian corridors into Aleppo in 2016 aimed to guarantee the delivery of aid and assistance to regime-affiliated groups (Lemmon, 2016). At the same time the Russian pressure to decrease the number of border crossings that can be used for international aid operations aims to undermine efforts to provide humanitarian aid to civilians in rebel strongholds. This illustrates how the Russian government which is a party to the conflict in Syria has yielded its veto power in the UNSC, linking negotiations on access to humanitarian aid to advantages for their partners on the battlefield rather than to the needs of the civilian population.

During the negotiations at the UNSC, Germany, Belgium, France and the United Kingdom worked hard to ensure that at least one border crossing into Idlib was kept open to guarantee the continuity of humanitarian assistance in areas not controlled by the Syrian regime (Aljazeera, 2020). Although a compromise, the resolution 2533 manifests a deterioration for humanitarian aid delivery into Syria as it is now limited to one border crossing. (IRC, 2020)

The limitation on humanitarian aid fits the pattern of the strategy applied by the Syrian regime throughout the conflict. The so-called "starve or surrender" policy was applied multiple times during the ongoing conflict such as in Madaya and Eastern Ghouta, where thousands of civilians were cut of any supplies or aid deliveries for months. The Center of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) criticized the regime's technique of using civilians' humanitarian needs as a tool to increase pressure on opposition actors (Kurtzer, 2019). By using such war crime strategies, such as long sieges and indiscriminate bombardment, the Syrian regime successfully gained control over some areas with

the support of Russian and Iranian forces. This strategy forced the opposition parties to surrender to regime forces. Fears of a repetition of such a scenario in Idlib increased after recent military escalations between Turkish and Syrian forces. Thus, the Russian desire to minimize the number of border crossing points that can be used for humanitarian aid agencies and shift all humanitarian aid distribution to Damascus is in line with previous efforts to starve civilians under opposition rule.

The need for humanitarian aid in Syria has been even more pronounced during the corona pandemic. Humanitarian agencies also raised health concerns in relation to an increased need for medical equipment due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Charbonneau, 2020). In June 2020, a group of organizations in Idlib collaborated to contact the UNSC concerning the Al-Yarubiah entry point. They released a collective letter that expressed the necessity to reopen Al-Yarubiah point, which should enable them to provide more humanitarian aid as the pandemic rages on. These organizations built their argument by referring to the Al-Yarubiah crossing as a lifesaving line that increases their capacity in delivering sorely needed medical supplements (Care International, 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the context of the current global health crisis, humanitarian agencies try their best to deliver aid through the remaining corridors and cover the needs of a growing number of dependent civilians in Syria. Given the volatile security situation in Syria and the dependence on UNSC negotiations and resolutions for the delivery of humanitarian aid into Syria, humanitarian organizations should try to build flexible delivery chains for humanitarian goods also around currently closed corridors in order to ramp up deliveries through alternate border crossings. UNSC Resolution 2533 and the current situation in Idlib leaves humanitarian aid agencies with the following possible avenues for action to improve their ability to deliver much needed aid to the suffering Syrian population.

- First, states willing to improve the situation must highlight the urgency of the current situation in Idlib, especially in light of the current pandemic. The huge need for medical supplies and equipment should be at the center of their call for opening further border crossings into Syria. In this context, human rights and humanitarian organizations in Idlib and their reports on the situation, play an important role in lobbying governments in the UNSC to pressure Russia to allow further entry points for aid delivery into Syria. The increasing number of Covid-19 cases in Idlib and all of Syria might incite action. In a recent report, Save the Children highlighted how the reduction of cross border aid entry points affects their work and is a hindrance to the reception of aid for millions of civilians in Idlib: “The Security Council must stop playing politics and put children’s lives first. We call on the Security Council to urgently re-convene to scale up cross-border humanitarian assistance children in Syria.” (Save the Children 2020).
- Second, the risk that the remaining entry point Bab Al-Hawa could be closed due to an escalation of fighting pertains (BBC News, 2020b). Humanitarian organizations should thus aim to avoid focusing all their efforts on just one border crossing and should seek the permission from the UNSC to use other border crossings (Lynch & Gramer, 2020). For donors and humanitarian organizations it remains paramount to push for the permission to use additional border crossings, such as Al-Yarubiya, for the delivery of humanitarian aid into Syria.
- Third, it is crucial for humanitarian agencies and human rights NGOs to ramp up advocacy efforts and initiatives long before the expiration of UNSC Resolution 2533 in July 2021. However, searching for an alternative solution — beyond the UNSC Resolution — is another avenue for advocacy and research. An alternative to the now tarnished UNSC agreement may be necessary. This calls for targeting sympathetic governments that support an initiative to open more border crossings for humanitarian aid deliveries, even if this means violating the UNSC resolution.
- Fourth, advocacy and research groups should continue to highlight the need for more entry points to humanitarian organizations working to support the Syrian population in the current pandemic and

advocate for reopening closed entry points. In addition, legal possibilities to provide aid to Syrians in Syria beyond the strict mandate of a UNSC Resolution should be explored, and sympathetic governments should be encouraged to consider such options. Advocacy and aid organizations should continue to highlight the problems of renewing resolutions and the inherent potential for political blackmail. In this regard, it has to be emphasized that Syria should serve as a negative example for future UNSC engagement in ongoing conflicts. Without the need for a UNSC Resolution, aid organizations would gain more control over distribution.

- Fifth, as the holder of the European Union's presidency, Germany in cooperation with the other European countries, must seek reconciliation with Turkey to avoid any further military escalation in the Idlib area from Turkey. Also, European countries should prepare to increase pressure on Russia in case it reignites fighting in Idlib by way of targeted economic sanctions. After the poisoning of opposition activist Navalny with the nerve agent Novichok the German government is already debating the fate of the joint German-Russian gas pipeline project Nordstream 2. Using the participation in this important economic project as a pressure card against the Russian government for targeting schools and hospitals in Syria may increase the costs for Russia's military involvement in Syria. Also, Germany can collaborate with other EU governments in pressuring Russia by imposing conditions on future European-Russian projects and agreements. European sanctions against Russian military personnel involved in war crimes or crimes against humanity in Syria could provide another avenue to increase the pressure on Moscow. At the same time, the EU should continue

- Finally, international donors should establish a joined monitoring and evaluation system assessing their local partner organizations and the struggles they face in order to allow for more streamlined support efforts and avoid doubling of structures and services.

to cooperate with other international donors to reach a long-term commitment from the Russian side to provide stable access points for the delivery of humanitarian aid into Syria leading to the pending renewal of resolution 2533 in July 2021. Such a commitment by the Russian side could be met with the easing of already established sanctions against Russia.

- Sixth, international and civil society organizations must help local Syrian partners to improve their transparency and accountability as part of their capacity-building efforts. Having empowered partners in Idlib would result in multiple benefits for the population. On one hand, it could weaken the Russian argument that Damascus is the only viable route for humanitarian aid due to the lack of capacity of local organizations in the Idlib area. On the other hand, these empowered local partners could implement activities independently in the case of any escalation that could hinder the access of international relief organizations in that area. Capacity building initiatives for local partners should focus on three main steps. First, international organizations should conduct an assessment of local partner's capabilities and address their key challenges and needs. Based on the outcomes of this assessment, comprehensive training programs should be provided to selected local staff that focus on different areas such as financial management, human resources, procurement, security and emergency planning and project management. Further, mentorship programs should be provided using online tools. Donors should also aim to connect local humanitarian organizations, enabling them to establish a network empowering their voices.

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