

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 12, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to express grave concern regarding the prolonged humanitarian crisis in Syria, and to urge the Administration to intensify diplomatic efforts at the United Nations to fully restore cross-border humanitarian operations, ensure the delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance to the Syrians in greatest need, and pursue a durable political solution to the crisis.

The urgency of the security and humanitarian situation in Syria has only been heightened by the global spread of COVID-19. After nine years of war, Syria is woefully ill-prepared to respond to a widespread outbreak. An estimated 6.2 million people remain internally-displaced, 5 million of whom are trapped in besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Over 11.2 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance. The health system has been decimated. Particularly in the northwest, where the regime and its Russian and Iranian enablers have deliberately targeted health facilities and displaced hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, an outbreak of the disease would be catastrophic.

The January 2020 decision by the UN Security Council (UNSC) to shutter cross-border humanitarian assistance into Syria from two of the original four border crossings, and to shorten the authorized timeframe of delivery from remaining border crossings from 12 months to 6 months, has had a disastrous impact upon the humanitarian situation on the ground. This move, coming as it did after a Russian and Chinese veto of a draft resolution that would have kept three crossings open for a full year, was an operational and symbolic blow to the international community's efforts to assist civilians in need across Syria. As record levels of civilians have fled their homes, cross-border humanitarian assistance delivered by the UN and its partners remains a critical lifeline for millions.

First and foremost, the closure of the Ya'rubiyah border crossing between Iraq and northeast Syria has hindered the overall humanitarian response and disrupted the UN's ability to deliver specialized medical equipment. Without access to these border crossings, the UN has been forced to suspend funding for many of its NGO partners, who must now rely on alternative, woefully inadequate, and easily manipulated means to deliver aid, such as land-based convoys from Damascus.

Ambassadors Craft and Jeffrey have demonstrated their commitment to ensuring that humanitarian assistance continues to flow, including by traveling to the Turkey-Syria border to witness first-hand the UN's complex logistical effort. Yet, we are increasingly concerned that Russian and Chinese obstructionism at the United Nations will, once again, thwart efforts to re-authorize border crossings, which would effectively halt the only feasible way the United Nations can deliver assistance without Assad regime interference. It is vital that the United States use its voice, vote,

and influence on the UN Security Council to counter Chinese and Russian obstructionism and fully restore cross-border humanitarian assistance. Specifically, we suggest the following:

- Push for the re-opening of the Ya'rubiyah border crossing for at least one year;
- Advocate for additional border crossings, guided by the Secretary General's recommendations on alternatives to the Ya'rubiyah crossing; and
- Propose specific language in the resolution to protect the UN's ability to fund NGOs operating through the cross-border approach.

While a strong U.S. strategy at the UNSC is of the utmost importance, we nonetheless expect that contingency plans will be required, in the event that the UNSC fails to re-authorize cross-border operations. To that end, we further recommend that you work with other like-minded countries to identify more multilateral opportunities to directly fund NGOs, and similarly push all UN agencies to find ways to continue their financial support to the Syrian people.

Apart from serving as a humanitarian lifeline for Syria's population, these border crossings remain critical for the creation of a safe and neutral environment, free from Russian or Assad regime control, necessary to implement UN Security Council Resolution 2254 – namely, ongoing work on the constitutional committee, a ceasefire, release of detainees, and setting conditions for free and fair elections.

After nine years of a devastating conflict that has destroyed millions of lives, destabilized the whole of the Middle East, and threatened the national security interests of the United States and our allies – and now coupled with the looming threat of sustained community spread of COVID-19 in Syria – we must act with urgency to ensure that this vital lifeline remains active. The people of Syria need and deserve our quick and urgent action.

Due to the importance of this issue, we urge you to ensure that the U.S. government is engaged at the highest levels with its foreign counterparts. We appreciate your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,



JAMES E. RISCH
Chairman
Senate Foreign Relations Committee



ELIOT L. ENGEL
Chairman
House Foreign Affairs Committee



ROBERT MENENDEZ
Ranking Member
Senate Foreign Relations Committee



MICHAEL T. McCAUL
Ranking Member
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