



What's In Blue

Syria: Vote on Cross-Border Humanitarian Access Draft Resolutions*

Tomorrow (9 July), the Security Council is scheduled to vote on renewing the mandate of the cross-border humanitarian aid delivery mechanism to Syria authorised under [resolution 2533](#) of 11 July 2020. At the time of writing, it appears that Council members will be voting on two draft resolutions which were put in blue today (8 July). One of the draft resolutions, which was tabled by Ireland and Norway, the co-penholders on Syria's humanitarian file, would authorise UN agencies and humanitarian partners to continue to utilise the Bab al-Hawa crossing on the Syrian-Turkish border for an additional 12 months, until 10 July 2022. The second draft resolution, put in blue by the Russian Federation, would authorise the Bab al-Hawa crossing for six months, until 10 January 2022, and calls for a series of significant changes to the mechanism's current mandate. At the time of writing, the outcome of the votes remains uncertain, and it is unclear whether Council members are working on a compromise text.

Background

The UN cross-border aid delivery mechanism was established by [resolution 2165](#), which was unanimously adopted on 14 July 2014. It authorised UN agencies and humanitarian partners, with notification to the Syrian authorities, to use the border crossings at Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salam on the Syrian-Turkish border; Al Yarubiyah on the Syrian-Iraqi border; and Al-Ramtha on the Syrian-Jordanian border to “ensure that assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, reached people in need throughout Syria through the most direct routes”. The mechanism was subsequently renewed annually by unanimous vote for several years. However, beginning with resolution 2393 in December 2017, consensus began to unravel, with China and Russia (joined by then-Council member Bolivia) abstaining on the mechanism's renewal. These permanent members abstained again on resolution 2449 in December 2018, which extended the mechanism for another year.

The Council renewed the mechanism, but only for six months rather than one year, when it adopted [resolution 2504](#) on 10 January 2020 by a vote of 11 in favour, none against, and four abstentions (including China and Russia). This renewal re-authorised only two of the four crossings, Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa, while removing the al-Ramtha and the Al Yarubiyah crossings. This adoption followed several weeks of difficult negotiations, including failed attempts to re-authorise the mechanism on 20 December 2019, as two competing draft resolutions—one tabled by co-penholders Belgium, Germany and Kuwait and the other by Russia—were vetoed and received an insufficient number of affirmative votes, respectively.

The adoption of resolution 2533 in July 2020 saw similar challenging dynamics: while the Council succeeded in adopting resolution 2533 on 11 July (with China, Russia and the Dominican Republic abstaining), it came after a week of acrimonious negotiations, four failed draft resolutions and resulted in the Council re-authorising the single border crossing at Bab al-Hawa.

Negotiations

The co-penholders circulated a zero draft of their resolution on 25 June and one round of in-person negotiations among Council experts took place on 30 June. The co-penholders' zero draft was apparently nearly identical to resolution 2533 of 2020, but included the re-authorisation of the Al Yarubiyah border crossing.

It seems that during the 30 June negotiations, the P3 (France, the UK and the US), along with Estonia, reiterated their position that the draft resolution should authorise three border crossings (Bab al-Hawa, Al Yarubiyah and Bab al-Salam) for a period of 12 months. At the same meeting, China, India and Russia apparently raised concerns that the zero draft did not reference the need for increased cross-line deliveries (that is, aid that crosses a domestic frontline from Syrian government-held areas into areas outside government control) and the adverse effects of unilateral sanctions on the humanitarian situation.

Russia had made clear earlier that day (30 June) that it would not countenance an expansion of the cross-border mechanism. Speaking to the press, Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia (Russia) told reporters that "reopening the closed cross-border points [is] really a non-starter" and that "we have to ensure stable deliveries from the cross-line, from inside of Syria". On the same day, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking after a meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, said that the co-penholders' proposed text "completely disregards" a number of issues that Russia argues have led to the dire humanitarian situation in Syria, which included sanctions and some Council members' "refusal to ensure the delivery of international organisations' humanitarian aid through Damascus and the contact line". It seems that the first round of negotiations ended without any changes being made to the zero draft.

While Council-wide negotiations began on 30 June, separate bilateral discussions between Russia and the US on the cross-border mechanism had already begun and have continued thereafter. In the run-up to the 30 June negotiations, most Council members maintained that the discussions between Russia and the US would be pivotal to finding a solution that would allow a re-authorisation of the cross-border mechanism. There have been some indications that the Russia-US bilateral talks could bear fruit: during the 16 June summit between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin, the two discussed humanitarian access in Syria, with one US official subsequently stating that there was "scope for the US and Russia to work together on a positive outcome so that [a] resolution gets passed". On 2 July, a meeting took place between Russian Special Presidential Envoy on Syrian Reconciliation Alexander Lavrentiev and US National Security Council Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa Brett McGurk. While the meeting was reportedly held in a cooperative spirit and the cross-border mechanism was discussed, no agreement was reached. Russia and Turkey have also reportedly held a series of bilateral talks on the facilitation of cross-line deliveries.

On 6 July, the co-penholders placed a draft text under silence until 7 July at noon. China apparently broke silence, arguing that it could not accept an additional border crossing and that the text should include language on the expansion of cross-line deliveries and the adverse effects of unilateral sanctions. The text, it argued, also failed to address concerns China has regarding the transparency of the mechanism. This was largely in line with the position expressed by China's permanent representative to the UN, Zhang Jun, during a 6 July press encounter, in which he noted that China wanted to see an extension of the cross-border mechanism, but also the "tackling of unilateral sanctions".

The co-penholders subsequently removed the language in their draft resolution re-authorising the Al Yarubiyah crossing, but made no further textual changes. They then placed the updated draft under silence yesterday (7 July) until today (8 July) at 10 am. It appears that China maintained its position from the previous day, that its concerns had not been addressed in the text. Despite this, the co-penholders decided to put the draft text in blue during the afternoon of 8 July, with the vote scheduled for 9 July.

It seems that Russia has not engaged on the co-penholders' zero draft, nor on the updated text that they have put in blue. Ambassador Nebenzia did not attend the Council's closed consultations on the humanitarian situation in Syria on 6 July (Russia was represented by its deputy permanent representative), and Russia did not send a representative to the negotiations on the draft text organised by the co-penholders later that afternoon. During the Council's closed consultations, Russia's deputy permanent representative apparently argued that in the year since the Council adopted resolution 2533, the Council had taken no action to address the impact of unilateral sanctions on the humanitarian situation in Syria, nor had there been any progress in facilitating cross-line deliveries.

Shortly after the co-penholders put their text in blue on 8 July, Russia circulated and put in blue a rival draft text, which differed significantly from the co-penholders' draft. The Russian draft text apparently called for the authorisation of the Bab al-Hawa crossing for only six months, with the "anticipation of renewal subject to the Secretary General's report on transparency in operations and progress on cross-line access", thereby, it seems, making any future renewal of the cross-border mechanism conditional upon the evolution of cross-line deliveries. The draft text apparently refers to several other issues that China, Russia, and several other Council members have been raising regarding the cross-border mechanism. For example, it encourages "efforts to improve cross-line delivery of humanitarian assistance" and requests the Secretary-General to include in his regular reporting to the Council overall trends in "UN cross-line operations, in particular on the implementation of... activities on improving all modalities of humanitarian deliveries inside Syria".

The Russian draft text also apparently raises the issue of "early recovery projects" that support services such as provision of water, sanitation, health, education, and shelter, welcoming "all efforts and initiatives to broaden the humanitarian activities in Syria, including...early recovery projects" and requesting the Secretary-General also to report on the implementation of early recovery projects. Some Council members argue that the funds that would be used for these projects are a precursor to reconstruction funds, an area where there have been stark differences in the Council. A 5 May Group of Seven (G7) ministerial [statement](#), for instance, noted that "only when a credible political process is firmly under way would [the G7] consider assisting with the reconstruction of Syria". The Russian draft text appears to omit any reference to sanctions. In addition, it apparently references the COVID-19 pandemic, noting the need to facilitate equitable access to the COVID-19 vaccine across Syria and address the needs of the Syrian people because of the pandemic's socio-economic effects.

***Post-script:** The Security Council unanimously adopted [resolution 2585](#) on 9 July. Resolution 2585 was a compromise text that emerged after Council members held closed consultations during the morning of 9 July. The text was tabled by Ireland, Norway, Russia and the US. Resolution 2585, among other things, calls for the renewal of the Bab al-Hawa border crossing for a period of six months, until 10 January 2022, with an extension of an additional six months until 10 July 2022 “subject to the issuance of the Secretary General’s substantive report, with particular focus on transparency in operations, and progress on cross-line access in meeting humanitarian needs”.

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