



What's In Blue

Syria: Vote on Competing Humanitarian Draft Resolutions*

This afternoon (10 January) the Security Council will vote on two draft resolutions authorising cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access in Syria: the first produced by Belgium and Germany (the humanitarian co-penholders) and the second by Russia. There has also been talk of a possible third draft resolution, which could either authorise a two-week technical rollover of the current arrangements or present compromise language.

The UN cross-border aid delivery mechanism was established in [resolution 2165](#) (2014) and its mandate was renewed most recently until 10 January 2020 in [resolution 2449](#) of 13 December 2018. On 20 December 2019, the Council failed to renew the authorisation for the mechanism, as two competing draft resolutions—one tabled by Belgium, Germany and Kuwait and the second by Russia—were vetoed and received an insufficient number of affirmative votes, respectively.

The co-penholder draft text put in blue ahead of today's vote would re-authorise three of the four border crossings (Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa on the Turkey/Syria border and Al Yarubiyah on the Iraq/Syria border) that had been mandated by previous humanitarian resolutions for a period of six months, until 10 July. It does not re-authorise use of the al-Ramtha crossing on the Syria/Jordan border. The draft further requests the Secretary-General to conduct within six months an independent written review of UN humanitarian cross-border and cross-line operations, including on the need to re-authorise the use of the al-Ramtha crossing. The text remains the same as the co-penholder [draft resolution](#) tabled on 20 December 2019, with the only difference being the duration of the mandate, as the previous draft resolution called for an extension of the mandate for “six months, followed by an additional period of six months, unless the Council decides otherwise”. The 20 December 2019 co-penholder draft resolution received 13 affirmative votes but was vetoed by China and Russia. It appears likely that Russia will veto the new penholder draft, having made clear that it will only accept a re-authorisation of Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa. However, it is less clear if China will join Russia in a veto of this draft.

The text of the Russian draft in blue is almost identical to the Russian [draft resolution](#) put to a vote on 20 December. It would re-authorise only two of the four existing border crossings (Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa) for a period of six months, until 10 July, while excluding re-authorisation for use of the al-Ramtha and the Al Yarubiyah crossings. During the 20 December 2019 vote, the Russian draft resolution failed to be adopted due to an insufficient number of affirmative votes, as only five members (China, Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Russia, and

South Africa) supported it. The new composition of the Council has raised the question of how many votes the Russian draft could garner this time, as the incoming Council members have yet to publicly express their position on this issue.

If a resolution fails to be adopted today, the UN has indicated that the mandate of the UN cross-border aid delivery mechanism in Syria will expire at 11:59 EST on 10 January. Secretary-General António Guterres has stressed to relevant stakeholders that in such an eventuality, the UN border operation in Syria will immediately cease and close. A new resolution providing authorisation for the mechanism would be needed for it to operate again.

Negotiations on the Authorisation for Cross-border/Cross-line Aid Delivery

After the 20 December vote, there were strenuous attempts to reach an agreement on the cross-border aid mechanism in Syria before its 10 January expiry. Belgium, Germany and Kuwait continued to engage with members of the P5, both in New York and in capitals, with the hope of tabling a new draft by the end of 2019. This push was motivated in part by concerns over the possibility that the new composition of the Council might make it even more difficult for the mechanism to be renewed. However, efforts to put a draft resolution in blue by the end of 2019 did not succeed and negotiations continued into 2020.

Throughout the process, the main points of contention have been the number of border crossings that should remain open and the duration of the mechanism. Russia maintained that the Al Yarubiyah crossing should not be part of the aid mechanism, while the P3 and several members of the E10, along with several UN agencies, held that Al Yarubiyah must remain open and cited the importance of the medical aid and supplies which come through the Iraq/Syria border. These Council members were willing to accept a shorter mandate for the mechanism in order to keep all three crossings open, but this was still unacceptable to Russia.

It seems that OCHA has stressed to Council members the importance of maintaining the Al Yarubiyah crossing. According to OCHA figures, 40 percent of health supplies entering north-east Syria come through Al Yarubiyah. Furthermore, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that if the crossing closes 1.4 million people will be affected. WHO warns that in such a scenario, 50 percent of the health system facilities in north-east Syria will cease to function within three months. During the negotiation process, several other cross-border crossings were suggested as alternatives to Al Yarubiyah, including the Tal Abyad crossing on the Turkey/Syria border, which Turkey had previously proposed to add as a fifth crossing for the mechanism. However, OCHA maintained that these options were not viable alternatives to Al Yarubiyah since they would not easily allow for the sustained delivery of medical supplies into Syria.

The negotiations have been taking place against the backdrop of an increase in hostilities in north-west Syria, with an upsurge in aerial bombings in Idlib leading to the displacement of approximately 300,000 people since 12 December 2019. On 3 January 2020, the Council was briefed by Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Mark Lowcock and Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo in closed consultations on developments in Idlib. At the meeting, a number of Council members referred to the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Idlib to illustrate the urgent need to find a compromise on the resolution to renew the cross-border aid mechanism

before its expiry. It seems that Lowcock underlined that if the mechanism is not re-authorised by 10 January, the UN will not be able to deliver food and life-saving aid to those in need.

In the last week, the P5 have met at least four times to seek a compromise on the renewal of the aid mechanism. During these meetings, the main point of disagreement remained the question of the Al Yarubiyah crossing. It seems that the P3 were unwilling to give up Al Yarubiyah but tested the idea of having that border open for only six months. By 8 January, it appears that with no compromise in sight, the discussions focused on the possibility of agreeing on a technical rollover of the resolution, which would have kept the four original crossings, as mandated in resolution 2449, open for an additional two weeks. Such an outcome would have allowed Council members to continue negotiating a formula for the mandate's renewal. However, Russia made clear that it would not agree to a technical rollover of the mandate or any draft text that included the Al Yarubiyah crossing. By 9 January, with the P5 unable to reach agreement on the modalities of the mechanism's renewal, a draft resolution was put in blue by the humanitarian co-penholders, after which Russia put its draft resolution in blue.

***Post-Script (13 January 2020):** On the day of the vote (10 January), the co-penholder draft resolution was revised to allow for the re-authorisation of two of the four border crossings (Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa) for a period of six months. The draft was adopted as resolution 2504 by a vote of 11 in favour, to none against, with 4 abstentions (China, Russian Federation, United Kingdom, United States). This resolution excludes re-authorisation for use of the al-Ramtha and the Al Yarubiyah crossings, thus constituting a departure from the co-penholder draft resolution that was put in blue on 9 January which included the latter crossing. The resolution further requests the Secretary-General to report to the Security Council on the feasibility of using alternative modalities for Al Yarubiyah by the end of February 2020. During the vote, Russia proposed an oral amendment to the co-penholder draft which referenced the “guiding principles of humanitarian emergency assistance”, as contained in General Assembly resolution 46/182. The oral amendment failed to be adopted due to insufficient votes, as only three Council members (China, Russia and Viet Nam) voted in favour.

Tags: [Insights on Middle East, Syria](#)