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Beyond UN Security Council action Treating Idlib as protracted crisis

On 10 July 2020, UN Security Council Resolution 2504 expires.¹ It authorises humanitarian access from Turkey into northwest Syria. Should it not be extended, a humanitarian catastrophe will almost certainly occur. Fortunately, intense lobbying is already underway to avoid such an outcome. But other actions are essential beyond the resolution's renewal. Key among those is the need for a shift in approach: instead of handling northwest Syria as a humanitarian emergency, the area should be treated as a protracted crisis to reflect the absence of a short-term solution to the predicament of its four million residents, including 2.7 million internally displaced.² In practice, this means that much more humanitarian aid should be delivered through local Syrian organisations, reliable mechanisms for cross-line aid operations should be introduced, and the ground should be prepared for more EU engagement with Turkey and Russia. Without such actions, human suffering and its exploitation are bound to increase.

The geopolitics of the Idlib battlefield

The Turkish-Russian ceasefire brought a measure of calm to Idlib on 5 March 2020. Notwithstanding the inherent volatility of an ongoing civil war, it is likely to persist for several reasons. To begin with, the Covid-19 outbreak has forced the Syrian regime to deploy many of its forces away from the region, cease military conscription and discharge some of its soldiers. More importantly, even with Iranian

support the regime cannot retake Idlib against the wishes of the Turkish military and without the Russian air force. Russia, in turn, seems unwilling to risk its broader relation with Turkey in a direct military confrontation with an uncertain outcome. The increase of Turkey's military presence in Idlib with infantry, armour, air defence systems and commando forces – together with a willingness to take casualties –

1 This brief was produced for the [Clingendael Levant research program](#) that focuses, inter alia, on the political-economy of the Syrian civil war. The authors thank Ana Uzelac (Alterra Research and Consulting) and Erwin van Veen (Clingendael) for their invaluable feedback. The content naturally remains the authors' responsibility.

2 OCHA Recent Developments in Northwest Syria Flash Update. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/recent-developments-northwest-syria-flash-update-29-may-2020> (accessed 2 June 2020).

shows Ankara is determined to hold its ground. After all, if the regime were to regain control of Idlib, another wave of refugees towards the Turkish border is certain to ensue. The fall of Idlib would also inevitably turn regime attention to Turkish-held areas in the north³, a scenario Ankara prefers to avoid.

In short, cold geopolitical calculations make a full-blown regime offensive backed by Russian airpower unlikely for the foreseeable future. Yet frontlines are unlikely to settle fully, because disagreement persists about the future of Idlib and other opposition-held areas in northwest Syria, in particular regarding the radical Islamist armed group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS).

Humanitarian challenges

The absence of large-scale violence after the Turkish-Russian ceasefire has hardly improved the humanitarian situation in northwest Syria since the regime's most recent military operations displaced approximately one million people, overwhelming local governance bodies and humanitarian organisations in the process.⁴ International funding cuts in aid made in 2018 also played a role by reducing available means.⁵ Finally, heavy weather and hard-to-reach locations have increased malnutrition and enabled the outbreak of diseases.⁶ The looming threat of a Covid-19 outbreak is having a further negative impact on the humanitarian situation. Restrictive

measures to stem its spread include closure of border-crossings and restrictions on movement, including NGO staff.⁷ In addition, a steep drop in the exchange rate of the Syrian pound has rendered more people dependent on humanitarian assistance as their purchasing power cannot keep pace with price increases and shortages of basic goods occur.⁸ The 'frozen' battlefield situation suggests that humanitarian needs will remain structurally high for a long time to come, effectively amounting to a protracted crisis. A shift into a more fitting operational mode is urgently needed to prevent greater human suffering and more regional instability.

Over-reliance on the UN Security Council?

At present, the only effective way for aid to reach the four million residents of northwest Syria is via the Turkish border on the basis of UN Security Council Resolution 2504. The resolution cancels the need to seek prior permission from the Syrian regime, which has a track record of appropriating aid for its own purposes. The initial resolution was adopted in 2014 with full UN Security Council consensus. It included four border crossings: two from northwest Turkey into Syria, one from Iraq into northeast Syria and one from Jordan into south Syria. The resolution was renewed until the end of 2019. Since then, Russia and China, both of which are keen to see the regime regain full control over its borders, have enforced the closure of the border crossings from Iraq and Jordan into Syria and demanded closure of those into northwest Syria as well. They wish to see aid being routed through Damascus instead. Should they support their words with action by vetoing further extension of resolution 2504, a humanitarian catastrophe would almost certainly ensue. While Turkey would

3 Turkish-held areas include Afrin, Al-Bab, Azaz, Jarabulus as well as Tel Abyad and Ras al-Ain.

4 Reach Situation Overview. <https://www.reach-initiative.org/what-we-do/news/press-release-new-situation-overview-from-northwest-syria-shows-that-living-conditions-of-new-arrivals-remain-dire/> (accessed 25 May 2020).

5 2019 in Review: Counter-terror compliance holding back relief. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2019/12/25/counter-terrorism-humanitarian-compliance> (accessed 25 May 2020).

6 Briefing to the UN Security Council. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-103> (accessed 25 May 2020).

7 Syria, Logistic Cluster. Cross Border Operation; Gaziantep. <https://logcluster.org/document/meeting-minutes-gaziantep-14-april-2020> (accessed 25 May 2020).

8 Syrian Pound Falls to New Historic Low, The Syria Report. <https://www.syria-report.com/news/finance/syrian-pound-falls-new-historic-low>.

likely continue to enable humanitarian access, international aid flows would be seriously impeded due to the loss of access through cross-border mechanisms supported by the resolution.

Addressing the desperate humanitarian situation in northwest Syria adequately requires extending UN Security Council resolution 2504 and a substantial increase in the volume of humanitarian aid. But it also demands the introduction of new modalities for aid delivery. Existing mechanisms lack the flexibility and resilience needed to withstand shifting geopolitical considerations. Increasing direct support to local Syrian organisations, facilitating cross-line aid operations and strengthening cooperation with Turkey can ensure more reliable aid flows.

Action 1: Localise aid

Donors, policymakers and humanitarian actors have long recognised the need to provide humanitarian support directly to local actors such as NGOs and governance structures, which in Syria include the local councils and the Health Directorate in Idlib.⁹ They constitute the first line of response and are closest to affected populations. Yet, donors often remain hesitant to provide direct funding because of information asymmetries as well as operational and reputational risks, including aid diversion.¹⁰

9 Several international initiatives, such as the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, made commitments to greater localisation of aid. See: the Grand Bargain: <https://www.agendaforhumanity.org/initiatives/3861>. Inter-Agency Standing Committee: <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/about-the-grand-bargain>. Charter for Change: <https://charter4change.org/>. The Shifting the Power Project: <https://startnetwork.org/>. (All accessed 27 May 2020)

10 According to the OECD's Commitments into Actions publication, a humanitarian response is considered localised when a local humanitarian responder is involved in the entire programme cycle.

In the context of northwest Syria, however, localising the humanitarian response is made easier by the high levels of collaboration that have characterised relations between local, national and international aid actors since the start of the civil war. The capacities of local actors and NGOs were also boosted by various stabilisation programmes between 2013 and 2018.¹¹ As a result, local NGOs and governance bodies now possess the expertise to expand their role. In addition, years of effective collaboration with international actors mean that there is ample information available on the financial, administrative and operational capacities of local humanitarian organisations. Finally, reliable structures for direct funding already exist: international donors can simply engage with organisations that are currently beneficiaries of the United Nations pooled funds. Such organisations have been vetted by UN agencies with appropriate contextual knowledge and oversight capacity mechanisms, and present a low risk. A number of them – such as the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations (UOSSM) or the [Al-Sham Humanitarian Foundation](#) – have received international external audit scores that put them on par with their international peers in terms of accountability.

But localising aid goes beyond direct funding. It also requires a longer-term effort to strengthen the leadership and capacity of local actors, including operational and administrative capacities, through training and direct coordination. Although at present such efforts are largely non-existent, donors can build on the experience of previous programmes.

Action 2: Increase cross-line operations

While trade and smuggling proliferate across frontlines, aid delivery does not. The biggest obstacles are regime

11 USAID overview: <https://www.usaid.gov/syria/our-work> (accessed 27 May 2020).

obstruction, bureaucracy and political interference. Although the regime has recently granted permissions to Damascus-based international NGOs to carry out fact-finding missions and needs assessments in Idlib, it remains to be seen whether this will translate into a sustainable flow of aid across frontlines. Other conflict parties, most notably HTS, have also blocked aid operations. For instance, the HTS-affiliated Salvation Government closed the representation office of the Syrian Red Crescent in Ariha (Idlib) and is said to obstruct field missions by Damascus-based international NGOs.¹²

Although they do not represent a viable substitute to cross-border aid, cross-line operations should nevertheless be scaled up to increase the overall aid volume to northwest Syria. Both Russia and Turkey are uniquely positioned to press actors on the ground to facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian assistance. Russia can convince the regime to facilitate cross-line aid delivery through an expedited and simplified approval mechanism for NGOs. Turkey holds power over Idlib's armed factions and can press them to facilitate cross-line needs assessments, aid deliveries and the establishment of offices. Turkey can also induce local authorities and armed factions to provide protection and freedom of movement to representatives of Damascus-based NGOs.

Such actions would fit with both countries' strategic objectives. Russia has repeatedly championed cross-line operations as part of its larger efforts to re-establish regime authority and control, which may lead it to accept more impartial aid as the price for greater flows via Damascus. For Turkey, more and better humanitarian aid flows would decrease the incentive for displaced Syrians to try and seek refuge in Turkey.

12 Interview with a representative of a Damascus-based international NGO, 27 May 2020; ICRC: Syria: Humanitarian aid workers and property must be respected and protected. <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/syria-humanitarian-aid-workers-and-property-must-be-respected-and-protected> (accessed 25 May 2020).

Meanwhile, in the absence of direct implementation options due to access and security restrictions, Damascus-based international NGOs can explore alternative channels to deliver aid to northwest Syria, including by building partnerships with organisations based in areas outside of regime control. At the same time, international NGOs operating in Turkey can work more closely with Turkish actors and through Turkish connections. EU Member States can also provide direct funding and support to the Turkish Red Crescent and other internationally recognised Turkish aid actors, such as the [IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation](#), which operate in northwest Syria and have good access.

Action 3: Improve EU cooperation with Turkey

While the ethical and political aspects of EU-Turkey cooperation on refugee policies remain a point of contention, it is clear that both stakeholders have a shared interest in preventing new waves of displacement in and from northwest Syria. Increasing humanitarian engagement between Brussels and Ankara on northwestern Syria is an opportunity to undertake joint action in a practical area of mutual interest. Turkey's decision in February to lift controls on land and sea borders with Greece made clear its frustration with having to carry the brunt of the crisis by itself. The EU can smooth the way by publicly recognising Turkey for the crucial role it has played over the years in facilitating humanitarian aid into northwest Syria. It can also do more to share the burden of the humanitarian crisis by increasing aid to displaced civilians in Syria and financial support to Syrian refugees in Turkey. In addition, the EU should establish and commit to a relocation programme that assists those most at risk. UNHCR's Emergency Evacuation Transit Mechanism in Niger¹³ and its

13 UNHCR: ETM Overview. <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Niger%20ETM%20Overview%20-%20August%202019.pdf> (accessed 27 May 2020).

Emergency Transit Centre in Romania¹⁴ could serve as a basis. Furthermore, the EU could build on the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement to offer relocation opportunities for the most vulnerable individuals out of northwest Syria.

The EU can employ its strategic position as one of the major humanitarian donors to encourage Turkey to: (1) put the issue of cross-line operations high on the agenda of ongoing negotiations with Russia, and (2) increase the pressure on armed groups in Idlib, especially HTS, to facilitate such cross-line operations. When it comes to HTS, Turkey can take advantage of the group's recent efforts to change and rebrand itself as a local group with a strictly Syrian Islamist agenda to request that in addition, it commits itself to preventing more radical jihadist factions from obstructing aid delivery. And while politically unpalatable, it is also crucial for the EU to directly engage Russia, which is seeking recognition of its role in Syria and may be open to facilitating cross-line operations.

In conclusion

Extending UN Security Council resolution 2504 and increasing the volume of humanitarian aid to northwest Syria are essential to address its desperate humanitarian situation adequately. In addition, this brief argues that new modalities for the delivery of humanitarian aid also need to be introduced to enhance the flexibility and resilience of aid flows against shifting geopolitical considerations. The EU and its Member States should, with urgency:

- Provide more direct funding to Syrian NGOs operating in northwest Syria, including for longer-term capacity building, and increase direct coordination efforts with local actors and NGOs.
- Induce Turkey and Russia to facilitate more cross-line humanitarian operations by pointing to the relevance of such operations to their own interests.
- Work more closely with Turkey to address the humanitarian crisis in northwest Syria and demonstrate greater solidarity by providing more humanitarian aid to IDPs in Syria and refugees in Turkey.

14 UNHCR: ETC Timisoara | Emergency Transit Center. <https://www.unhcr.org/ceu/100-enwhat-we-doresettlementetc-timisoara-html.html> (accessed 27 May 2020).

About the Clingendael Institute

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