



July 9, 2021

President Joseph R. Biden  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20500

## **RE: Amnesty International USA Calls on Biden Administration to Protect and Strengthen Critical Humanitarian Aid into Syria as Russian Government Threatens Closure of Crossing**

Over 80% of the 4.2 million Syrians in the country's north-west, overwhelmingly internally displaced people, rely on humanitarian aid delivered by the UN through the Bab al-Hawa crossing, the last remaining aid corridor in the country. With hundreds of thousands of Syrians killed in the armed conflict and millions more displaced in the past decade, the Russian government is pushing to close Bab al-Hawa threatening to block renewal of its expiring UN Security Council (UNSC) authorization in a vote set for today. If successful, this would have catastrophic effects for millions of Syrians, cutting them off from food, water, COVID-19 vaccines, adequate shelter, and lifesaving medication and medical support.

The Biden administration must use every tool at its disposal and stand firm to prevent the blocking of lifesaving aid - including COVID-19 vaccines - to millions of Syrians by working to ensure the UNSC protects humanitarian access in Bab al-Hawa, and further crucially reopens the previously closed Bab al-Salam crossing in the north-west and al-Yarubiyah in the north-east.

We appreciate the administration's continued support for keeping the crossing open, but far more action is necessary to meet the severity of this crisis. Amnesty further calls on the Biden administration to immediately take on a greater role for the U.S. in providing aid to, funding shelter for, and resettling more Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers - a responsibility neighboring countries have disproportionately shouldered. And as local Syrian humanitarian organizations face a devastating loss of UN funding, we urge a sorely needed increase of U.S. financial support to these groups and the crucial on-the-ground aid and services they provide, as well as broad expansion of direct U.S. assistance to Syrians in need.

Since the start of the conflict in 2011, the Russian government has used its veto power to block UNSC resolutions for accountability for or ending human rights violations in Syria at least 15 times, and to force the closure of the three other aid corridors. In this time, Amnesty and other international organizations have documented myriad violations and war crimes committed by the Syrian and Russian governments - including targeted or indiscriminate attacks that killed civilians, and humanitarian and medical workers; as well as bombing schools and hospitals. Beyond this crisis of access to aid, it is critical this administration pushes for and upholds accountability for these and other crimes in Syria committed by all parties.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [warned on 23 June that a failure to renew authorization for Bab al-Hawa](#) would have "devastating consequences". Russia's veto will block the delivery of aid to millions of civilians in critical need in north-west Syria, depriving them of their human rights in the process. And the amount of Syrians in need there is only rising. The UN says over [40% of those displaced](#) by the Syrian and Russian governments' military offensive in 2020 in the north-west are now food insecure, with severe acute malnutrition in children rising by [55%](#) in April 2021. The UN plays a crucial role in providing vital aid, and is relied on by aid workers for critical medical supplies and over [70%](#) of food and water assistance. If the crossing is blocked, so too would be UN COVID-19 vaccine distribution plans; as would [over half of all funding for sheltering millions of displaced Syrians](#), leaving scores at increased risk of losing shelter. The

U.S. must provide far greater support and funding for these efforts and direct humanitarian assistance broadly - especially medical aid and COVID-19 vaccines; and even more so if the vote fails.

The Russian government insists that aid be channeled solely through the Syrian government in Damascus - even to areas outside its control - which they claim would be more effective and respectful of sovereignty. But the reality on the ground is clearly to the contrary. The al-Yarubiayh crossing in north-east Syria, also forced closed in January 2020 by Russia's veto based on the same claim, was the source of critically relied-upon international aid for nearly two million people in the Kurdish Autonomous Administration. With the Syrian government now bearing responsibility for aid delivery, levels of aid reaching the region have plummeted due to government failures, obstruction, and arbitrary and unjustified restrictions. Local organizations struggle to operate with UN funding cut off, with at least [nine NGO health centers](#) facing closure, severe shortages of critical medication, and multiple COVID-19 treatment centers and [19 UN-run health facilities](#) already forced shut. Remaining support from international NGOs and the Autonomous Administration has not met the crisis-stricken population's dire need.

The Syrian government has neither functional oversight nor ability to replace UN aid, with a disturbing record of systematically and arbitrarily blocking crucial assistance. There is little reason to believe the Syrian government, during a catastrophic crisis it heavily fueled, would not continue arbitrarily restricting aid or use it as a political cudgel. In fact, in 2014, the UNSC [condemned](#) the government's "unjustified withholding of consent for" and "conditions that impede" access for aid delivery across several corridors.

Imminently, the UNSC is set to decide on this straightforward choice between the lives, well-being, and human rights of millions of Syrians; or the disastrous, politically motivated denial of direly needed UN aid and assistance in what is already a humanitarian catastrophe. The Biden administration must do all it can to stand up for and support human rights and humanitarian assistance in Syria, both regarding and beyond this vote.

Amnesty urgently calls on the Biden administration to take the following actions:

- Exhaust every avenue, including stronger public pressure, to ensure that the UNSC protects aid access through the Bab al-Hawa crossing and the millions of Syrians for whom cross-border aid is the difference between life and death; and continue to firmly work towards the crucial reopening of the al-Yarubiyah and Bab al-Salam crossings.
- Dramatically increase direct U.S. support for Syrians in need regardless of the vote's outcome by providing greater financial support for local Syrian NGOs, UN-funded facilities, and refugee shelters and the crucial humanitarian assistance they provide; expanding direct delivery of vital medical aid and COVID-19 vaccines; and scaling up U.S. resettlement of Syrian refugees.
- Strengthen commitment to human rights by further leading on public calls for international accountability measures for all parties that have committed human rights abuses and violations during the Syrian civil war, including the Syrian government.
- Take a position of leadership in calling for an end to usage of UNSC vetoes that would block resolutions regarding humanitarian crises as well as access for UN aid and assistance therein.

Sincerely, on behalf of Amnesty International USA,

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