

**“11 Years of War: The Humanitarian Impact of the Ongoing Conflict in Syria”**

Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

Wednesday, March 16, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

As prepared

**Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, Members of the House Foreign Affairs  
Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism Subcommittee:**

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today’s hearing. My name is Jomana Qaddour, and I am a Senior Fellow at the Atlantic Council where I head the Syria project. I am here to speak solely in a personal capacity and my comments today do not reflect the institutional views of the Council.

**Overview of Humanitarian Situation**

I am heartened by your decision to hold a hearing focused on Syria, which remains a singular source of conflict and instability despite newer instances of war dominating the headlines. As images of Ukraine rightfully captivate international attention, Syria-watchers are reminded, painfully, of the conflict we have seen unfold over the last eleven years. Images of a bombed maternity hospital in Mariupol recall the 601 medical facilities destroyed in Syria<sup>1</sup>, 542 of those destroyed by Russian and Syrian government attacks. Today, despite an overall decrease in hostilities, the Syrian people endure the next phase of the conflict: a slow deterioration of conditions caused by the persistent threat of violence, political instability, lack of sustainable education or healthcare, economic precarity and disparity, and the COVID-19 pandemic, all of which have created serious obstacles for the quality of life for all Syrians, except for the Assad regime.

97% of Syrians live under the poverty line, and 80% of the population is food insecure, even though \$2.27 billion worth of UN aid was distributed across the country last year.<sup>2</sup> This has done little to offset needs, however, given the Syrian government’s chokehold over humanitarian aid operations and their manipulation of all aspects of the response across the country. Each year, humanitarian organizations operating in the north Syria are annually threatened with a UN Security Council veto by Russia to cut off all cross-border aid in an attempt to pressure donors to send all aid through Damascus. Russia has also tried to press strictly for cross-line aid deliveries from Damascus to north Syria. However, over the last eight months, only two cross-line deliveries were sent to the northwest, far too little for the three million people living there. But we

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<sup>1</sup> “Physicians for Human Rights’ Findings of Attacks on Health Care in Syria,” Physicians for Human Rights, last updated June 2021, <http://syriamap.phr.org/#/en/findings>.

<sup>2</sup> “Syrian Arab Republic 2021,” UNOCHA Financial Tracking Service, last updated 10 March 2021, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/218/summary/2021>.

know this is a pattern: we see this same predicament in northeast Syria since the Yaroubia crossing was shut down in 2019. Since then, the Syrian government holds all aid to the northeast hostage by restricting life-saving aid and limiting access for UN funding to loyalist supporters, rather than credible, local NGOs.

Syria is best understood in three distinct parts, with each part requiring different humanitarian needs. Northwest Syria is home to at least 3 million civilians, 80% of which have been displaced more than six times.<sup>3</sup> It is also the site of consistent attacks, despite a delicate, often-violated ceasefire forged by the Astana Process. According to the White Helmets, the Syrian and Russian governments perpetrated at least 1500 attacks in 2021 alone.

The predicament of Northwest Syria is further complicated by the presence of the National Salvation Government and its armed wing, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, the strongest military group in Syria's northwest. Although the group by and large allows humanitarian organizations to operate without intervention, local governance entities, education centers, women's facilities, journalists, and activists are often treated with hostility, threats, closures, and sometimes violence.

Meanwhile, international, diaspora, and local NGOs managing programs in northwest Syria struggle to operate, as budgets for international aid decrease due to COVID-19. And while the Biden administration may be considering easing sanctions on northeast Syria, such a proposal for civilians in Idlib remains unlikely due to the presence of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Likewise, stabilization funding to northwest Syria also remains extremely limited, placing an undue burden on humanitarian organizations with limited abilities or funding to promote governance and strategic humanitarian and economic development services in the area.

The next generation also continues to suffer the consequences of short-term aid and development policy in Syria: in addition to a lack of authorities leading education in northwest Syria, local organizations operating in this sector struggle as the criteria for what donors are willing to fund is increasingly narrowing. Funding is almost exclusively limited to primary education, and even that is short-term in length and prevents any medium- or long-term planning – meaning children do not have access to stable education systems or higher education, and even fewer have access to actual school buildings, due to systematic and ongoing attacks on such buildings by Russian and Syrian regime forces. With nearly 75% of the Syrians in need being women and children—we're not doing enough to aid the most vulnerable.

In government-controlled areas, the economic situation has undergone unprecedented decline, as corruption schemes monopolize the Syrian economy, cutting out average Syrians, and instead enriching select members of Bashar al-Assad's elite circle and Assad's military patrons, Iran and

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<sup>3</sup> Natasha Hall, "Rescuing Aid in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies Middle East Program, 14 February 2022, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220214\\_Hall\\_Rescuing\\_Aid\\_Syria.pdf?hG4dKipxCaBNDRDaezmDvn2lHVmr8937](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220214_Hall_Rescuing_Aid_Syria.pdf?hG4dKipxCaBNDRDaezmDvn2lHVmr8937).

Russia. Compounding the economic challenges, mass flight of Syria's young population is ongoing and due to arbitrary arrests, conscription, and lack of job opportunities, including the flight of businesspeople and former loyalists who see no future in a highly-securitized and corrupt state. The collapse of the Syrian pound and the Lebanese banking crisis have depressed and devastated the average Syrian's future. The cost of an average food basket increased by 97% between December 2020 and December 2021.<sup>4</sup> Today, the Russian war on Ukraine also increases the likelihood of famine and starvation, given Russia has cancelled its wheat contracts with Syria, which in recent years came to account for 25% of Syria's wheat.

Damascus also maintains a chokehold over UN operations, with resulting limits on monitoring and evaluation, procurement, and hiring. Although the UN is not subject to US and EU sanctions and therefore can work with sanctioned actors, it nonetheless is required, by its own supplier code of conduct, to "support and respect the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights and to ensure that they are not complicit in human rights abuses."<sup>5</sup> However, over the past several years, the UN's work with suppliers and contractors affiliated with human rights abusers or their close affiliates or business entities has been thoroughly documented. The United States is the single largest contributor to UN humanitarian operations worldwide and therefore has a central role to play in seeking accountability regarding these funds.

Finally, in northeast Syria, home to three million people located in an area with a small but critical U.S. military presence, 1.8 million people need humanitarian assistance and 630,000 remain in DP camps. Both widespread displacement and latent political violence continue to devastate the area, while grim environmental conditions – namely a lack of water – decrease agricultural production and further water-borne diseases. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies' new report, *Rescuing Aid in Syria*, since the 2019 closure of the Yaroubia border crossing, the UN was unable to collaborate with NGOs and suffers from too little access to pooled funds in Damascus. Security in northeast Syria remains tenuous as the Islamic State attempts to revive its presence – now accessing illicit resources other than oil, including theft of livestock, taxation, and international funding from supporters. Further, genuine social cohesion issues are rampant in areas held by the Syrian Democratic Forces due to marginalization of Arab communities and tribes amongst political and military leadership – all of which has inadvertently allowed the Islamic State to exploit social rifts. While the US leads in the repatriation of its foreign fighters, at least 10,000 fighters are housed in prisons, likely to become more of a security risk in the coming period. The al-Hol camp houses another 60,000 Islamic State fighters and their families, creating fears that a new generation of children are being radicalized.

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<sup>4</sup> "Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic," UNOCHA, February 2022, [https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/hno\\_2022\\_final\\_version\\_210222.pdf](https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/hno_2022_final_version_210222.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Natasha Hall, "Rescuing Aid in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies Middle East Program, 14 February 2022, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220214\\_Hall\\_Rescuing\\_Aid\\_Syria.pdf?hG4dKipxCaBNDRDaezmDvn2lHVmr8937](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220214_Hall_Rescuing_Aid_Syria.pdf?hG4dKipxCaBNDRDaezmDvn2lHVmr8937).

Finally, let me speak briefly about Rukban. The Rukban camp, located on the Syrian-Jordanian border near al-Tanf military base, which hosts U.S. forces, is the site of an unaddressed humanitarian catastrophe. The proximity of Rukban to the nearby U.S. base has prevented the regime and its allies from exterminating the camp's 10,000 residents, which includes former rebels but also almost 6,000 children. However, they remain stranded, with no prospect of security or stability.

The Russian and Syrian governments have denied entry to humanitarian convoys since February 2019, leaving Rukban without access to medical care, education, and food.<sup>6</sup> Jordan has refused to admit the camp's residents due to security concerns. Individuals who have consented, out of desperation, to relocate from the camp into Syrian regime-held areas have been treated with hostility, detained, or disappeared. Rukban's residents instead have pled for relocation to non-government held areas, a prospect continuously denied by all actors.

Let me end by providing some recommendations for the Committee to consider:

- First, ensure that UN humanitarian operations continue in northwest Syria this July when the UN cross-border resolution comes up for renewal, even if the US and its allies must consider an alternative plan to ensure crossings into northwest and northeast Syria. Given broader tensions with Russia over Ukraine, an independent approach may be needed, in concert with supporting partners like Turkey.
- Second, the US government should lead in ensuring that accountability is integrated into global humanitarian policy. This means effective audits for all UN funding the United States contributes, to ensure that American tax dollars reach the most vulnerable rather than corrupt actors.
- Third, ensure that early recovery aid, a crucial part of this administration's strategy, benefits all areas of Syria, including northwest Syria, where medium-term funding and support for governance and development is critical. Additionally, stabilization funding should be pursued robustly in both northwest and northeast Syria.
- Fourth, encourage carving out exemptions from economic sanctions in northeast Syria if we are to make it prosper and remain stable.
- Fifth, education should be a key priority area for all donors across all contexts in Syria, including funding primary, secondary, and higher education programming like online university and college degrees, given the massive flight of Syria's educated class, and to

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Hagedorn, "Lawmakers urge US action on Syria's crisis-hit Rukban camp," *Al-Monitor*, 7 March 2022, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/lawmakers-urge-us-action-syrias-crisis-hit-rukban-camp>

prevent child exploitation, including child labor, early marriage, and prevent recruitment by extremist groups.

- Sixth, the US government should lead legal efforts to ensure assets seized from Russian officials as a result of the Ukraine war sanctions be allocated to rebuild and restore areas outside of government-held Syria given they too have suffered from Russian military attacks.
- Seventh, financially support diaspora organizations, like the American Relief Coalition for Syria, made up of ten Syrian American humanitarian organizations that have implemented about \$1 billion worth of aid programs, given their strong connections with local Syrians as well as their ties to the United States.
- Finally, ensure immediate access to humanitarian aid to civilians in Rukban and facilitate their passage to north Syria as they have requested.