



Predictable and Unexpected Compromise

UN humanitarian aid comes to Syria for another year

Shifts in regional impacts on the Syrian conflict zone determined Russia's flexible stance in the debates in the UN Security Council on the issue of humanitarian aid. The compromise that has left one cross-border channel open was achieved through a bilateral US-Russia deal, but Ireland and Norway performed the work on preparing the resolution. Post-war reconstruction in Syria is progressing slowly, and Russia is concerned about the stability of the al-Assad regime. Most external stake-holders are content with the current situation, but economic dislocation and insufficiency of international aid generate discontent and amplify new sources of conflict. By mid-2022, follow-up debates in the UN Security Council may reflect a new escalation of the Syrian war.

Brief Points

- Russia reckons international aid is crucial for ensuring the stability of the al-Assad regime and so has to agree on keeping the cross-border channel into the rebel-controlled Idlib province open.
- External stake-holders tend to see the current situation in Syria as acceptable, but it remains fragile due to lack of funding for post-war reconstruction.
- Continuation of US military presence in Iraq and Syria is uncertain, and Russia tries both to put pressure on and to cultivate dialogue with the USA.
- Follow-on debates in the UN Security Council could encounter a more rigid stance by Russia as a new escalation of hostilities in Syria becomes more probable.



Figure 1: Current status of U.N.-designated Humanitarian Aid Crossings in Syria

Introduction

The decision to deliver humanitarian aid to Syria reached by the UN Security Council on 9 July 2021 might appear to be a recycle of the compromise reached in 2020. In fact, this latest compromise is different in many important aspects and will be tested yet again next year. Unanimously-adopted Resolution 2585¹ essentially reproduces the key points of Resolution 2533 from 11 July 2020 and authorizes the use of only one border crossing (Bab al-Hawa leading from Turkey into the Idlib province) for 12 months, while three other crossings (Bab al-Salman in the north, al-Ramtha in the south, and al-Yarubiyah in the north-east) remain closed (see figure 1). Russia has insisted that cross-border aid should be discontinued while the USA advocated for opening of all four points of entry and expansion of aid deliveries. It was their compromise (on keeping Bab al-Hawa open) that paved the way for the decision, while Ireland and Norway performed the hard diplomatic work on preparing and drafting the resolution.²

The Syrian Disaster Area

The ten years-old tragedy of Syrian war continues to evolve, so the situation in the mid-2021 is significantly different from one year earlier and is certain to change further by mid-2022. The regime of Bashar al-Assad has been trying to consolidate the “victory” in the protracted civil war, and in early 2021 it sought to make it final by conquering Idlib province – the last stronghold of the rebels. That maneuver was thwarted by Turkey, whose intervention established effective control over two border zones in northern Syria. Ankara finds it useful to support the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) grouping (formerly associated with al-Qaeda), which has prevailed over several other groupings in Idlib. Despite occasional clashes, the situation in and around Idlib has remained relatively stable for the past year and will probably remain unchanged for another one, unless various al-Qaeda offsprings are energized into action.

Seeking to reinforce his grasp on power, al-Assad proceeded with holding presidential elections in May 2021 and secured, by crude

manipulations, the overwhelming result he wanted. Meanwhile, the UN-sponsored work of the Constitutional Committee in Syria has been effectively blocked since the fifth round of talks in Geneva in January 2021 and, consequently, the prospects for any meaningful power-sharing have disappeared. Sustained efforts by UN Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen have failed to open new channels of peace process. Then, in August 2021, in open violation of agreements reached with Russia’s mediation in summer 2018, Syrian government forces violently suppressed local governance in the Daraa province where the uprising against al-Assad began in spring 2011.³

However, the stability of al-Assad’s regime is being undermined by its inability to ensure reconstruction of Syria’s severely damaged economy and to contain the spread of COVID-19. The regime’s external sponsors – Iran and Russia – cannot provide the necessary resources, China remains reluctant to engage, and the inflow of international aid is limited because donors have no control over its distribution.

Regional Dynamics

Compared to the relative stability in the first half of 2020, the evolving disaster in Syria has been impacted more strongly by current regional developments, and especially by Iran’s declining engagement with and force deployment to Syria. This reduced role is necessitated by Iran’s urgent need to address domestic problems exposed in the course of its presidential elections in June 2021. The new conservative leadership must address the public discontent intensified by a sequence of waves of the COVID-19 epidemic, reaching a new high in August.⁴ Meanwhile, the protracted and increasingly violent state failure in Lebanon was aggravated by the fallout following the devastating fertilizer storage explosion in Beirut in August 2020. The crisis in Lebanon has created a competing urgent demand for international aid.

The world’s attention in spring 2021 was drawn most urgently toward the sharp escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which produced massive damage to urban infrastructure in Gaza. Significant amount of US, European and World Bank aid have been directed to urgent reconstruction there, despite firm control by Hamas over the distribution of this funding.⁵

The new Israeli government, which represents a broad coalition of parties, treads carefully on Palestinian matters, but finds it necessary to apply military pressure on Hamas, the Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, and pro-Iranian groupings in Syria. The pressure on the al-Assad regime from the neighbors has lessened, but the support has shrunk even more, and the structures of governance, corrupt as they are, cannot function without propping up from outside.

Mixed Messages from the US

The arrival of the Biden administration has brought significant changes in US policy in the Middle East, but a coherent strategy has yet to emerge. While Biden's team tries to build on recent achievements, such as the so-called "Abraham Accords", which normalized relations between Israel and the UAE, Morocco and Sudan, it also seeks to take a more balanced position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More recently, Biden's decision to make a full withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, and the powerful offensive by Taliban in the wake of this withdrawal, was obviously not anticipated in Washington. The debacle of massive evacuation will weigh heavily on US decision-making on other fronts, including the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and the re-negotiations of a nuclear deal with Iran.

In Syria, current US policy attempts to correct the heavily-criticized decision by former President Donald Trump for a quick withdrawal of troops, which amounted to general abandonment of Kurdish allies, who had played a crucial role in the defeat of ISIS. The withdrawal didn't actually happen under Trump, but Turkey interpreted his announcement as a "green light" for an operation aimed at establishing a "buffer zone" to the east of the Euphrates River. Limited US military deployment in northeastern Syria is supported by occasional airstrikes, but the sustainability of this posture is uncertain because even a single terrorist attack with US casualties might resonate heavily in Washington D.C.

In contrast to Trump's indifferent stance on Syria, the Biden administration has placed a strong emphasis on the urgency of humanitarian problems there. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken made a strong appeal to the UN Security Council for re-opening all border crossings into



In this handout photo provided by the US Embassy in Turkey, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, speaks at the Bab al-Hawa border crossing between Turkey and Syria, Thursday, June 3, 2021.

Syria, and the US Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, visited Turkey and travelled to the Bab al-Hawa crossing. In March and June 2021, the US State Department announced additional funding for humanitarian assistance to Syrian people, bringing the total sum of US aid to Syria since the beginning of the war to \$US 13.5 billion.⁶ US efforts to prioritize the issue of cross-border aid were crucial for reaching a compromise with Russia.

Russia Plays Geopolitical Games

As Russia enjoys veto privilege in the UN Security Council, it held the key to adopting Resolution 2585, and its decision to support it was both predictable and unexpected. Responding to the briefing by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on 23 June 2021, Russian UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia described the idea that cross-line routes (from Damascus into the contested provinces) were inadequate as "laughable" and asserted that humanitarian aid was being used for nefarious schemes supported by terrorists holed up in Idlib.⁷ China unreservedly supported Russia's stance that cross-border deliveries of aid constituted violations of Syria's sovereignty.

The abrupt departure from that "principled" position on channeling all aid through Damascus surprised many stakeholders, yet it was determined by the fact that Russia was not interested in cuts in the volume of aid coming to Syria. Moscow may be not particularly worried about

the humanitarian disaster, but it is concerned about the stability of al-Assad regime and sees inflow of aid as the only means to forestall the economic collapse. Realistically, Russian diplomats should have engaged in bargaining over the share of UN aid going through Damascus, perhaps arguing that since Hamas is treated by international donors as acceptable aid recipient, the al-Assad regime must be treated as legitimate government (and thus aid recipient as well). Russia could have also promised to increase its contribution to the UN efforts, rather than seeking to amplify publicity of the rather meager volumes of food and medicine distributed by military convoys. The problem for the Russian leadership is that expanding aid to Syria, by matching the extra funding provided by US, is highly unpopular with domestic audiences. Public mood in Russia (important for the September elections) has been dampened by the protracted contraction of household incomes and the stingy government support measures provided during the on-going COVID-19 epidemic.

Moscow has acknowledged the futility of its attempts to persuade the EU and major European donors to invest in Syria's post-war reconstruction. Russia also understands the poor compatibility of its limited economic plans with Iranian ambitions, even if temporarily curtailed. The Kremlin has no interest in local squabbles and aims at uplifting the Syrian debacle to the high geopolitical level by interactions with USA. President Vladimir Putin was ready to put the Syrian dossier on the table of June 16 Geneva talks with

President Joe Biden, who, however, preferred to cut the summit agenda short. Moscow tried to open a new opportunity by assuming an extra-rigid stance in the UN discussions thereafter, and Biden had to make a phone call to Putin on July 9 to get his approval for the compromise deal.⁸

Through the Fog of Desolation

The sad reality of present-day Syria is that an essentially unsustainable and degenerating situation is generally acceptable to all external stakeholders. Prioritization of US aid may help to consolidate governance structures of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDR) in the northeastern provinces. Turkey can utilize European and UN funding for strengthening its control over the “buffer zone” and for empowering its allies in the Idlib province. These developments would constitute a challenge to the al-Assad regime, which receives not nearly enough material support to start meaningful economic reconstruction in the territories and key urban centers under its control. Other concerns warrant interest here. The under-funded pro-Iranian militias could attempt to seize control over productive economic assets and clash with the regular army; the swift victory of Taliban in Afghanistan may inspire new Islamic radical groups to unite and incorporate the remnants of defeated ISIS.

Russia recognizes the risks that come along with the weakness of economic foundation of the al-Assad regime and the fragmentation of its security structures, but it cannot give priority to these problems given the intensity of new security challenges in Central Asia and the scope of tasks pertaining to rescuing the Lukashenko regime in Belarus, Russia’s key ally. Russian diplomacy will push the issue of the negative impact of US sanctions (the “Caesar Act”, enforced

since June 2020) on the humanitarian situation in Syria, but its prime objective is to corrupt and compromise the cause of upholding democracy against the threat of autocracy as championed by President Biden. Syria will remain a minor entry point in the complex agenda of geopolitical competition and bargaining with USA, as perceived by the Kremlin. Russia’s ability to make a difference in the central (Israeli-Palestinian or Saudi-Iranian), and even peripheral (Yemen), conflicts in the Middle East is set to decline, its ties with Turkey and Iran are weakening, and its role as an alternative influencer to the USA is shrinking to the point of irrelevance.

The difficult maneuvering in the UN Security Council in Spring and Summer 2022 over the recurrent issue of humanitarian aid to Syria will be influenced by this contraction of Russia’s capabilities, which will not make the search for a new compromise any easier. Moscow might become even more inclined to play the spoiler game; ultimately, however, the need to ensure the inflow of aid to Syria and the preference for the UN channels (rather than Turkey-controlled or US-managed) will most probably determine another Putin’s rational choice for allowing the Bab al-Hawa crossing to function and maybe even for re-opening al-Yaroubiyah.

Notes

1. The text of the Resolution 2585 and the accompanying statements of the members of the UN Security Council can be found through the UN press release (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14577.doc.htm>).
2. Statement from the Norwegian Foreign Ministry on humanitarian aid to Syria is available at (<https://www.regjeringen.no/en/aktuelt/resolution-on-humanitarian-access-in-syria-adopted-following-difficult-negotiations-in-un-security-council/id2866117/>).

3. Updates on the situation in Daraa are provided by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights; available at (<https://www.syriaohr.com/en/category/local-news/dara/>).
4. As of early August, only 4% of Iranians (3.32 million of 83 million) were fully vaccinated; see “Iran says one person dying of COVID-19 every two minutes”, Reuters, 9 August 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-says-one-person-dying-covid-19-every-two-minutes-2021-08-09/>).
5. Recent discussion on this issue in the UN Security Council can be accessed at: (<https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/prioritizing-gaza-reconstruction-must-not-detract-broader>).
6. Data on the US humanitarian assistance is available on the USAID website (<https://www.usaid.gov/humanitarian-assistance/syria>).
7. Transcript of this session of the UN Security Council is available at (<https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sc14559.doc.htm>).
8. The Russian position is examined in Pavel Baev, “Putin’s predictable Syrian compromise amidst hostile Russian behavior”, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 12 July 2021 (<https://jamestown.org/program/putins-predictable-syrian-compromise-amidst-hostile-russian-behavior/>).

THE AUTHOR

Pavel K. Baev is a Research Professor at PRIO. He is also affiliated with the Brookings Institution (Washington DC) and French International Affairs Institute (IFRI, Paris). His research examines shifts in Russian foreign and security policies in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Ukraine and Belarus, and in the Arctic.

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