

Introduction

In January 2021 Ireland had taken up its seat on the United Nations Security Council for a period of two years. One of Ireland's roles on the Security Council is co-penholder of the Syrian humnaitarian brief, alongside Norway. This gives Ireland responsibility for facilitating discussions and negotiations related to humanitarian access to the millions of people needing support in the country. The key moment many Syrians will look to, as Ireland takes up this position, is the expiry in July of Resolution 2533, authorising a mechanism for cross-border aid to North West Syria through a single border crossing with Turkey. GOAL urgently seeks the renewal of this resolution, and the protection of humanitarian access throughout Syria and especially in its devastated north western region.

About GOAL

GOAL is the only Irish NGO with an operational presence in North West Syria. In collaboration with local Syrian partners, GOAL provides hundreds of thousands of people in host and displaced communities with food assistance, multi-purpose cash assistance, nutrition, potable piped water, and emergency relief. GOAL has been working for the conflict-affected people of northern Syria since 2013. With several field offices in Idleb Governorate and in Aleppo's Azaz district, in 2021 600 staff reached more than 900,000 people every month.

No end to conflict

In North West Syria where GOAL is operational, different armed groups continue to oppose the government of Bashar Al-Assad. This region, the size of County Galway, contains upwards of 1.5 million displaced people. In late 2019 and early 2020, intensive fighting in North West Syria endangered the lives of roughly 4 million people in the region, causing many to flee their homes in Idleb, Northern Hama and Western Aleppo. With most of Syria now under the control of the government, this is the last remaining space for displaced Syrians to flee to, leaving millions of people, many of them displaced multiple times, crowding into host communities that have themselves been devastated by war.

There is a risk of further fighting in 2021. Assad's stated objective is the restoration of the entire country to the control of the Damascus government; this objective has the military and political support of Russia. Renewed fighting will result in even greater damage to civilian infrastructure, new waves of displacement, and intense strain on an already-stretched humanitarian system.

The war has resulted in countless civilian deaths and mortal risk to humanitarian actors. Many aid workers have been killed in violent clashes and targeted bombings, including three GOAL staff. While a ceasefire has been in place since March 2020, there have been regular violations. In 2020, over 1,361 civilians and 14 humanitarian aid workers were killed in North West Syria; 25 health care facilities were targeted and there were attacks on civilian infrastructure (such as schools and marketplaces) and residential areas. In the event of a renewal of active fighting in the North West – an eventuality predicted by many – the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers must be a priority.

The humanitarian situation

In March 2021, Syria will mark ten years of its devastating civil war. Since 2011, more than half of the country's population has been displaced: 6.7 million of them within Syria and 6.6 million throughout the world, primarily in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. The population of Idleb province in North West Syria has doubled to three million people in recent years thanks to displacement, while crucial public infrastructure including electricity, water and the roads network has been destroyed. In June 2020, 9.3 million Syrians in the country were facing food insecurity. The conflict is accompanied by an economic crisis: runaway inflation and currency shortages have increased poverty levels to nearly 90% nationally, with basic needs such as bread and rent proving increasingly unaffordable. The cost of living in Syria has increased by more than 100% year on year, and the Syrian pound lost 15% of its value against the US dollar in November 2020 alone.

COVID-19

War has had an especially severe impact on Syria's once-strong health care infrastructure. Clinics and hospitals have been destroyed, as has the corpus of excellent trained medical staff who served in the health service prior to the war. It is estimated that 70% of health care workers have now fled the country. It is very difficult to determine the exact prevalence of COVID-19 in North West Syria, although the winter brought a spike in cases. The conditions in camps for displaced people are ideal for the spread of respiratory disease. Camps are crowded multi-generational spaces in which children and young people mix with the elderly and many people whose health is compromised. Preventing the spread of disease is almost impossible.

Humanitarian access and the United Nations Security Council

In North West Syria, 2.8 million people are reliant on humanitarian assistance, provided by Syrian NGOs and the international community, and crucially supported by the UN humanitarian system including the United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The Syrian government restricts international humanitarian acess to opposition-controlled parts of the country as part of its strategy to regain full control of its territory. As a result, in 2014 the Security Council put in place a system of authorised border crossings allowing for the delivery of UNled humanitarian relief without the approval of the Damascus government. Cross-border access was renewed on an annual basis from 2014 until 2019, although with increasing opposition from Russia – a key ally of the Syrian government – and China. In December 2019 only two of the original four border gates were renewed for a period of just six months, and in July 2020 just one border crossing was authorised by the Security Council, at Bab al-Hawa/ Cilvegözlü at the Turkish border.

The safe and effective delivery of essential humanitarian aid will be devastated without access through the final border crossing. If UN agencies lose the use of the border crossing, this will result in a massive funding shortfall for local Syrian agencies, a reduction in coordination of humanitarian actors, and an absolute reduction in the quantity of aid supplied – in the form of food parcels, cash transfers and medical staff and supplies. Loss of this access would be a disaster. Loss of this access would be a disaster counted in human lives.

Recommendations to Ireland at the UNSC:

As the co-penholder alongside Norway of the Syria humanitarian brief at the UN Security Council, Ireland is in an important position. With Norway, Ireland will oversee the UN's political response to the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Syria and co-facilitate the negotiations on cross-border humanitarian access. As one of 15 non-permanent members of the Council, Ireland will also have a vote on other issues related to the crisis in Syria. GOAL calls on Ireland at the UNSC to prioritise five actions:

1. Secure humanitarian access

- Prioritise a timely and predictable approach to the renewal of resolution 2533.
- Seek to maintain the existing cross-border access point at Bab al-Hawa.
- Closely monitor the status of the ceasefire in the North West and anticipate increased humanitarian need in the event of renewed fighting.

2. Protect humanitarian aid workers and civilians

- Closely monitor the implementation of global resolutions UNSCR 2175 and 2286, and Syrian resolutions UNSCR 2254 and 2139, which call for protection of civilians including aid workers in conflict.
- Insist on full implementation of ceasefire agreements by all parties to the conflict.
- Support independent monitoring of crimes under international law, including the UN General Assembly IIIM initiative, with a view to prosecution of war crimes committed by any parties to the conflict.

3. Support peacebuilding

- Emphasise the urgency of maintaining the current ceasefire in North West Syria, and nurture conditions of a future negotiated peace.
- Support UNSC Resolution 2254, and support efforts to bring all actors together under the associated peace talks.
- Prioritise Women Peace and Security, and Youth Peace and Security measures in peacebuilding initiatives.

4. Seek UN reform

- Support calls from the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for a global ceasefire in response to the crisis of COVID-19.
- Work for Security Council reform with an emphasis on reform of the P5 veto.
- Work with the ACT group at the UN to build a more open relationship between the Security Council and the wider UN system.

5. Pursue these goals in wider foreign policy

- Oppose any obligatory return of refugees to Syria. Any repatriation must be safe, voluntary and dignified.
- Cover the gaps in the humanitarian response to the Syria crisis, which received on 49% of the requested funding in 2020.
- Plan to ensure continuity of service in health centres and no funding gaps.
- Push for continued localisation in the Syrian response in accordance with the Grand Bargain in Humanitarian Operations, and the support of Syrian agencies, particularly those led by women and young people.

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