

Special Briefing with Jeffrey Prescott, Deputy to the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations

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Moderator: Great, thank you. Greetings to everyone from the U.S. Department of State's Dubai Regional Media Hub. Sorry we're starting a little bit late. We have lots of folks calling in from all over the world to hear this conversation today, and so we just wanted to make sure we gave time to everyone to get on the line. So with that, I would like to welcome our participants dialing in from the Middle East and around the world for this on-the-record briefing with Jeffrey Prescott, Deputy to the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations.

Deputy Prescott will discuss the United Nations Security Council's adoption of a resolution renewing Syria cross-border humanitarian access, and then he will take questions from participating journalists.

We are pleased to offer simultaneous interpretation for this briefing in Arabic. We request that everyone keep this in mind and speak slowly.

I'll now turn it over to Deputy Prescott for his opening remarks. Sir, the floor is yours.

Mr. Prescott: Thanks so much and thanks, everybody, for joining the call today. Yesterday the UN Security Council unanimously voted on a resolution that would keep vital humanitarian aid flowing into Syria, into Idlib, through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for another year. This humanitarian agreement will literally save lives.

What does this mean? Many Syrian parents will not have to worry about their children starving to death in the coming weeks. Famine has always been a real possibility were this crossing to close. Food and clean water will continue to reach displaced Syrians in need, and vaccines in this moment of pandemic can continue to go across the border, which will help the region recover from COVID-19. Courageous UN frontline and NGO workers can now make plans to secure their procurements and deliver necessary aid through this literal lifeline in the weeks and months to come.

This humanitarian agreement was possible thanks to the strong leadership of the co-penholders at the UN Security Council, Ireland and Norway, who worked tirelessly over the last year to help preserve this crossing, and thanks to all of our colleagues aligning on this issue in the Security Council. The result was a 15-0 unanimous Security Council resolution that was passed yesterday. And above all, this result was possible because of the work the United States and Russia were able to do together diplomatically to forge an agreement that meets the dire humanitarian needs of the Syrian people.

Of course, there's a lot of additional work that we need to do. We've urged the Security Council – and the United States will continue to push – to expand humanitarian access so that everyone in need can get the assistance that they desperately need. But this humanitarian initiative is a critical starting point, and our aim is to build on it in the months to come.

With this humanitarian agreement, the Security Council has shown that it can deliver for people in need; it can do so unanimously; and going forward, we hope to continue in this spirit to work diplomatically to achieve additional common goals and to further peace, security, and prosperity for all.

So we have a huge agenda at the Security Council. There's a huge humanitarian agenda when it comes to Syria and this Security Council resolution and this unanimous result yesterday, and the hard work of diplomacy that went into bringing it about is really what the Security Council should be all about.

So why don't I stop there and let's get into the conversation. I'm happy to take some questions. Thank you.

Moderator: Great. Thank you, sir. We will now begin the question and answer portion of today's call. Questions submitted in advance have been incorporated into the queue. And our first question is one of those pre-submitted questions, and it comes from Ahmad Zakaria from Syria24 news outlet, and he asks: "Why did the UN Security Council resolution only focus on the Bab al-Hawa crossing and did not also include the Yaroubia crossing with Iraq or other crossings?" Over to you, sir.

Mr. Prescott: Thanks, and that's a very important question. I guess I would just step back and provide a little context into how this Security Council resolution came about, and at least for the Biden-Harris administration, it goes back to when we came into office in January. At that time, we saw immediately that the humanitarian needs in Syria had dramatically increased over the last few years. We've seen, obviously, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which everyone is facing in common, but obviously has a tremendous impact in areas that are also suffering conflict. You've got drought conditions in some parts of Syria. You've got the impacts of the economic crisis, including the impact of the economic challenges in Lebanon that also have an impact in Syria as well. And you, of course, have the threat and the increased risk of famine that many humanitarian organizations have been pointing to.

But when we came into office, we also discovered that the number of crossings, as you know, had gone down from four to one, and that this last remaining crossing was just going to – was going to expire in just a few months. And so aid was being constricted right at the time where need was going up. You also had at least some members of the Security Council, especially Russia, had been very clear for months that they intended to veto and to eliminate this final crossing.

So the question that we have been facing and working on over the last few months is how can we keep this last remaining crossing open, how can we keep this critical humanitarian assistance flowing to millions of Syrians in need, and that's what we focused on in this resolution. We were able to secure the continuation of this crossing for another year, which will enable this critical humanitarian assistance to continue to flow.

Now, of course, the United States supports expanding the number of crossings. We'd like to see the number of crossings increase. I think there – and when it comes to Yaroubia, I think there are opportunities – there could be opportunities to do that down the road. We'd like to see diplomatic efforts to expand access to additional crossings for critical humanitarian assistance, especially as the urgency of COVID-19 relief and the ability of vaccines to flow into Syria is quite acute.

So we're going to continue to work diplomatically to continue to have humanitarian assistance flow and, hopefully, to expand the availability of that assistance to all of those who are in need in Syria.

Moderator: Great. Thank you, sir. Our next question is from the live queue and goes to Ibtisam Azem from Al-Araby al-Jadeed newspaper. Operator, please open the line.

Question: Thank you. Can you hear me?

Mr. Prescott: Yes.

Question: Okay, thank you. Ibtisam Azem from Al-Araby al-Jadeed newspaper, correspondent at UN-New York. So my question is about the SG report. Could you say more about that? Because he usually has made reports about the humanitarian operation in Syria. What's the difference now? And then, you talked about expand – a follow-up regarding what you said before regarding expanding the aid to move – the cross-border. We see that the Russians – and yesterday the Russian ambassador during the meeting also talked about that his country wants to expand the cross-line operations and they want to get to a point where there is only cross-line aid operations and not a cross-border. Could you comment on that? Thank you.

Mr. Prescott: Sure, thanks. And you're absolutely right. The resolution, as prior resolutions on this topic, have – as prior resolutions have done as well, the resolution requires the Secretary-General to make a report – I think it's every two months – on the status of the humanitarian operations, humanitarian assistance through the mechanism that this resolution sets up.

What's different in this resolution is that the continuation, the full year of continued assistance across this critical humanitarian cross-border operation, that the continuation of that assistance depends on the issuance of that regular report from the Secretary-General with some detail about how those operations are going and some focus on the relationship between how that operation is working and how aid is getting to other parts of Syria as well. And we feel that this resolution not only extends this vital lifeline for another year, which is very clear in the text, but also is completely consistent with U.S.

policy towards Syria and will help reinforce our efforts to make sure that critical humanitarian assistance is flowing through all modalities to people in need all across Syria.

So our view remains the same, that cross-line assistance alone cannot meet existing humanitarian needs, which is why extending this mandated Bab al-Hawa for another year has been and is so important. But the United States, which remains the leading donor globally of humanitarian assistance to the people of Syria, we provide humanitarian assistance through all modalities, and that includes cross-line and cross-border, and we maximize the level of assistance that Syrians across Syria who are in need can receive that assistance.

So what we focus on in this resolution – you’ll see that there’s some language encouraging additional efforts to provide humanitarian assistance through all modalities, including cross-line. That’s something that we support. That’s something we think there can be additional efforts in the coming months to expand, and we’ll look forward to working with humanitarian partners – the NGO partners, the UN agencies that we work with already – to continue to work to make sure that humanitarian assistance are getting to all Syrians in need.

Moderator: Great. Thank you, sir. Our next question is a pre-submitted question from Murad Abduljalil from Orient TV, and he asks: “Did Russia get something in return for allowing this resolution to pass? For example, is the U.S. going to ease sanctions on the Syrian regime?” Over to you, sir.

Mr. Prescott: Thanks. Well, it’s a very good question. I mean, I think the resolution in many ways speaks for itself. It was a unanimous resolution of the Security Council, and as I just mentioned, it’s fully consistent with our approach to providing critical humanitarian assistance to people in need in Syria. I do think it’s a good example of what the Security Council can achieve when it works together to meet urgent humanitarian needs and for the greater good. We think there’s more work that needs to be done. There’s also no question that this was a result of some very important diplomacy that Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, that other members of our team, and of course President Biden raised with President Putin in their conversation in Geneva. Of course, they had a phone call yesterday and were able to thank our teams for the diplomacy that went into this arrangement as well.

I would stress this is a humanitarian agreement. We think there’s an opportunity for continued work to meet the urgent humanitarian needs for the people of Syria, and that this is a foundation of a potential humanitarian initiative to better meet those needs. And that’s what the focus of the conversation has been diplomatically between the U.S. and Russia and between the U.S. and other members of the Security Council. So this is a real achievement, demonstrating what patient and quiet diplomacy can do to keep an urgently needed humanitarian – to keep urgent humanitarian assistance flowing through this critical border crossing. So we think there’s a real opportunity to continue to work to

expand humanitarian assistance through all modalities. There's some references to that in the Security Council resolution, and that was the focus of the diplomacy that went into achieving this result.

Moderator: Great. Thank you, sir. Our next question is from the live queue and comes from Reema Abuhamdiya from Al Araby TV. Operator, please open the line.

Question: Hello, can you hear me?

Mr. Prescott: Yes.

Question: Thank you for doing this. I wanted to ask about one thing that the Russian ambassador said during the session, which is that Russia is looking at replacing this mechanism with a different one that would be led by the Syrian regime. What kind of mechanism would the U.S. be willing to accept after this mechanism expires? And the Russians are not looking at the whole year, they're looking at six months from now. Thank you.

Mr. Prescott: Thank you for the question. So I guess I would just – I would say a couple of things. First of all, the U.S. continues to believe that we need to provide assistance to Syrians in need all across Syria, through all modalities. That's what we're focused on and that's why extending this border crossing was so essential and why we are pleased that we were able to extend this for another year. We also support providing assistance through all modalities, and this humanitarian agreement is just about the ability to expand the provision of assistance across all modalities. So this border crossing will continue. There's also an opportunity to continue to work on assistance through other modalities, including cross-line assistance, and that's what we're going to be focused on in the months ahead.

In some ways, for the United States the provision of humanitarian assistance is very basic. We work with implementing partners, we work with UN experts and NGOs on the ground who know this stuff, are expert in this stuff, and they can tell us where are the areas of need, what are the modalities that are working, what's been effective at providing assistance to those in need, and how can we continue to work with those partners to make sure that we're meeting urgent humanitarian needs – that we're addressing, frankly, the expanding need that comes from the impact of the economic crisis, of the pandemic, certainly the impact of the pandemic in Syria, of drought conditions, of other changes over the last year that have made the humanitarian situation more acute. So that's what we're going to be working on.

There's no question that Russia's position over the last year has been consistent. They have been looking to end the cross-border mechanism. They've said they're willing to use their veto at the Security Council to do so. They've said that they would like to get rid of that cross-border modality and focus all humanitarian assistance through Damascus. We've also been very clear that we don't think that's sufficient to meet the need. And we don't think that's sufficient to provide assistance to all of those in need in all parts of Syria. So that was the nature of the diplomatic debate. The expectation had been that

Russia would use its veto to end this mechanism and close down this crossing, and what we've been able to achieve through the diplomatic effort of Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield, of our colleagues across the U.S. Government, of our colleagues and other members of the Security Council, is an agreement – a unanimous agreement – to continue that critical cross-border assistance for another year and also to work collectively on a humanitarian arrangement to expand humanitarian assistance across all modalities. So that's what we hope to work on in the months to come.

Moderator: Great. Thank you, sir. We have time for just one or two more questions. Let's go for the next question to the live queue, to James Bays from Aljazeera. Operator, please open the line.

Question: Good morning. Thank you for doing this, Jeff. James Bays, Aljazeera. One quick clarification, then a question. You keep saying that it's clear that this is 12 months. I'm sorry to tell you that two other permanent representatives of other Security Council delegations say that that is not clear and they believe a vote is needed in January, so could you please answer that?

And my actual question: You're very positive about the role of Russia here, and I assume that's to try and get more momentum and goodwill so that you can work together in the future. But isn't Russia being praised for simply agreeing to the bare minimum on this occasion?

Mr. Prescott: Well, thanks for that. On the first question, it's very clear this crossing has been renewed for another year. The text of the resolution makes clear that the initial six-month authorization will extend for an additional six months once the UN Secretary-General issues his report. That means, importantly, there is no need for a vote in January, in the dead of winter, and that was a key diplomatic outcome that we were hoping to achieve and that we have achieved through this resolution. So we're very confident that this crossing will continue to be available to the UN for providing this urgent humanitarian assistance for the next year, and we're happy with that outcome.

On your second question, I guess I would just step back and say a couple of things. First, of course, Russia is a permanent member of the UN Security Council, has a veto on the council, and Russia's position has been quite clear for the last year. We came into office in January; at that point there had been four crossings open and it had been whittled down to one that was going to expire in just a few months. And so the question for us was: is there a way to keep the last remaining crossing open? Is there a way to ensure that our NGO partners, that UN partners who are working on providing this assistance would have a sufficient timeline to be able to make their logistical and procurement arrangements to continue to provide this lifesaving need in the months to come, and certainly for the next year, if possible.

So that's the outcome that we were seeking to achieve through this negotiation. We knew that would be a very tough negotiation because Russia's position has been – as I said, has been very clear. You can see public statements, very frequent public statements over the last year that they're interested in closing down this mechanism and were willing to use

their veto to do so. So we're pleased that we were able to work diplomatically with Russia to keep this crossing open and to expand the number of – expand the opportunities to work together with Russia, with other members of the council to increase the opportunities for humanitarian assistance to reach Syrians in need across all modalities, and to keep the focus on what this issue should be all about, which is making sure that those desperate for assistance, lifesaving assistance, can continue to receive that assistance. And that's what we think we've achieved here.

Moderator: Great. Thank you, sir. Our last question today will go to Monalisa Freiha from Annahar newspaper. Operator, please open the line.

Question: Hello and thank you for this. A follow-up for you. Do you really consider this agreement a turning point in the relation between Washington and Moscow? And what could mean – what could it mean for cooperation in Syria?

Mr. Prescott: Well, thank you. I think that's a – it's exactly the right question. I think we're very – we're pleased with the work that the United States and Russia were able to do diplomatically together to forge this agreement, to help meet the dire humanitarian needs of the Syrian people. The President had a chance to speak to President Putin yesterday and they both welcomed the efforts by our teams to reach this agreement and to be able to provide the continuation of this critical assistance in the year to come. That's obviously been a priority for the United States, and I think it's a positive sign and positive signal that we were able to work together.

Now, obviously, there are a whole host of other issues where we have disagreements with Russia, and the President and Putin were discussing some of those issues in their call yesterday, as the readout makes clear. But this is a positive outcome; it's a good example of what diplomatic efforts between the United States and Russia can achieve. So we're pleased with that and we're looking to build on that in the months to come. So again, I think this has been – we've been focused on this issue in the Security Council, on reaching a humanitarian agreement to keep this lifesaving aid flowing. The council was able to come together and unanimously do that, and that is a good foundation for work on providing humanitarian assistance in Syria, which we want to expand on in the months to come, but also a good signal for the possibility of cooperation in the Security Council to address a whole range of other critical humanitarian and other efforts to try to bring peace and security to conflicts and other challenges around the world.

So we'll look to build on this if possible, and that's what we'll be focused on in New York in the months to come.

Moderator: Great. Thank you, sir. Now I'll turn it back over to you, Deputy Prescott, if you have any closing remarks.

Mr. Prescott: No, I'll stop there. I just really appreciate folks taking the time and for the questions, and of course we're always available if there are any follow-ups or you want to take this further in the days to come. So thanks so much.

Moderator: That concludes today's call. I would like to thank Jeffrey Prescott, the Deputy to the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, for joining us, and thank all of our callers for participating. If you have any questions about today's call, you can contact the Dubai Regional Media Hub at DubaiMediaHub@state.gov. Information on how to access the English recording of this call will be provided by AT&T shortly. Thank you and have a great day.