Earthquake Aftermath: Aiding Northwest Syria Without Rehabilitating Assad

Jesse Marks and Hardin Lang
Executive Summary

On February 6, a series of deadly earthquakes struck Syria and Türkiye, upending the lives of millions. Search and rescue teams and other forms of international aid poured into Türkiye. However, little of that initial aid made its way into Northwest Syria, where the earthquake took a harrowing toll. Over 4,500 Syrians perished and more than 10,000 were injured. The destruction was immediate and extensive – over 10,600 buildings lay in full or partial ruin, and an estimated 103,000 people were rendered immediately homeless. Millions more were cut off from international support. The earthquake shattered critical humanitarian operations, forcing Syrian organizations to respond alone.

In those early days, the affected communities in Northwest Syria felt abandoned by the outside world. This was exacerbated by the failure of international aid agencies to extend “duty of care” and other forms of support to help Syrian implementing partners in the Northwest to recover from the earthquake and maintain continuity of operations. The earthquake aftermath also accelerated diplomatic normalization between Middle Eastern countries and the government in Damascus – a move many in Syrian civil society consider a betrayal and expect to come at their expense.

The international aid architecture for Northwest Syria has evolved in the aftermath of the earthquake. The Syrian government permitted aid agencies to use additional border crossings as part of the relief effort. UN staff moved away from remote management and began carrying out cross-border missions into Northwest Syria to assess the damage and deliver assistance – reportedly with the consent of Damascus. Other initiatives – like calls for more crossline aid and the opening of a UN office in Northwest Syria – have yet to bear fruit.

Two key elements of the cross-border relief effort remain works in progress. First, aid localization lags far behind the rhetorical commitment of donors and aid agencies alike. The longstanding failure to invest more explicitly in a locally led response translated into a lack of tangible, adequate mechanisms to get large-scale aid into the hands of local Syrian NGOs in affected areas. It is past time for donors and international aid groups alike to begin shifting greater resources and operational influence to Syrian civil society organizations. An immediate measure would be to scale up support through locally focused pooled funds like the UN Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) and the newly minted Aid Fund for Northwest Syria (AFNS).

Second, early recovery projects – those which aim to restore basic services, build resilience, and reduce dependency on aid – also remain underfunded. For years, communities in Northwest Syria have urged aid agencies to move beyond emergency response. This included outstanding requests for more durable shelter support and a shift away from emergency rations. The destruction the earthquake wrought has brought this issue once again into focus.

Having endured natural disaster on top of conflict, communities in Northwest Syria now face a familiar third test. In July, the United Nations Security Council will once again consider the renewal of the mandate of the UN cross-border aid mechanism for Northwest Syria. The threat of a Russian veto hangs over a shortened six-month mandate, even as aid agencies struggle to respond to a new disaster. The UN’s internal estimates paint a bleak picture of their ability to deliver in the event of non-renewal. The earthquake has clearly exacerbated the situation. Unfortunately, UN contingency planning for non-renewal has suffered because of February’s disaster.
Finally, the regime’s decisions to allow UN agencies to use two additional border crossings and to send staff into Northwest Syria have accentuated concerns over non-renewal. These events appear to pave the way for an aid architecture underpinned by regime consent. But such a move would be premature, overlooking the regime’s bloody track record and the concerns voiced by local Syrian NGOs. For now, renewing the cross-border resolution represents the most effective means for ensuring cross-border aid. In the event of non-renewal, Western donors should push for the decoupling of the UN cross-border mechanism authorization from the UN Security Council, a position meticulously outlined by the UN Independent Commission on Syria, the American Relief Coalition for Syria, and international legal scholars.

**Recommendations**

**To UN Security Council Member States:**

- The UNSC should authorize UN agencies to provide cross-border aid access through three border crossings – Bab al-Hawa, Bab al-Salam, and Al-Ra’ee – for Northwest Syria for a minimum of 12 months. The P3 – the United States, UK, and France – should also ramp up diplomatic outreach to other Council members, especially those involved in the diplomatic normalization of the government of Syria. The role of UK, as the presidency of the UNSC during July, will be critical for advancing outreach and negotiations with the penholders – Switzerland and Brazil – to ensure there is broader buy-in across the Council.

**To United Nations:**

- The UN Secretary General should publicly advocate for the renewal of the cross-border resolution to UN Security Council members. A lack of clarity on the UN’s position has heightened concerns among NGOs and civil society that senior UN officials may not advocate as hard for renewal as in previous years. This could impact the position of some members of the Council. The UN Secretary General should use his June report to the UN Security Council in advance of the July vote to make the case for renewal. Support and fund refugee-led and local organizations that work on provision of services for refugees and on protection and legal assistance of Rohingya detained in India.

- UN agencies should maintain staff access into Northwest Syria and expand infrastructure to support official cross-border missions. The UN can expand its footprint at Reyhanli or near the border to improve its capacity to undertake cross-border missions more conveniently. This would reduce the commute time for UN staff currently departing from Gaziantep and give UN staff more time in local communities in Northwest Syria. Meanwhile, the UN should refrain from setting up physical offices inside Northwest Syria until the reporting relationship to the UN office in Damascus is clarified.

- UN agencies, in coordination with donors and INGOs, should explore options for supporting Syrian NGOs and their staff impacted by the earthquake. It is critical that UN agencies, donors, and INGOs acknowledge the direct impact of the earthquake on Syrian
NGOs and enhance “duty of care” and other forms of support to help aid workers affected get back on their feet. The failure of the international community to support aid workers when it was needed most must also not be repeated for future disaster responses.

- **UN agencies should undertake a transparent and coordinated contingency planning exercise with international and Syrian NGOs to prepare for non-renewal.** The lesson of the earthquake aftermath clearly reflected that when cross-border access is lost, Syrian NGOs are called upon to fill the gap. In preserving cross-border aid, UN agencies should work proactively with international and Syrian NGOs and their representative bodies – e.g. the Humanitarian Liaison Group, NW NGO Forum, Syria NGO Alliance, and the Syrian International NGO Regional Forum – to devise a strategy and transition plan for investing in a locally led cross-border response in the event of non-renewal. This planning should build on previous internal UN assessments of post non-renewal delivery capacity, albeit updated for earthquake relief efforts.

- **UN OCHA should commit to maintain humanitarian coordination for the Northwest of Syria from Gaziantep in the event of non-renewal.** The continuity of humanitarian cluster coordination will be imperative to sustain sector-specific coordination between Syrian NGOs and INGOs inside Northwest Syria. OCHA previously assured Refugees International of the continuity of the cluster system in Türkiye through a “lite” coordination model, comprising the core coordination functions but at a smaller scale. OCHA should ensure that any model deployed can maintain logistic coordination in addition to other critical functions, such as humanitarian access coordination and negotiations.

- **UN OCHA should commit to maintain humanitarian access coordination and negotiations with local authorities in the event of non-renewal.** This critical function is important for ensuring humanitarian access continues across the region. If OCHA is unable to continue to sustain access coordination and negotiations in the event of non-renewal, it should work in advance to build the capacity of UN agencies to negotiate on behalf of INGOs inside of Northwest Syria.

- **The UN-led Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) and the Aid Fund for North Syria (AFNS) should work together to define a clear set of priorities and division of labor.** Finalizing the negotiations over a complementary memorandum that is reportedly under development is an important next step. The two funds should share information and best practices on partners to harmonize the vetting processes of both funds and streamline granting modalities for local partners. The AFNS should leverage its mandate to fund early recovery to jump start that sector. The two funds should develop a shared contingency plan to shift resources and grantees to the AFNS in the event of non-renewal.

**To Donors:**

- **Donors should robustly fund the Syria Humanitarian Response Plan.** While the UN rapid appeal for the earthquake was fully funded, the HRP remains woefully underfunded at less than 8 percent, a gap of $5.4 billion, for the requested 2023 needs. The needs across Syria have reached an all-time high following the earthquake, exacerbating an already protracted crisis. Urge UNHCR to take a stronger stance against government intimidation and restrictions on activities in support of refugees. Support NGOs facing such
intimidation through private and public engagement with Indian officials.

- **Donors should invest in a locally led response and push international aid agencies to do the same.** The international aid agencies remain heavily reliant on international actors who lack the same level of connectivity and robust capacity to respond in a timely and efficient manner as their local counterparts. Two immediate steps by donors could help achieve this: increasing contributions to multi-donor pooled funds like the Aid Fund for Northwest Syria (AFNS) and expanding direct funding to Syrian NGOs operating in Northwest Syria.

- **Donors should increasingly shift from emergency response programming to early recovery projects that cultivate long-term resilience in Northwest Syria.** This should include an expanded early recovery agenda targeting the rehabilitation of vital infrastructure, water systems, healthcare infrastructure, and dignified shelter. Donors should focus on protracted needs in the education sector, livelihood programs, and the growth of local value chains and sourcing. These activities should build the resilience of local communities. The AFNS has an important role to play as a vehicle to fund early recovery.

**To the government of Türkiye:**

- **Türkiye should quickly re-establish and expand the cross-border medical referral system for emergency medical cases requiring treatment in Turkish hospitals.** After the earthquake, the referral system was cut off due to border closures, overcapacity hospitals, and the prioritization of Turkish citizens. This fixture of the Northwest Syria-Türkiye relationship is a critical pillar in the provision of timely and lifesaving aid to Syrians, particularly for those requiring advanced treatments for cancer, chronic diseases, and other non-communicable diseases.

- **Türkiye should continue to provide a permissive operating environment for INGOs and SNGOs operating in the Northwest.** As Türkiye engages in normalization discussions with the Syrian government, Ankara should sustain policies that enable international and Syrian NGOs operating inside Türkiye and Northwest Syria to take on a greater role in the cross-border aid delivery operation. This also includes providing pathways for Syrian NGO workers and staff to legally reside and work in Türkiye.

**To the government of the United States:**

- **The Biden administration should set a clear policy on preserving, protecting, and enhancing the humanitarian response in Syria, particularly in the Northwest.** This policy should clearly define U.S. humanitarian priorities aimed at insulating the humanitarian response from the geopolitical implications of normalization. U.S. officials should publicly reinforce a U.S. commitment to a principled humanitarian response at the UN Security Council in July, while also continuing to work with Türkiye and Syrian civil society to ensure cross-border aid remains open.
Methodology

This report is based on Refugees International research conducted in Türkiye in May 2023, as well as via virtual interviews with relevant actors, stakeholders, and UN agencies in the Middle East, United States, and Europe. This report serves as a timely update to the 2022 Refugees International and Syria Northwest Aid Continuation Task Force (SNACTF) joint report for sustaining cross-border aid in Northwest Syria following the February 6 earthquakes, which caused untold damage and disaster across Southwest Türkiye and Northern Syria.

Background

Before the Earthquake

Established in 2014, the UN cross-border mechanism is a lifeline for millions in Northwest Syria. This mechanism originally enabled aid delivery from Türkiye, Iraq, and Jordan. But since 2018, Russia has gradually reduced the number of authorized crossings from four to one, and the approval period from twelve to six months. The resolution’s six-month window placed significant constraints on cross-border aid. Humanitarian organizations have criticized the six-month authorization as woefully inadequate. The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths has observed that the shortened time frame “led to additional logistical and operational challenges, increased operational costs, and curb the capacity of humanitarian partners.”

Russia has also threatened to veto the resolution if there was not greater progress on crossline assistance from Damascus. As a result, UN agencies and Member States have sought to increase the frequency of crossline deliveries but with little success. Most Syrian humanitarian actors remain skeptical of crossline as a reliable modality over concerns of aid diversion and politicization. The risk of a Russian veto has also translated into a highly volatile aid environment. In 2022, OCHA assessed in an internal report that over $470 million in planned UN activities would be lost in the event of non-renewal.

Disaster Strikes

On February 6, a series of deadly earthquakes struck Türkiye and Syria, immediately impacting millions of people. With over 4,500 Syrians dead, more than 10,000 injured, and approximately 103,000 instantly homeless, the earthquake’s brutal aftermath left a ravaged landscape and cut off millions from international aid. Amid this catastrophic destruction, Syrian NGOs and first responders battled with immense humanitarian needs, while overcrowded hospitals and camps teetered on the edge of chaos and the constant threat of aftershocks pervaded.

The earthquake shattered critical humanitarian infrastructure, disrupted cross-border aid, killed humanitarian staff, and left many seeking temporary refuge. The crisis effectively halted the UN’s activities in the region. The Turkish government, grappling with its own domestic crisis, shifted focus away from Northwest Syria. Critical support services like emergency medical referrals ceased as Turkish hospitals prioritized their own citizens. Commercial ties were also disrupted, depriving Northwest Syria of access to basic goods.
In the aftermath, Syrian NGOs and civil society appealed for international support for emergency search and rescue efforts but received little to no assistance. While the Syrian government requested and obtained support from seven UNDAC teams in government-controlled areas, Northwest Syria saw no such assistance. UN officials disclosed to Refugees International that attempts to deploy international search and rescue teams stationed in Türkiye to Northwest Syria were rebuffed, as these units operate under their home countries’ authority, not UN authority, and respond to host country requests. Consequently, Syrian civil society and local organizations were forced to go at it alone.

The United Nations cross-border operation for Northwest Syria faced immediate hurdles. The UN-authorized Bab al Hawa border crossing took three days to become fully operational. UN officials told Refugees International that the staff responsible for managing the cross-border transshipment hub were greatly affected by the earthquake’s destruction in Hatay. Tragically, a UN staff member responsible for managing the cross-border hub perished when their hotel collapsed.

Despite these hardships, UN staff managed to reopen the transshipment hub in Türkiye just two days. However, the physical border couldn’t be opened due to the absence of Turkish border officials, who had been severely affected by the disaster. Meanwhile, crossline deliveries from Damascus also failed to materialize due to reports of regime aid obstruction and diversion, as well as a staunch unwillingness from local authorities in the Northwest to cooperate.

Although the UN gradually reinstated the cross-border mechanism, reputational damage was done. Martin Griffiths, OCHA Director, publicly acknowledged that “We have so far failed the people in north-west Syria. They rightly feel abandoned. Looking for international help that hasn't arrived. My duty and our obligation is to correct this failure as fast as we can.” The UNSC’s failure to approve additional border crossings, despite availability, exacerbated the issue. It also took the Syrian government almost a week to permit UN access via the Bab al Salam and Al Ra’ee crossings, despite persistent international appeals.

**Relations between the International Community and Syrian Civil Society**

**Abandonment and Concerns over Normalization**

Following the earthquake, tension rose between the United Nations and their Syrian civil society partners. Syrian civil society felt abandoned by the outside world during the early days of the earthquake response, severely damaging trust in following months. The robust international relief effort for the victims of the quake in Türkiye stood in marked contrast to what Syrian partners witnessed on their side of the border. This is particularly true of search and rescue. This sense of abandonment was exacerbated by the failure of international aid agencies to extend duty of care support to the staff of their Syrian implementing partners (see below).

More broadly, Syrian civil society is understandably suspicious of any arrangements that premise the continuation of the humanitarian response on the consent of the Assad regime. Syria’s re-
turn to the Arab League, high-level visits from senior foreign officials to Damascus, and a lack of vocal opposition from western countries – accompany significant shifts in the aid environment in Northwest Syria following the disaster. The visits of senior UN officials to Damascus and the role of Assad’s consent in opening new border crossings and facilitating new humanitarian action are fueling speculation that the UN is moving away from Gaziantep and towards Damascus.

For their part, United Nations officials are sensitive to what they consider to be an unfair critique of their performance in the initial phase of the earthquake response. A number of UN staff were killed, injured, or made homeless in the earthquake. Many spent the initial hours and days caring for themselves, their families, and their colleagues. At the same time, UN agencies note that they released prepositioned goods inside northwest Syria within 24 hours of the earthquake and began to move new aid convoys across the border within three days of the disaster.

**Duty of Care and Continuity of Operations**

The question of “duty of care” for aid workers responding to the impact of the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria was perhaps the most contentious issue raised by Syrian NGOs. United Nations and most – if not all – international NGOs provided international and national staff with some form of “duty of care” – a term used by [international](#) and Syrian NGOs operating in Northwest Syria to refer to both support to aid workers affected by the earthquake as well as the funds necessary to continue operations – to help staff recover. Indeed, many UN and INGO staff on both sides of the Türkiye-Syrian border lost their lives or property or were injured during the earthquake and required some form of assistance to get back on their feet so they could respond to the needs of others.

However, every Syrian NGO or civil society organization the Refugees International team interviewed observed that they had been largely forgotten by their international partners when it came to such financial support. Donors and international aid agencies either neglected or refused to supply duty of care payments for their Syrian partners. Several Syrian organizations who did engage with donors directly were told to reallocate funds from existing programs or from their overhead budget (which, in contrast to INGO overhead rates, often accounts for less than 10 percent and is nowhere near sufficient). This was confirmed by a major donor who told Refugees International that their implementing partners could reallocate from other program budgets.

The dearth of financial support for duty of care made it deeply challenging for Syrian organizations to recover quickly. Plans to address duty of care for local groups are now underway in various aid coordination platforms in Gaziantep. But these efforts are forward-looking and designed to address a future disaster rather than manage the fallout of the February earthquake.

**Humanitarian Aid Architecture after the Earthquake**

The international aid architecture for Northwest Syria has evolved significantly in the aftermath of the earthquake. Two new cross-border access points and road missions of UN staff into the Northwest have led to improvements in the delivery of assistance. But other initiatives like the call for more crossline aid and discussions around the opening of a UN office in Northwest Syria
have yet to pay off. These changes are occurring against the backdrop of a dynamic political environment in which diplomatic normalization between the Assad regime and the Arab world has accelerated significantly.

Sanctions

Following the earthquake, the U.S. Treasury Department issued Syria General License (GL) 23, authorizing transactions for earthquake relief for 180 days. This aimed to reassure partners, financial institutions, and NGOs that earthquake relief would not be hindered by existing Syria sanctions. This enabled organizations and individuals involved in grassroots fundraising and crowdsourcing to send funds to humanitarian organizations and NGOs operating on the ground. It also permitted foreign governments to provide aid to Syria, a move that critics have argued enabled Arab Gulf states to speed up normalization by funding the regime.

GL 23 has not fully assuaged NGO concerns about the impact of sanctions on aid, but has demonstrated some flexibility on the part of the Biden administration. The future renewal of GL 23, due to expire on August 8, remains uncertain, and its potential loss could disrupt NGO fundraising and operations due to a loss of confidence from financial institutions.

Two New Crossing Points

On February 13, the Syrian regime authorized two additional crossings for three months at Bab al Salam and Al Ra'ee for UN access, which were extended through August 14. This was the first time the regime consented to cross-border humanitarian access since the establishment of the UN cross-border mechanism in 2014. The opening of these two new crossing points was welcomed by UN officials and most aid organizations, and resulted in an improvement of aid flows primarily through Bab al Salam. Although 80 percent of aid to Northwest Syria still flows through Bab al Hawa, the new crossings account for 20 percent of total cross-border aid, while also serving as critical access points for UN road missions to harder-to-reach area. As a result, UN staff have better access and proximity to displaced communities.

Crossline Delivery

The movement of crossline humanitarian assistance continues to fall far short of the needs in Northwest Syria. Since 2018, attempts by Russia and the government of Syria to push the delivery of crossline humanitarian assistance from Damascus have only led to a handful of convoys per year. These deliveries have been riddled with issues. Local authorities in Northwest Syria often block or refused to cooperate with either the UN or the Syrian regime regarding these deliveries. Furthermore, the Syrian government has a long history of restricting humanitarian actors and access to needy populations. More recently, new reports documenting state-led diversion operations during earthquake relief operations have further heightened suspicion and distrust.

Since the earthquake, UN agencies and Syrian NGOs report that there has only one successful delivery relief aid via the crossline modality since the earthquake. One NGO worker familiar with the delivery told Refugees International that the food aid delivered as part of the convoy was “unfit for human consumption.” More broadly, no UN agency or NGO interviewed by Refugees
International in Gaziantep believed that crossline assistance can realistically meet the humanitarian needs in Northwest Syria. These views echo statements made by OCHA Executive Director Martin Griffith and UN heads of agencies asserting that crossline deliveries “…cannot match the scale and scope of cross-border operations, which is and will continue to be indispensable.”

Access for UN Staff to Northwest Syria

Following the earthquake, UN staff entered Northwest Syria as part of the relief operation for the first time in years. For years, aid agencies have implemented remotely through Syrian NGOs and civil society groups. In the days following the earthquake, UN staff launched road missions to communities affected by the disaster. Over time, these missions branched out, covering the remainder of Northwest Syria to assess and coordinate efforts to meet the protracted needs of other communities. Over the last three months, almost one hundred such road missions have been conducted.

UN agencies welcomed this new physical access. Their staff have been able to observe their programs firsthand, meet their implementing partners in the field, and visit the communities they serve. As one senior official put it, “now we can finally see what is working and what is not.” At least one agency has already begun to adjust its programming because of these field visits. Physical access has also opened the possibility for a shift towards area-based coordination models, which provide greater opportunity to engage and empower local communities in relief efforts.

The rationale as to why UN staff are now able to enter Northwest Syria after years of remote implementation from Türkiye remains unclear. Some UN officials explained that, following the earthquake, the UN had reinterpreted the Security Council cross-border mandate to allow the entrance of staff into Syria. The other and more widely shared explanation was that the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths secured verbal permission from Syrian President Assad to send UN staff into the Northwest during a February 13 visit to Damascus. The clear and demonstrable value of staff access coupled with the apparently precarious foundation upon which it is based would suggest that action is needed.

Too Early for Permanent UN Presence

Following the earthquake, the United Nations floated the possibility of opening an office in Northwest Syria. However, many Syrian NGOs and civil society organizations in NW Syria are unenthusiastic about the prospect of a new UN office. This is largely because it remains unclear whether such an office would report to the UN office in Gaziantep or the UN headquarters in Damascus. Syrian civil society is concerned that the UN would only establish a permanent office after receiving the greenlight from the Syrian government. As one leading Syrian NGO put it, “we welcome the new road missions, but not a new UN office if that office answers to Damascus. The UN won’t offer us any assurances and normalization isn’t happening…”

However, these discussions may be premature given operational, logistical, and security challenges. Most benefits of a static presence can be achieved through frequent road missions. Establishing a field office in Northwest Syria prior to the July renewal vote appears imprudent. Instead, the focus should be on building sub-offices and accommodations in Reyhanlı, Türkiye to serve as a staging ground to maintain or even expand the current tempo of road missions.
Moving Beyond Emergency Assistance

The UN flash appeal for the earthquake mobilized nearly $400 million in donor funding for earthquake relief, but little has been earmarked for early recovery activities. Early recovery projects are critical for restoring basic and essential services, building resiliency in local communities, and reducing affected communities’ dependency on aid providers. These can encompass a range of activities, including repairing roads and infrastructure, livelihood support, and rehabilitating damaged hospitals and markets.

The small amount of early recovery assistance provided as part of the earthquake response was earmarked for debris removal and limited rehabilitation of damaged infrastructure. Syrian NGOs almost universally told Refugees International the level of support is insufficient and must expand beyond rubble removal and focus on building resilience across all sectors. International aid workers mostly shared this perspective – a position Refugees International has advocated previously. There is an emerging consensus on the importance of early recovery among donors, including by the United States. On June 20, 2022, Ambassador Linda Thomas Greenfield affirmed the importance of early recovery as “an important component of sustain response efforts.” This was reiterated by the UN Secretary General following the earthquake.

However, mobilizing early recovery funds from donors before and after the earthquake has yielded little success. Several factors may be at play. First, early recovery often requires longer-term contracts and commitments for the completion of projects. Current projects in Northwest Syria funded by the UN, under the current cross-border resolution, are limited to six-months. Second, early recovery in Northwest Syria often gets unfairly categorized as benefiting the Assad regime. In his January 2023 letter, U.S. Chairman of the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Michael McCaul argued that” ...more investment in Syria in any form is a form of normalization...” with the regime. While such comments are often directed toward activities occurring in regime-held areas, little attention is paid to differentiate between early recovery in regime from non-regime held territories. Lastly, the line between early recovery, which is implemented by aid organizations, and reconstruction, which is implemented by a state, remains opaque in the case of Northwest Syria. Due to the lack of guardrails in place to define early recovery activities, the fear is that some forms early recovery in Syria could be construed as reconstruction and trigger U.S. sanctions. The pooled funds provide one potential avenue where donors can contribute indirectly to support early recovery projects in Northwest Syria.

This focus on early recovery is particularly important if Russia vetoes the resolution in July. The Syria Cross-Border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) – the UN’s primary vehicle for early recovery activities – would close in July if the resolution is not renewed, resulting in a loss of $131 million and impacting an estimated 2.7 million Syrians, according to the aforementioned 2022 internal UN assessment viewed by Refugees International. This would result in the loss of approximately half of all early recovery activities in the Northwest. AFNS early recovery grants could bridge the gap between the earthquake response and early recovery if the SCHF closes. It provides an alternative option for some donors hesitant to indirectly support early recovery projects and avoid domestic legal restraints which restrain direct financing (see section on “Deploying Funds Locally” below for more details).
The Renewal of the Cross-border Mechanism

The next UN Security Council vote to renew the cross-border mechanism in July will be highly consequential. In recent years, this UN mechanism – and the aid delivered through it – have experienced a number of shortcomings. These include a failure to engage and empower civil society and help communities recover in Northwest Syria more fully. Indeed, many of these challenges have been on display since February. If the Council fails to renew the resolution, the people of Northwest Syria still reeling from the earthquake will pay the price.

Concerning Estimates of Impact of a Non-renewal on Aid Delivery

The potential loss of the cross-border aid mechanism if not renewed in the upcoming UN Security Council vote in July could lead to a disruption or cessation of nearly 88 percent of all humanitarian relief activities, according to an internal 2022 UN assessment viewed by Refugees International. This scenario takes on a new significance following the earthquake.

In the shelter sector, non-renewal would severely jeopardize ongoing efforts to respond to the increased demand following the earthquake, including for the provision of dignified shelter. It would also impact ongoing efforts to respond to more protracted needs by undercutting shelter coordination, camp management, and multisector service delivery for the 1.8 million internally displaced Syrians already living in the formal camps. For as many as 1 million displaced Syrians, this would mean remaining inside a tent for the foreseeable future with few hopes of finding more dignified shelter.

Northwest Syria’s health sector, having already survived nearly 12 years of intentional targeting by regime attacks, was severely diminished by the earthquake. One Syrian doctor told Refugees International that “one earthquake equals roughly one year of conflict in terms of the scale of infrastructure damage and lives lost. We have experienced twelve years of war.” The risk of non-renewal could push the region’s health sector to the breaking point. Without the UN’s support, a major Syrian medical NGO noted that it would be unable to provide critical services at the same scale and level of access across Northwest Syria. The closure of the cross-border mechanism could also result in the loss of WHO support for the delivery of essential medicines and life-saving equipment.

Food insecurity also remains a major concern in the event of non-renewal. An estimated 15 million Syrians are currently food insecure, including most in the Northwest. The earthquake exacerbated these conditions and amplified dependence on World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF food assistance. Without cross-border aid, an estimated 1.4 million Syrians could lose regular food assistance, and around 400,000 internally displaced people could lose access to emergency food distribution. While Turkish aid organizations and commercial procurement could provide some alternative procurement and delivery options, the lack of UN oversight may compromise transparency in aid delivery.

Women and children, who form the majority in IDP camps, would be severely affected by the closure of the cross-border mechanism. These vulnerable groups already face considerable risks, including gender-based violence (GBV) and other harmful coping strategies, which according to a Syrian NGO worker, have only escalated due to the earthquake, reversing any progress made earlier. Consequently, these adverse conditions could have a profound impact on their mental.
health. If the cross-border mechanism is not renewed, the crucial protection programs might be discontinued, along with the cessation of training, support, and interventions provided by UN agencies. This could potentially increase risks for women and children, particularly if the existing protective measures are compromised, resulting in a more precarious environment in the camps.

Absence of Coordinated Non-renewal Contingency or Continuity Planning

Serious contingency planning for the potential non-renewal of the UN cross-border aid mechanism remains either wanting or largely internal to specific aid agencies. Although such planning has been conducted in the past, UN officials acknowledge that they are running behind now due to the earthquake relief efforts. To the extent that such planning is underway, international NGOs and Syrian relief groups outside the UN system do not appear to have visibility of the process. The UN will need to engage more proactively with its international and Syrian partners. Moreover, there is a lack of clarity regarding the future status of UN coordination mechanisms in the event of a non-renewal. An UN official involved in the UN Coordination Cluster system noted that OCHA has proposed an “OCHA lite” model, where the cluster system in Gaziantep continues to support aid coordination inside Northwest Syria. This model would likely consist of a scaled down OCHA presence. However, the UN has yet to provide a clear idea of what Syrian and international NGOs should expect in the event of non-renewal. As a result, some groups have already begun exploring alternative coordination mechanisms. One leading Syrian NGO representative in the health sector noted a series of efforts to establish an alternative health cluster in the Northwest. Refugees International also spoke with other NGOs who were aware of similar efforts across other clusters.

Importance of UN Humanitarian Access to Continued Coordination with the Local Authorities in Northwest Syria

Currently, OCHA in Türkiye plays a critical role in coordinating humanitarian access with the interim authorities in Northwest Syria. This task is complicated by the presence of Hay’at Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a U.S.-listed terrorist group, and its affiliate, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG). Similar complexities arise in areas controlled by the Syrian Interim Government (SIG), a coalition of Turkish-backed factions, north of Idlib. Despite humanitarian carveouts, sanctions on armed groups like HTS continue to cast a long shadow on aid operations. Many international NGOs and UN agencies, wary of direct contact with HTS or SSG, entrust coordination with these groups to OCHA.

This raises the question of how such humanitarian access negotiations and coordination would be carried out in the event of non-renewal. Humanitarian access and dialogue with the local authorities is reportedly improving now that UN staff can travel around Northwest Syria. If the UN in Gaziantep were to cease operations, such access negotiations in their current form could well come to an end. Even in the event of the continuation of a light UN presence to assist with coordination and contracting, it is hard to see how humanitarian access requiring direct contact with representatives of the local authorities in Northwest Syria would be allowed. As one senior international NGO representative put it, “the UN cross border resolution allows the humanitarian system to speak to the local authorities in Northwest Syria. We could not do what the UN does...” when to comes to humanitarian access.
Deploying More Funds Locally

The surge in earthquake relief to UN agencies and INGOs did not necessarily trickle down to Syrian NGOs in Northwest Syria, except for a few organizations who received direct donor funds. Pooled funds have assumed a greater role in funding local NGOs. Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF), the largest UN pooled-fund in Syria, and the Aid Fund for North Syria (AFNS), a multi-donor localization pooled fund launched in 2022, have acted as conduits for channeling donor contributions locally.

Both funds have deployed timely earthquake relief funds to support Syrian NGOs across the border in a de-facto trial run. On February 21, the SCHF allocated $50 million reserve allocation in two phases, with the initial $30 million distributed two weeks after the earthquake. Meanwhile, the AFNS also delivered their first special allocation of $32.5 million, 67 percent of which was directly allocated to Syrian NGOs, according to AFNS numbers viewed by Refugees International. The funds directly supported four priority areas: cash assistance; health, nutrition, and WASH; education and child protection; and emergency response.

Coordination between the AFNS and SCHF remains a work in progress. The funds are in the process of finalizing a concept paper outlining complementarity between the two funds, but those familiar with the consultations told Refugees International it has been a contentious process. The funds have yet to set out protocols for coordination or establish a clear division of labor, which is a missed opportunity, given the SCHF is a relatively strong institution with significant capacity to disburse money quickly. Sharing information on vetted partners should be a priority. While the AFNS is not part of the UN cluster system, it actively coordinates with it, integrating its operations into the wider cross-border humanitarian planning.

Long-term, these pooled funds are vital for channeling international aid directly to local front-line responders. However, robust donor support is essential. To date, the scale of aid falls short of what is needed to empower local entities to meet both escalating post-earthquake needs on top of protection needs. In 2022, the SCHF received $114 million in donor contributions and allocated $136 million to support 76 local projects in NW Syria, accounting for 12 percent of the 2022 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan. In the first quarter of 2023, a total of $62.5 million was allocated to Syrian NGOs via both the SCHF and the AFNS pooled funds. For comparison, this is insufficient to cover the potential gap created by the UN’s projected loss of $471 million in UN-funded services in the event of non-renewal, according to an internal UN assessment that Refugees International viewed.

For its part, the AFNS still needs time to mature. One way to build complementarianism is through the timely deployment of funds for early recovery projects even as it prepares for a significant humanitarian role in the event of non-renewal. While the SCHF funding cycle is limited to the resolution’s six-month cycle, the AFNS can develop longer term programming and serve as a bridge from humanitarian aid to early recovery inside Northwest Syria.
Conclusion: The Way Ahead

Millions of Syrians are again subjected to unprecedented uncertainty as their futures hang in the balance in what has become a disaster zone layered upon a war zone. Within the Council, the biggest change ahead of the July vote is the regime’s decision to consent to UN cross-border operations at two additional border crossings. This marks the first time since 2014 that the Syrian regime has authorized UN access to Northwest Syria, a move which was welcomed by the UN and most aid organizations. The Syrian regime could extend its consent to include Bab al Hawa prior to the vote and push the Council debate away from renewal toward shifting to a consent-based authorization.

The United States, UK, and France (P3) should push the Council to ensure that the resolution is renewed with an extended window of 12 months, a position argued by Martin Griffiths and UN heads of agency in January 2023. This authorization offers stronger assurance of the continuity of cross-border aid and access into Northwest Syria following the earthquake than regime consent. While additional consent for cross border aid by the regime is indeed welcome, it is insufficient to meet Syria’s obligations under international humanitarian law, especially considering the regime’s bloody history of aid denial. Sole reliance on a consent-based aid system without some form of insurance cannot guarantee the same predictability, sustainability, and durability offered by the UN resolution.

Meanwhile, ahead of the July vote, UN Secretary General and UN heads of agency need to publicly advocate for the renewal of the resolution with UNSC members. This is particularly important now that UN agencies have seen firsthand the scale of need on-the-ground in Northwest Syria after the earthquake. Some Syrian civil society leaders expressed concern over a lack of public advocacy since the earthquake by senior UN officials for the renewal of the UN cross-border resolution in July, a marked contrast to previous renewals. These fears emanate from a growing transparency gap between UN agencies and Syrian NGOs and the simultaneous strengthening of relations between UN senior staff and the Syrian regime.

Moving away from the resolution may appeal to other Council members like China, who underscore national sovereignty, but should be opposed by P3 Members. Russia’s position will remain unpredictable until the final days before the vote. Moscow may support the shift in authorization for cross-border to Damascus away from the resolution. But Russia may also choose to renew the resolution, but leverage the negotiation process to exact Western concessions for increased crossline deliveries and early recovery in regime areas.

The P3 must prepare for a scenario where either Russia vetoes the resolution or there is a concerted shift from the resolution to regime consent as the authorization for cross-border aid. In this case, it would be critical that the United States and other Council Members push for decoupling the UN cross-border mechanism authorization from the UN Security Council, a position meticulously outlined by the UN Syria Commission of Inquiry, international legal scholars at Guernica 37, and the American Relief Coalition for Syria (ARCS). The resolution, while politically expedient, is not legally required under international law. This would aim to force transparent dialogue between the UN Office of Legal Affairs who interpret the resolution as a legal necessity and international legal scholars who challenge OLA’s restriction interpretation of international law.
About the Authors

**Jesse Marks** is the senior advocate for the Middle East. Follow him on Twitter at @JesCMarks.

**Hardin Lang** is the vice president for programs and policy. Follow him on Twitter at @HardinLang1.

About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance, human rights, and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.