

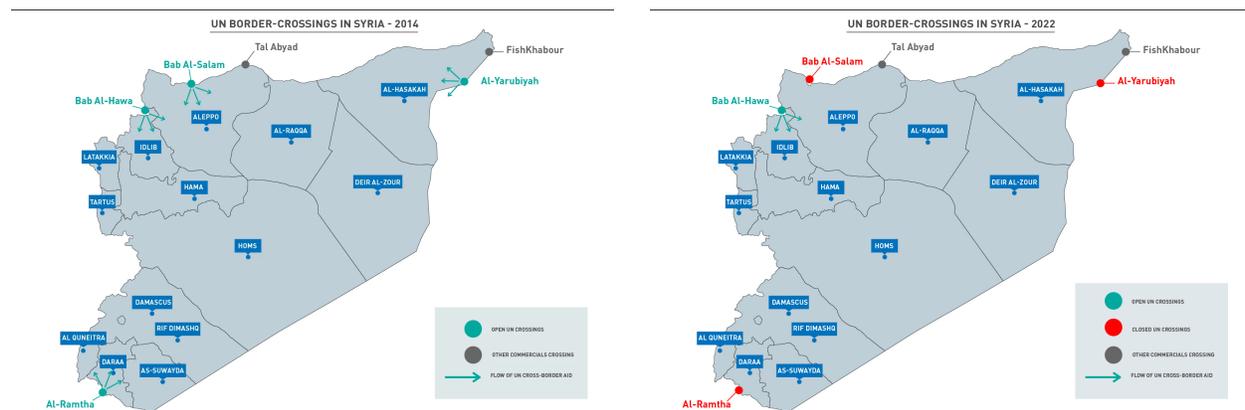
SPHN Policy Brief: UNSC resolution on border crossing to northwest Syria – failure to renew in January 2023 will lead to a worsening public health crisis

Background

The fractured political and healthcare structures in Syria have left millions deprived of essential needs, including food, water, shelter, and healthcare services. Since 2014, United Nations (UN) cross-border mechanisms have been essential for the delivery of humanitarian aid to areas outside of Syrian government control. Cross-border mechanisms were introduced after Damascus repeatedly blocked aid from areas besieged by their militias and failed to deliver aid to geographical areas outside of its control, instead allocating aid based on loyalty. Because cross-line mechanisms repeatedly failed, cross-border mechanisms became necessary for the UN and other relief organisations to transport aid from neighbouring countries and coordinate programs that support the infrastructure in northwest Syria.

Initially, there were four border crossings: Al-Ramtha to the south on the Syria-Jordan border (closed in January 2020), Al Yaroubieh to the northeast on the Syria-Iraq border (closed in January 2020), Bab al-Salam to the northwest on the Syria-Turkey border (closed in July 2020) and Bab al-Hawa to the northwest on the Syria-Turkey border. Bab al-Hawa is the last remaining open border crossing.¹ It allows for the delivery of essential aid and programs to more than 4 million people in Northwest Syria, more than half of whom are IDPs (internally displaced people)². 80% of the IDPs in the area are women and children. According to estimates from UNOCHA, there are 4.1 million people in need, nearly 2 million who live in tents, and 3.1 million who are food insecure in northwest Syria^{3 4}.

Until July 12th, 2022, the UNSC resolution 2642 that protected the Bab al-Hawa border crossing had been subject to annual renewal. However, following a veto from Russia, the renewal was only extended for 6 months with the requirement of a subsequent vote for renewal for the additional six months. For this to pass, a new resolution needs to be issued based on the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations no later than 10 December 2022⁵. In this brief, we discuss the public health consequences of these decisions.



¹ <https://www.msf.org/access-healthcare-northwest-syria-risk-over-potential-border-crossing-closure>

² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666623522000496>

³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/northwest-syria-factsheet-14-july-2022>

⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-west-syria-situation-report-20-jun-2022-enar>

⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/security-council-renews-cross-border-aid-operations-syrias-north-west-six-months-adopting-resolution-2642-2022-compromise-amid-divisions>



Humanitarian Impacts of Partial Renewal of the UNSC Resolution for Bab Al-Hawa Crossing

The UNSC decision in July 2022 to renew the Bab al Hawa border crossing for 6 months only, has several implications for the health and humanitarian response.

- First, failure to renew the cross-border resolution in January 2023 will limit the funding available to support the humanitarian programs delivered via this mechanism. After the first cross-border resolution was adopted in 2014, the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) was established to provide financial support for humanitarian assistance in Syria independent of funding for other UN agencies⁶ ⁷. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) distributes funds from SCHF to NGOs on the ground, which then implement food, water sanitation, and other humanitarian programs⁸. Renewal of the cross-border resolution is closely related to the funding that supports the ongoing work of the UN and its partners. Failure to renew cross-border aid would leave a funding gap in the humanitarian programs operating in northwest Syria.
- Second, the decision to renew for 6 months instead of one year limits the amount of time allowed for the delivery of resources to the over 4 million people in need⁹. In the lead up to the vote, humanitarian and human rights organisations intensified advocacy for the full 12-month renewal, because despite efforts to stockpile aid in warehouses, such efforts are not sustainable to meet the long-term needs of the population. Also, the precedent of shortening the time span of this protected cross-border mechanism may increase the likelihood of non-renewal during the next vote.
- Thirdly, the resolution is set to expire in January 2023, a time of year known for harsh winter conditions that result in the death of children and an increased fire risk due to unsafe cooking and heating practices in overcrowded tents, as well as increased flooding that makes access and transportation of supplies more challenging¹⁰. Winterization planning has been historically underfunded and delayed relative to the increased and exacerbated humanitarian needs during the winter. Should the cross-border resolution to keep Bab Al-Hawa crossing open fail to be renewed in January 2023, the public health consequences will be dire at a time when humanitarian needs are at their highest yet¹¹.

Russia, which sits on the UNSC and vetoed the renewal in July 2022, is advocating for an increase in cross-line aid, whereby aid to any area in Syria would first flow through Damascus, as well as the lifting of unilateral sanctions against Syria and early recovery aid for the regime. Despite Russia insisting that cross-line aid be stipulated in the resolutions since 2021, this has yet to be meaningfully implemented. Furthermore, the precedent set by the closure of Al Yaroubieh border crossing, which served northeast Syria until January 2020, demonstrates that the flow of aid through Damascus is often restricted or

⁶ <https://www.unocha.org/syrian-arab-republic/syria-cross-border-humanitarian-fund>

⁷ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/possible-end-cross-border-aid-syria>

⁸ <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/8/2/transforming-syrias-lifeline-a-plan-for-sustaining-cross-border-aid-in-north-west-syria>

⁹ <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PHR-Syrian-Health-Disparities-Report-Dec-2021-English.pdf>

¹⁰

<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/northwest-syria-winterization-and-flood-preparedness-and-response-plan-2022-2023-season-may-2022>

¹¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1122332>



interfered with when directed to areas outside of government control^{12 13}. This continues to negatively affect the essential humanitarian needs of 2.7 million people in northeast Syria of whom 630,000 are IDPs^{14 15} and has led to the closure of more than 40 relief and medical organisations that were active in these areas, according to media reports^{16 17}. The effects of this border closure are particularly stark after the COVID-19 pandemic including, as of September 2022, an outbreak of cholera across many governorates¹⁸.

Here we highlight specific public health implications of failure to renew Bab Al-Hawa border crossing:

Medical Supplies (including equipment, consumables, medications)

- Health facilities in northwest Syria are funded by UN agencies, including the World Health Organisation (WHO) and UNICEF^{19,20}. If the UNSC fails to renew the cross-border mechanism, these facilities will no longer have the necessary funds to operate.
- In an area with an under-resourced healthcare system, the delivery of medical supplies is key to protecting healthcare workers and patients and providing essential medical services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the delivery of personal protective equipment (PPE) and materials required for infection prevention and control (IPC) via the cross-border mechanism was a lifesaving component of the healthcare response²¹. However, the entry of essential medicines and equipment into northwest Syria has already faced interruption after the closure of Bab al-Salam border crossing.
- After the onset of the conflict, destruction of factories and inadequate regulation resulted in collapse of the pharmaceutical industry. Consequently, the quality and availability of medicines has been affected. Such challenges would be exacerbated by non-renewal of the resolution, as delivery of medications and restoration of the infrastructure to manufacture them would be impeded. The concern would be primarily for the most vulnerable, including women and children, the elderly and those with chronic diseases.
- Vaccinations in northwest Syria are key to protecting the population, particularly children, from communicable diseases that increased incidence after the conflict. The conditions in northwest Syria, such as overcrowded tents and limited access to clean food and water, enable easy spread of communicable diseases. The Expanded Program of Immunisation (EPI) and vaccines against SARS-CoV-2 have provided for vaccination efforts in northwest Syria. Additionally, continued access to vaccinations will help guard against the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance by reducing overuse of antimicrobials²².
- Northwest Syria has already seen multiple communicable diseases outbreaks including measles, diarrhoeal illnesses and leishmaniasis. The current cholera outbreak (declared in Syria on 10th September 2022 with the first case declared in northwest Syria on the 19th September 2022) is a

¹² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/28/syria-aid-restrictions-hinder-covid-19-response>

¹³ <https://phr.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/PHR-Syrian-Health-Disparities-Report-Dec-2021-English.pdf>

¹⁴ Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) POPULATION ASSESSMENT / May 2022 SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC

¹⁵ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666623522000496>

¹⁶ <https://npasyria.com/87987/>

¹⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/reopen-al-yarubiyah-crossing-syria-open-letter-united-nations-security>

¹⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-awdcholera-response-plan-september-2022-29-september-2022>

¹⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/media/118621/file/Whole-of-Syria-Humanitarian-SitRep-28-February-2022.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.emro.who.int/media/news/who-and-uder-implement-multi-partner-project-to-boost-primary-health-care-services-in-northwest-syria.html>

²¹ <https://www.syriahealthnetwork.org/wps6/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/FINAL-Syrian-Healthcare-workers-COVID-19Feb2021docx.pdf>

²² <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29793039/>



stark reminder of the risks in the area and the importance of rapid responses to deal with such outbreaks. The inadequate responses of the Syrian government to infectious diseases outbreaks in areas under their control or responsibility, including to northeast Syria as seen during COVID-19 and now the cholera outbreak, raises alarms should responses or aid need to flow through Damascus. The closure of Bab Al-Hawa would severely impair already challenging responses to outbreaks in northwest Syria.

Food

- The combination of more than a decade of political instability, a crumbling economic situation, and environmental factors have left Syria in a state of rampant food insecurity. In northwest Syria, a third of children are developmentally stunted as a result of inadequate nutrition²³. 80% of food assistance to the region is delivered through the UN border crossing - were it to be shut down, it would exacerbate the already debilitating food insecurity and malnutrition crises in northwest Syria²⁴.
- Secondary consequences of food insecurity include increased susceptibility to other illnesses, particularly for the most vulnerable, including children and pregnant women, with both acute and chronic effects for the population. Though most focus is often on macronutrients, micronutrients are also essential for the general health of the population.

WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene)

- The water and sanitation infrastructure in northwest Syria is no longer able to meet the needs of the population.²⁵ This is due to overcrowding (more than 58% in northwest Syria are IDPs from elsewhere in Syria) as well as the consequences of the conflict with attacks (including deliberate attacks) on water infrastructure.²⁶
- Clean water is trucked via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing - an expensive but needed intervention. Without this or other sustainable methods of providing water of sufficient quality and quantity, the population has little option but to purchase bottled water. This is an expensive and unsustainable alternative in a country where more than 80% are below the poverty line.²⁷ However, due to significant underfunding, some organisations have had to cease trucking, worsening the WASH situation.
- Sustainable, quality WASH interventions are currently essential, given the year on year rise in waterborne diseases and now, as of September 2022 the outbreak of cholera²⁸. Currently, the majority of cases declared are from northeast Syria, a region which has suffered the consequences of the Al Yaroubieh border crossing in January 2020. Following the decision to close Al Yaroubieh, the agreement was that supplies would flow through Damascus. However, as of September 2022, little of the supplies donated to Damascus by WHO have reached northeast Syria^{29 30}. This also mirrors the COVID-19 response to northeast Syria³¹.

²³ <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/syria/card/5qPJJe2upG1/>

²⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/north-west-syria-situation-report-20-jun-2022-enar>

²⁵ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/millions-vulnerable-people-are-facing-acute-water-crisis-northern-syria>

²⁶ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34010668/>

²⁷ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/millions-vulnerable-people-are-facing-acute-water-crisis-northern-syria>

²⁸ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-awdcholera-response-plan-september-2022-29-september-2022>

²⁹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-cholera-dg-echo-partners-who-echo-daily-flash-20-september-2022>

³⁰ <https://assets.researchsquare.com/files/rs-2031442/v1/752fa281-7b00-432d-991e-250489c87b10.pdf?c=1664575323>

³¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/31/turkey/syria-weaponizing-water-global-pandemic>



Shelter

- An estimated 1.8 million people in northwest Syria live in tents, many of which are not adequately equipped to protect against the harsh winter conditions that will coincide with the expiration of cross-border aid in January 2023³². Others still reside in collective shelters, unfinished buildings or other areas unfit for protection from the environment. Some progress has been made after investment following the COVID-19 pandemic however, this has not reached all those in need.
- A report following winter storms in the area in January 2022 indicated that more than 10,000 tents were damaged or destroyed³³. The humanitarian response was essential, not only in the provision of emergency food baskets, but also in supporting living conditions by distributing blankets and plastic sheets. Without a protected cross-border mechanism to allow for the delivery of such materials, thousands of individuals living in tents in northwest Syria will be left even more susceptible to the ruthless winters.
- In addition to supplying tents, the cross-border mechanism also allows for other programs carried out by the Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) cluster in northwest Syria. CCCM efforts include fire and emergency preparedness, providing access to showers and latrines, and vocational training³⁴. Successful implementation of such programs improves living conditions by creating a safer environment. However, CCCM operations are currently underfunded and failure to renew would further disrupt such work.

Recommendations

To the UNSC

- Permanent members of the UNSC (the US, France, UK) must use all diplomatic avenues available to ensure the renewal of the UNSC resolution on January 10th, 2023 despite the risk of a veto by Russia or China.
- All UNSC members must reject the replacement of cross-border aid via Bab Al-Hawa with cross-line health and humanitarian aid given the precedent seen in northeast Syria where aid flows have hampered COVID-19 and cholera responses. The northwest is even more vulnerable as it is essentially besieged with Turkey on one side and territory under the Syrian government on the other. Though crossline aid is stipulated in the UNSC resolutions since 2021, there has been little effective crossline aid delivery in that time.
- The UNSC should involve leaders from humanitarian organisations working in Syria in discussions on the consequences of non-renewal.

To UN agencies and international actors

- UN agencies must ensure preparedness for potential non-renewal in January 2023. This should include developing alternative mechanisms for cross-border operations, finalising contracts, meeting supplies for humanitarian organisations and clear communications with humanitarian organisations, particularly Syrian organisations who are essential to the success of any contingency planning.
- International donors must meet their pledges for the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan and the pooled Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund; only a quarter of the currently needed funds have been achieved thus far.

³² <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/syria/>

³³ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/heavy-snowfall-hits-northern-syria-s-displaced-communities-flash-0>

³⁴ <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/nw-syria-cccm-cluster-advocacy-paper-2022>



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- Increased localisation and investment in Syrian humanitarian organisations is essential to supporting a more cost-effective, ground-up response. This includes building capacity, empowering Syrian organisations and ensuring that responses are in line with the needs of local communities.
- There must be a shift towards investing equitably in early recovery and sustainable interventions which reduce reliance on external humanitarian aid. This includes key social determinants including WASH, shelter and agriculture - all of which directly impact health.

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About SPHN: The Syria Public Health Network was established in 2015 to provide a space where academics, humanitarian and international organisations, policy makers and Syrian public health professionals can discuss, analyse and generate policy proposals for the types of health interventions and research that can support the current and future health needs in Syria and Syrian refugee hosting countries. Visit www.syriahealthnetwork.org for more details or email info@syriahealthnetwork.org