

Syria: Vote on Cross Border Humanitarian Access Draft Resolution

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What's In Blue

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This afternoon (7 July) the Security Council will announce the results of a vote on a draft resolution authorising cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access in Syria. Under an agreement reached on 27 March, due to the COVID-19 pandemic Council members submit their votes to the Security Council Affairs Division through written adoption procedures. Voting on the draft in blue began yesterday (6 July) at 16:30 and was set to close today at 16:30. The announcement of the results is expected at 17:30. The negotiations have been difficult, and it is unclear what the outcome of the vote will be.

The UN cross-border aid delivery mechanism was established by [resolution 2165](#) (2014), and its mandate was renewed most recently until 10 July 2020 in [resolution 2504](#) of 10 January. That renewal came after the Council failed to re-authorise the mechanism on 20 December 2019, 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. On 10 January, the Council re-authorised two border crossings (Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa on the Syria/Turkey border) for six months but did not re-authorise the al-Ramtha (Syria/Jordan border) and the Al Yarubiyah (Syria/Iraq border) crossings. The draft was adopted as resolution 2504 by a vote of 11 in favour, none against, and four abstentions (China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

On Saturday (4 July) the humanitarian penholders (Belgium and Germany) put under silence a draft text that would re-authorise the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa crossings for 12 months. Russia, China and the United States broke silence on the text. Russia argued that the text did not take account of its comments on the initial draft circulated on 16 June, including the removal of the Bab al-Salam crossing and the reduction of the authorisation from 12 to six months. China called for the addition of language supporting the Secretary-General's call in March for the "waiving of sanctions imposed on countries to ensure access to food, essential health supplies, and COVID-19 medical support", as well as requesting the Secretary-General to report on the impact of sanctions on Syria. The United States requested the text to re-authorise the Al Yarubiyah crossing for six months, in addition to authorising the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa crossings for 12 months. (Al Yarubiyah had been included in the initial draft as an authorised crossing, but was removed during the negotiation process.) Russia also noted that it would circulate its own text if its comments were not reflected in the next draft. At the time of writing, Russia had not circulated an alternative draft resolution.

The text that the penholders put in blue remains essentially the same as the one they put under silence on 4 July. In addition to re-authorising the border crossings at Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa for 12 months (until 10 July 2021), the draft further requests the Secretary-General to report to the Security Council by the end of August 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on the need for and the delivery of humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, throughout Syria, including in Syria's north-east, through the most direct routes.

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

As with the last renewal of the cross-border mechanism in January (see 10 January [What's in Blue](#) for details), the most contentious issues in the current negotiations have been the number of border crossings that should be authorised and the duration of the mechanism. Several Council members, including the United States and the United Kingdom, have maintained that the current COVID-19 pandemic warrants a re-authorisation of the Al Yarubiyah crossing. The initial draft circulated by the penholders to Council members on 16 June contained both the renewal of the Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa crossings for 12 months, as well as the re-authorisation of the Al Yarubiyah crossing for an initial period of six months in light of the impact of COVID-19, with a review to assess if another six months would be needed. Russia has maintained that the Al Yarubiyah crossing should not be part of the aid mechanism; speaking during the 29 April Council briefing, Russia's Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia urged Council members "not to waste their time on looking for a way to advocate, explicitly or implicitly for getting Al Yarubiyah back...". Russia has reiterated this position during Council meetings on 19 May and 29 June on the humanitarian situation in Syria.

Apparently, most Council members—including all ten elected members—supported keeping Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa open, with a number of them also arguing that the Council should authorise the re-opening of Al Yarubiyah given the potentially devastating impact that COVID-19 could have on Syria's north-east. Russia, however, deemed this unacceptable.

During a meeting of the five permanent members of the Council on 24 June, Russia also apparently left the impression that it would push for the removal of one of the two existing crossings, although it noted that it did not yet have instructions from capital. Shortly before the second round of negotiations on the text, Russia informed Council members that its starting negotiating position was to close Bab al-Salam and renew Bab al-Hawa for six months.

In contrast to Russia, many members have emphasised the importance of the Al Yarubiyah crossing. However, as a compromise, some Council members were willing to forgo re-opening the Al Yarubiyah crossing in order to keep both Bab al-Salam and Bab al-Hawa open. According to the Secretary-General's most recent Syria humanitarian report, "distributions of WHO medical items did not reach the majority of facilities that previously depended on deliveries via the Al Yarubiyah border crossing".

In recent weeks, both the Secretary-General and OCHA have made clear the need for the two crossings in Syria's north-west. On 13 May, the Secretary-General submitted his review of the UN's humanitarian cross-line and cross-border operations, which was requested in resolution 2504. The report noted that 11 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance throughout Syria. Of the 6.2 million people living in areas not under Syrian government control, 4.2 million concentrated in Syria's north-east and north-west have acute humanitarian needs. In his 19 May Council briefing, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock was unequivocal on the need for cross-border assistance in the north-west, arguing that "meeting the enormous humanitarian needs in the north-west requires a renewal of the cross-border authorisation for the Bab al Salam and Bab Al Hawa border crossings for an additional 12 months". In the north-east, cross-line air shipments of health supplies have been ongoing. On 14 June, the World Health Organization announced the delivery of more than 80 tons of emergency medical supplies to support the health system in the region. According to Lowcock's 19 May briefing, however, since the Council failed to renew the authorisation for cross-border humanitarian aid into Syria through Al Yarubiyah, "supplies [have] reached only 31 percent of the medical facilities that had previously been supported by cross-border deliveries from Al Yarubiyah". This, he argued, meant that a "combination of more cross-border and cross-line access is required to sustain, and preferably increase, humanitarian assistance".

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