

BRIEFING: NORTH WEST SYRIA AND IRELAND ON THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL (UNSC)

December 2020

Introduction

In January 2021, Ireland will take up a two-year seat as one of ten temporary members of the United Nations Security Council. This is a crucial opportunity for Ireland to deliver on its mandate as an elected member, to build peace, strengthen conflict prevention, and ensure accountability. As the only Irish agency directly operating in the North West of Syria, GOAL looks forward to working with the Department of Foreign Affairs in pursuit of peace and dignity for the people of Syria. We urge Ireland to play an assertive role in securing humanitarian access; ensuring protection of civilians and aid workers; and improving international cooperation to meet these aims.

The North West of Syria is one of the last bastions of opposition to the Syrian government. It is now host to fighters forced from other parts of the country as well as millions of civilians, many of whom have been forced to flee multiple times over the ten years of war. A fragile ceasefire is in place, and GOAL and other agencies provide relief to affected civilians and carry out essential work in support of the conflict-affected communities of Idleb, Aleppo and the surrounding areas. Since 2013, GOAL has worked tirelessly alongside others to provide basic services: this is dangerous work and the threat to civilians and humanitarian aid workers is constant, even in the context of ceasefires. The impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic is beginning to make itself felt and the area is poorly equipped to deal with viral transmission. In spite of the resilience of community structures, the humanitarian system is stretched to breaking point under the current conditions. Previous ceasefires have broken down, and it is possible that this current one may collapse in the coming months. The government of Bashar Al Assad, with Russian backing, has indicated that further assaults on the area will come - the question is simply when. With all remaining opposition fighters now concentrated in this small area, renewed fighting, when it comes, will be intense - even more intense than previous rounds. Upwards of 1.5 million displaced people in camps and cities live in fear of renewed fighting. Still local organising persists, and civilians, often women, continue to organise school groups, food deliveries and negotiations with combatants while relying on the support and protection of the international community.

In seeking the humanitarian brief at the UNSC, Ireland is taking up the cause of the forgotten people of North West Syria. GOAL urges Ireland to relentlessly pursue ongoing humanitarian access to the area and the protection of civilians and humanitarian workers, and in this way to support the resilience of local systems and the promotion of local leadership. Nonetheless, no amount of

humanitarian support will help, without a durable peace in North West Syria. GOAL urges Ireland to redouble efforts for a lasting peace in Syria, in line with UNSCR 2254.

This briefing outlines GOAL's operations in the North West of Syria, and describes the state of the conflict and the humanitarian crisis in the North West at the end of 2020, as Ireland takes up its seat on the UNSC. It outlines two key areas where Ireland should seek progress at the Security Council: in securing humanitarian access, and in seeking a sustainable ceasefire and peace process. The briefing makes five sets of recommendations:

1. **Secure continuous humanitarian access to North West Syria**
2. **Ensure protection of civilians and humanitarian aid workers**
3. **Support ceasefires associated with inclusive and meaningful peace talks**
4. **Seek broader change at the UN, including reform of the Security Council**
5. **Pursue these aims beyond the UNSC**

GOAL in Syria

GOAL is the only Irish NGO with an operational presence in North West Syria. In collaboration with local Syrian partners, GOAL provides millions of 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 2020 600 staff reached more than 1,300,000 people every month.

GOAL's approach in the North West of Syria is to support immediate humanitarian need while investing in existing systems and infrastructure. In this way, GOAL avoids creating parallel systems reliant on external actors. Instead, GOAL delivers aid through carefully-designed programmes which can be handed over to local management when this becomes possible. GOAL has focused on off-camp settings, stabilising pre-existing infrastructure (for example the water system) rather than duplicating it. Our programmes are exposed to a high risk from the conflict, but they reach people where they need ongoing support.

GOAL's conflict-sensitive approach demands an intimate understanding of local dynamics. We aim to build up local systems without giving power to any side of the conflict: numerous processes,

including a community feedback mechanism accessible to all programme participants and monitored by senior GOAL management, underpin this commitment. The lifesaving aid that GOAL provides, including support for food, livelihoods and safe water supplies, is delivered by local staff and in collaboration with local organisations. We are committed to collaborating, learning and sharing with the wider community: we play an active leadership role in the UN-led humanitarian cluster system and host the North West Syria NGO Forum. GOAL is one actor among many who share a common objective: the realisation of the rights and dignity of the people of Syria. We are part of a complex infrastructure made up of shattered yet resilient communities, badly damaged municipal structures, national relief and civil society organisations and international humanitarian agencies.

In North West Syria, GOAL seeks to respond to urgent humanitarian need in the hope of a future inclusive peace. This is highly complex, expert work, reliant on robust processes of accountability and an informed and dedicated local and international workforce with a strong Syrian leadership. Since 2013, four GOAL staff members have been killed in the conflict in North West Syria, alongside thousands of other civilians.

Without a durable peaceful resolution to the ongoing conflict, we will continue to see a need for large-scale humanitarian aid to a population devastated by violence, destruction and displacement. GOAL is responding to this need, and calling on Ireland on the UN Security Council to address the underlying issues driving the ongoing emergency.

The conflict in North West Syria

The current conflict in Syria began in 2011, triggered by a wave of peaceful protests in Arab countries. Calls for President Bashar al-Assad to step down were met with a violent crackdown, which in turn triggered army defections and the emergence of a number of armed resistance groups, reflecting pre-existing religious and ethnic divisions in the country. Since 2012 Assad has been opposed by dozens of different armed forces, often themselves fragmenting and realigning.

The intractability of the Syrian conflict has been heightened by the involvement since the beginning of regional and global actors, providing military, financial and political support on either side of the shifting battle lines. Military action has been taken by the US and its allies, and by Russia, Iran, Israel and Turkey. Regional instability has been exploited

by jihadi actors, and the early years of the conflict saw the emergence of the Islamic State/ Da'esh and associated groups. In the northeast, Kurdish forces opposed the Damascus regime with military support from the US until 2019. In short, Syria has become a site for hostile contestation of many proxy wars and underlying tensions; a seemingly limitless supply of international funding and military support allowed the conflict to continue for the best part of a decade.

The closing months of 2020 see the country largely under the control of Bashar al Assad's Damascus government, heavily backed by Russian military and political support. Opposition has been driven out of most provinces through aggressive military manoeuvres and negotiated surrenders. Two parts of the country remain in the hands of opponents of the regime: the Kurdish North East, and the North West where GOAL operates. Successive attacks by Syrian and Russian forces have driven much of the remaining opposition into this north western area the size of Galway, as well as hundreds of thousands of civilians, crowding into devastated host communities.

Assad's stated objective is the restoration of the entire country to the control of the Damascus government, an objective that Putin's Russia fully backs. This means that further military action in the North West is considered inevitable by many people on the ground. Of particular strategic importance are two highways: the M5 from Aleppo to Hama and the M4 connecting Idlib to Latakia. Seizure of the M5 by Russian and Syrian forces in early 2020 triggered a wave of displacement towards GOAL's area of operation. There is a real possibility that Damascus will move to take the M4 in 2021. Civilians and humanitarian workers in the area fear a repeat of the invasion and aerial bombardment of 2019 and early 2020 which destroyed 43 health facilities, 29 water stations and seven markets between April and August 2019¹. Besides the two key strategic highways, there are fears that the remaining population of the area may be abandoned to their fate, unprotected by any of the Great Powers fighting over dominance in Syria and the Middle East.

The positions in the North West are especially entrenched as a result of the long history of this war. The area represents the last outpost of opposition to the regime. Where the Government of Syria does not have control there is a patchwork of different ruling militias including the Free Syrian Army, a coalition of opposition groups with the military backing of Turkey, and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) a jihadist alliance established when it broke ties with al-Qaeda in 2017. HTS is designated as a terrorist

¹ Hospitals among seven health centres attacked in Syria's north-west", UN News, 2 September 2019.

organisation by the UN: it took control of much of Idleb province in a violent offensive in January 2019. In March 2020 a ceasefire was negotiated between Russia and Turkey in this area, and that ceasefire remains somewhat stable, patrolled and enforced for the most part by the Russian and Turkish armies.

2019 and early 2020 saw some of the most intense violence of a devastating war characterised by airstrikes, explosions, shelling and assassination incidents, and it is a return to this level of violence that people most fear in North West Syria. Every offensive by the regime or opponents results in civilian deaths, destruction of homes and livelihoods, and a new wave of displacement. A repeat of this recent fighting will lead to tens of thousands of civilians, many of them displaced more than once already, being forced further north to the Turkish border, where conditions continue to worsen (see humanitarian situation, below). With the rest of the country in regime hands, and Turkey committed to defending its borders against further waves of refugees, there is no prospect for negotiated surrenders - since there is nowhere left for departing rebel fighters to go. Fighting, if it comes, will be intense.

As 2020 comes to an end, the ceasefire that holds in the North West makes it somewhat easier for GOAL and other agencies to provide essential support to the people living there, and for civilians to begin to rebuild their lives. In 2019, GOAL was able to support the provision of subsidised bread to 300,000 people every day, and in 2020-2021 we have secured an annual budget of €67.7 million to continue with emergency aid, helping to prepare communities for future shocks. In order to make these interventions possible, the UN Security Council must prioritise three things: continuous humanitarian access; protection of civilian life and the lives of humanitarian aid workers; and the restoration of a durable peace to Syria.

The humanitarian situation

Before 2011, Syria was listed by the World Bank as a middle income country². It had a highly educated workforce, an effective state and strong institutions.

Prior to the protests which led to the outbreak of war in 2011, Syria was experiencing an economic downturn triggered by severe droughts and the devastation of the agricultural sector. Ten years on, much of the country's built infrastructure has been destroyed, as have its previously stable institutions. The economy, badly hit and in decline since the beginning of the conflict, took a precipitous turn for the worse in 2019 with the collapse of the Syrian pound. Strong mutually-supportive communities have been torn apart, and although social cohesion remains evident in the ways that communities lean on and support one another, distrust and suspicion continue to grow³.

The toll of war

Since 2011, more than half of the population of Syria has been displaced: a total of more than 13.3 million people. In June 2020, there were 6.7 million people forcibly displaced within Syria, and a further 6.6 million Syrians displaced throughout the world, but primarily in the bordering countries of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan⁴.

In North West Syria, crucial public infrastructure including electricity, water and the roads network have been destroyed through conflict, sabotage and neglect. For example, the country's once effective and operational water system is badly damaged thanks to a mixture of sabotage, degradation, lack of maintenance, and vandalism⁵. The previously-strong health care infrastructure has 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 fled the country. In June 2020, 9.3 million Syrians in the country were facing food insecurity. Runaway inflation and currency shortages have increased poverty levels to nearly 90% nationally⁶, 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 year⁷, and the Syrian pound lost 15% of its value against the US dollar in November 2020 alone⁸.

The North West of Syria plays host to nearly 1.5 million internally displaced people⁹, while more

² World Bank Group (2017) The Toll of War: The economic and social consequences of the conflict in Syria

³ Care International (2019) Understanding Resilience: Perspectives from Syrians

⁴ UNHCR 2020 'Syria Refugee Crisis Explained' <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/#:%7E:text=More%20than%206.6%20million%20Syrians,remain%20trapped%20inside%20the%20country.>

⁵ Interagency Report (ATAA Humanitarian Relief Association and Others) 2020 Don't Leave Them Alone: The future of the cross-border response in north west Syria

⁶ Centre for Operational Analysis and Research 2020 Cash crash: Syria's economic collapse and the fragmentation of the state

⁷ The Conversation 2020 'In war-torn the coronavirus pandemic has brought its people to the brink of starvation'. <https://theconversation.com/in-war-torn-syria-the-coronavirus-pandemic-has-brought-its-people-to-the-brink-of-starvation-144794>

⁸ UNOCHA 2020 Recent Developments in Northwest Syria Situation Report No. 22 – As of 18 November 2020

⁹ UNOCHA 2020 Recent Developments in Northwest Syria Situation Report No. 22 – As of 18 November 2020

than 2.8 million people in the region are in need of humanitarian assistance¹⁰ thanks to the destruction of their livelihoods and economic devastation. More than half of the civilian population in North West Syria is made up of children. Changes in gender roles have been documented in some cases, with many women taking on new responsibilities in their families and communities - on the other hand, women have also experienced assaults at the hands of state and opposition forces for violating gender norms¹¹.

The nature of the conflict

The people of Syria have lived through nearly ten years of conflict: they are experts in fear, loss and displacement. At the end of 2020, a restless ceasefire is in place in North West Syria, the last bastion of a number of opposition forces, some of whom are backed by Turkey. The 1.5 million people living in active displacement sites fled previous attacks and know they may have to flee again. Between December 2019 and February 2020 the escalation of hostilities in the area endangered the lives of roughly 4 million people, causing many to flee their homes in Idlib, northern Hama and western Aleppo. Hundreds of thousands of civilians, displaced as the regime pushed against opposition-held areas elsewhere in Syria, are now crowded near the Turkish border.

Low levels of conflict are ongoing around contested areas. The ceasefire agreed in March 2020 has brought a welcome degree of stability to the North West, yet there is constant danger. The Syrian Network for Human Rights documented the conflict-related deaths of 172 civilians in November 2020 including 16 children, 11 women and 155 men. On just one day in November 2020 reports indicated at least eight civilians killed by shelling in Idlib Governorate, including four children and two local aid workers, while at least thirteen others were injured¹².

Escalation of the conflict in the North West will force service providers like GOAL to shift their emphasis from building the resilience of the conflict-affected communities back to a rapid response phase. The impact of this constant instability takes a huge toll on GOAL and local communities.

A member of GOAL's management team in the North West reflects on the situation:

For more than five years now it is all emergency life. Even my parents, I tell them we need to buy some extra food - they say we don't know if we will be here in 3 months. They are living month by month, week by week. This is affecting their mentality, affecting their perception.

It is the nature of conflict that it creates chaos, uncertainty and instability. Humanitarian actors like GOAL provide basic services to sustain populations through the trauma of war. Additional shocks – such as the currency collapse, COVID-19, and removal of humanitarian access mechanisms – exacerbate the dreadful toll of war even further.

Covid-19

While fighting was at its most intense in North West Syria in February 2020, the world was beginning to come to grips with the COVID-19 pandemic. Reliable data about the prevalence or spread of COVID-19 in North West Syria remains hard to come by. It is fair to assume that all reports are an underestimate, owing to a combination of limited testing facilities and the lack of access of most people to testing¹³. The best data available shows that since the first positive diagnosis on July 9th the total number of diagnosed cases reached 13,179 by November 18th 2020¹⁴. This represents a huge recent spike: 80% of all confirmed cases occurred in the months of October and November. More than 15% of known cases in North West Syria are in health workers¹⁵, placing a drain on a health service which is already under enormous stress.

The conditions of the camps are perfectly suited to disease transmission, especially as winter comes: camps are crowded with people of different generations including children and the elderly, many of whom have already compromised health. Water and sewage infrastructure in camp settings is very poor, making basic hygiene such as hand washing far more difficult. The capacity of health workers to respond is weak: the health system has been chronically undermined by bombing of physical buildings and the loss of trained staff, and health workers themselves are especially vulnerable to infection. In the context of widespread displacement and devastated health infrastructure, existing interventions face extreme challenges.

¹⁰ Interagency Report 2020 Don't Leave Them Alone

¹¹ Amnesty International 2019 'Syrian women must have an official and active role in shaping the country's future' <https://www.amnesty.org.au/women-must-play-an-active-role-in-shaping-syrias-future/>

¹² UNOCHA 2020 Statement by Mark Cutts, Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Syria Crisis on Idlib Violence, Gaziantep, 4th November 2020

¹³ COVID-19 Situational Analysis project : iMMAP with the support of the USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Assistance (USAID BHA)

¹⁴ UNOCHA 2020 Recent Developments in Northwest Syria November 2020

¹⁵ UNOCHA 2020 Recent Developments in Northwest Syria November 2020

Meanwhile, there are many other ways in which the global pandemic has altered the situation in North West Syria. The economic impacts of the pandemic exacerbated the economic crisis brought about by the complete collapse of the Syrian pound. In June, the Guardian reported demonstrations against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in Idleb and against the government in Damascus owing to the rising cost of bread and the economic impacts of the pandemic, the currency crisis, destroyed productivity and economic sanctions¹⁶. In the wake of economic collapse, UNOCHA notes an increase in violations of child protection and violence against women, with sexual exploitation and abuse arising in the context of coping mechanisms for poverty¹⁷.

COVID-19 also impacts on GOAL's ability to do its work. Essential changes to programming make operations less efficient, because of necessary efforts to keep people apart and avoid non-essential contact. While there have fortunately not been any serious or fatal cases among GOAL staff to date, increasing numbers of staff have become infected, forcing them into quarantine. Overall, the continuity of programmes is undermined by Covid-19 and the adaptations it has demanded.

In spite of limited and unreliable health data, it is clear that conditions are bad, and will worsen in the winter. This comes alongside other threats: that of a collapse of the current fragile ceasefire, and the closure of the last cross-border humanitarian gate (see below). Multiple crises compound each other even as global attention has moved on. GOAL now fears that North West Syria may become one more on the list of the world's forgotten crises.

Seeking progress at the UN Security Council

While GOAL confronts immediate human need in North West Syria, we rely on the international community to address the root causes of this crisis. With Ireland taking up a seat on the UN Security Council, we look forward to the presence of a loud voice for multilateralism and humanitarian protection. It is encouraging that Ireland is seeking the role of penholder for the Syria humanitarian brief. GOAL anticipates Ireland's constant pursuit of protection for all humanitarian operations and insists that the most the Security Council takes full responsibility for guaranteeing humanitarian access and the protection of civilians and humanitarian aid workers.

The civil war in Syria and the associated humanitarian emergency has long been a topic of concern for the UN Security Council, complicated by intense division on the council itself. Although the UNSC has adopted 26 resolutions on Syria since the beginning of the war (on topics including peacebuilding; chemical weapons; accountability and humanitarian access), it has been hampered by irreconcilable differences among members, marked by a broad divide in approach of the permanent five members. Russia actively supports the Damascus regime with financial and military backing as well as political support, not least on the Security Council.

Addressing the Security Council in 2019, the head of UNHCR the UN's refugee agency emphasised that the responsibility of the Security Council is to end conflict and facilitate humanitarian access¹⁸. This is an urgent mandate, needed to deliver stability to a troubled region and prevent the many knock-on effects of war on global relations; but most importantly of all to secure the lives and dignity of the Syrian people, whose lives have been devastated by this war. The protection of humanitarian aid in North West Syria is uniquely within the control of the members of the UN Security Council. GOAL expects that Ireland, as a member of the Security Council, will meet its commitment to humanitarianism and the protection of civilians and aid workers.

¹⁶ The Guardian 2020 'Syrian protestors call for Assad's downfall as economic crisis deepens' <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/syrian-protesters-call-for-assads-downfall-as-economic-crisis-deepens>

¹⁷ UNOCHA 2020 Recent Developments in Northwest Syria October 2020

¹⁸ <https://www.unhcr.org/en-ie/news/latest/2019/4/5cad10c74/un-refugee-chief-urges-security-council-firm-response-record-high-displacement.html>

Key issues and actions:

Securing humanitarian access

As long as the shocks of conflict, displacement and economic crisis continue to affect Syria, civilians will be reliant on humanitarian actors to secure basic needs. The United Nations Security Council is responsible for ensuring that in the most dire circumstances, humanitarian actors can carry out their life-saving work. This is highly complex work, involving interconnected systems which demand the support of the international community. If humanitarian access breaks down in Syria, it is the responsibility of the international community. This access is brokered and guaranteed by the Security Council.

Cross-border and cross-line humanitarian access for the UN was first authorised by the Security Council with the unanimous adoption of Resolution 2165 in July 2014, authorising the UN to deliver aid without the consent of the Syrian government. Resolution 2165 enabled a strong and coordinated response by humanitarian actors, facilitated in the North West by the Turkish government and border authorities. In the context of the constant fear and uncertainty of war, cross border humanitarian access has given a small degree of certainty to humanitarian actors. The access has been renewed by the UNSC at yearly intervals since 2014, over which time the issue has become increasingly contentious. Russia, usually supported by China, argues that since Assad is the legitimate ruler of Syria, aid should be delivered through official channels; further that the provision of cross-border aid is tantamount to providing material support to terrorist organisations. While the first authorisation of cross-border aid in 2014 provided for humanitarian border crossings at four points in the country (at borders with Jordan, Iraq, and two in the North West with Turkey), since July 2020 just one crossing remains open, at Bab Al Hawa/ Cilvegözü .

Aid agencies including GOAL are required to find ways of working in hostile environments to deliver urgent aid without boosting the power of any warring side. It is likely that if the UNSC votes not to renew the final humanitarian gate at Bab al Hawa/ Cilvegözü, UN organisations will be severely limited from operating in North West Syria. Other agencies will find it much harder to stand up to the political pressures and risks of operating in the context of ongoing conflict.

Regardless of longer-term aspirations, GOAL insists that cross-line aid (that is, aid delivered to occupation-held areas from within Syria, with the

authorisation of the Damascus government) is not currently a viable alternative to a cross-border mechanism. When the Al Yarubiyeh border crossing at North East Syria/ Iraq was closed in January 2020, cross-line operations from Damascus reached just 31% of the medical facilities which had been previously stocked by cross-border operations¹⁹.

At the Security Council, it falls to the co-penholders of the Syria humanitarian brief - potentially to include Ireland - to oversee negotiations for this access, due to be renewed by July 10th 2021 at the latest. The attention required by the renewal of the humanitarian crossings is in itself a barrier to humanitarian access, and GOAL calls for the Security Council to do everything it can to enable the rapid and effective delivery of essential aid.

GOAL notes that it will continue to provide cross-border humanitarian aid through commercial channels, even if these internationally-supported crossings are shut down. It is UN agencies that are most critically affected by the border crossings - but in the complex world of humanitarian action, the UN agencies play an important role. GOAL emphasises that the cross border access is relevant to all actors for the following reasons:

- The UN agencies operate at a scale that is not replicated by any other actors in the North West of Syria. The World Food Organisation, for example, provides food and nutrition to approximately 1.2 million people in IDP camps per month. None of the NGOs operating in the area can reach that sort of scale, and so in the absence of WFP operations, a huge gap will be left, increasing levels of hunger, malnutrition and death.
- The UN system is the most significant source of funding for local Syrian organisations, enabling moves towards the localisation agenda outlined in the 2016 Grand Bargain in Humanitarian Operations²⁰. More than 50% of local organisations operating in the North West of Syria are almost completely dependent on UN funding, which includes the pooled Syrian Cross-border Humanitarian Fund (SCHF) as well as bilateral aid. This allows relief to be shared, diversified and crucially localised, instead of being centralised under large INGOs who can operate at scale. Loss of humanitarian access renders this sort of aid illegal, as we saw with the closure of the Al Yarubiyeh gate in January 2020. More than \$300 million is transferred per year through the SCHF: closure of humanitarian access

¹⁹ Centre for Strategic and International Studies 2020. 'The possible end of cross-border aid in Syria' July 6, 2020 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/possible-end-cross-border-aid-syria>

²⁰ <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/grand-bargain>

threatens this transfer.

- Perhaps the area where UN agencies are most essential is in the area of health, especially important in the context of increasing COVID-19 infections. UN agencies are the exclusive providers for certain health services including vaccinations, and they are the main source of PPE and COVID-19 testing kits. When the Al Yarubiyeh gate closed in the North East of Syria in January 2020, 19 health facilities were closed as a result of loss of SCHF funding²¹. In other cases where UN agencies such as the WHO have operated inside of Syrian-government controlled areas, delivering aid across the lines to opposition-controlled areas, reports have shown medical supplies being stripped by Syrian authorities²². With COVID-19 cases on the increase, the need for secure and reliable cross-border medical pipelines to opposition-controlled areas is more urgent than ever.
- The UN supports the central coordination of humanitarian response, through its cluster system. This system enables excellent division of responsibilities, burden sharing, capacity-building and lesson learning. It serves as one driver for mainstreaming of gender equality, protection and Women Peace and Security within humanitarian operations. Without the UN agencies on the ground, remaining agencies will need to fill a significant coordination and capacity gap, drawing them away from humanitarian work at precisely the time it's most needed.
- Removal of the dedicated humanitarian gate compromises humanitarian access and effectiveness even for those agencies (like GOAL) who use different crossings. GOAL is experiencing delays in movement owing to increased traffic on the single entry into Syria, and the ability of local actors to think ahead and build resilience is undermined.

2021 is certain to bring increased humanitarian need to the North West of Syria, a result of the ongoing impact of COVID-19, coupled with the impact of likely renewed fighting and the associated displacement. The penholders of the humanitarian brief at the UNSC must anticipate increased humanitarian need in 2021, and provide

the maximum continuity possible in humanitarian access. These things underpin any possible transition to peace.

Protection of civilians and humanitarian aid workers

Humanitarian aid workers operate under the protection of International Humanitarian Law, however around the world attacks on aid workers are steadily increasing, with health workers the most vulnerable to attack during conflict²³. In 2019, Syria was the most lethal location for aid workers in the world²⁴. In North West Syria, armed actors have consistently targeted civilian infrastructure including health facilities and markets, placing civilians at high risk as well as aid workers. Since the beginning of 2020, over 1,361 civilians and 14 humanitarian aid workers have been killed in North West Syria, while 25 health care facilities were targeted in addition to attacks on infrastructure and residential areas²⁵.

Conscious of this growing threat, a series of UN Security Council Resolutions seek to address the safety of civilians and humanitarian workers in conflict. Most recently, in 2014 UNSCR 2175 laid out steps to halt the increasingly common attacks on humanitarian workers globally; and UNSCR 2286 (2016) condemns increasing attacks against medical facilities and health personnel in conflict situations. In North West Syria, these resolutions have been routinely violated by Syria, Russia, and opposition forces.

The elimination of violence towards civilians and humanitarian aid workers, both targeted and unintentional, must be a top priority for the Security Council, and existing resolutions must be monitored and enforced. GOAL urges Ireland to exert all possible efforts to protect civilians and humanitarian aid workers, including the provision of robust and consistent monitoring and accountability mechanisms such as the IIIM²⁶.

Towards peace

There have been many attempts at peace talks in Syria's ten year civil war. Rounds of talks have taken place since 2012 in Geneva, Astana and Sochi, resulting at times in limited ceasefire agreements but never approaching a durable resolution to the conflict itself. GOAL staff, most of them Syrian citizens themselves, emphasise that anything less

²¹ Interagency Report 2020 Don't Leave Them Alone

²² Interagency Report 2020 Don't Leave Them Alone

²³ Humanitarian Outcomes 2020 Aid Worker Security Report 2020

²⁴ Humanitarian Outcomes 2020 Aid Worker Security Report 2020

²⁵ Syrian NGO Alliance 2020 Statement on targeting civilians and humanitarian aid workers November 2020

²⁶ International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism to assist in the investigation and prosecution of persons responsible for the most serious crimes under international law committed in the Syrian Arab Republic since March 2011. <https://iiim.un.org/>

than the permanent cessation of hostilities in their home cannot guarantee the security of conflict-affected people.

In December 2015, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2254, calling for a transitional governing body, a new constitution, and UN-sponsored parliamentary and presidential elections. The resolution acknowledges the 'close linkages between a ceasefire and a parallel political process' and calls for the initiation of such a political process, which should be UN-facilitated but Syrian-owned. The resolution seeks to establish in Syria 'credible, inclusive and non-sectarian governance'. In September 2019 the UN Secretary General launched a Constitutional Committee, convened by UN Special Envoy Geir O. Pedersen. Out of all the peace initiatives seen since 2012, this one appears most like a possible avenue out of conflict, however to date it has achieved little concrete progress, unlike the Astana-track talks²⁷ which have at least brought about limited ceasefires. The process of agreeing an agenda for talks has proven extremely difficult, and it is hard to gauge how sincerely the Syrian government is engaging in the process; nonetheless since November 2020 a timeline for further discussions is in place, although this has been hampered by COVID-19-related restrictions.

Parallel to the UN-led constitutional reform process, a second political track emerged in talks organised and attended by some of the main international sponsors of the conflict: the so-called troika of Russia, Iran and Turkey. The Astana-track talks which began in 2017, have succeeded in the sense that they have led to agreed ceasefires which Russia and Turkey are competent to enforce - however, they are not representative of any long-term peace process such as that envisioned by Resolution 2254.

It is worth additionally observing that the UN-led process has made some effort to respond to the fact that women in Syria are deeply embedded in local service delivery as well as often playing a part negotiating local ceasefires and working across lines. 41% of the mediators and 28% of negotiators in the 2019 Constitutional Committee meetings were women, far from equal representation, but nonetheless indicative of a conscious effort to address the Women Peace and Security agenda²⁸.

Since Russia's vision of resolution of the conflict involves an internationally-supported reconstruction process²⁹, even a peace brokered by Russia will require the buy-in of the international community which funds such processes, generally under the auspices of UN initiatives. The existence of these

two political processes in parallel weakens both critically. Until a ceasefire can be negotiated with sincere and inclusive peace talks attached, North West Syria is doomed to ongoing slaughter and displacement.

Recommendations to Ireland on the UN Security Council

(1) Secure humanitarian access

GOAL is hopeful that Ireland will be successful in its efforts to become co-penholder of the Syrian humanitarian brief and will be able to play an assertive role in maintaining access to the conflict-affected people of North West Syria. Crucially, this will see Ireland overseeing the renewal of cross-border access under resolution 2533, which expires on July 10th 2021. Within this role, we urge Ireland to:

- Prioritise a timely and predictable approach to the renewal of the resolution, recognising that uncertainty relating to humanitarian modalities is in itself a significant impediment to the delivery of life-saving aid. In this sense, renewal of cross-border access should be predictable, orderly and last for the longest duration possible.
- Work to maintain and if possible, expand cross-border humanitarian access points to North West Syria, and to other points in Syria. GOAL urges the UNSC to renew access via Bab al-Hawa, and to provide additional cross-border access points as possible at Bab al-Salam, Al Yarubiyeh and Al-Ramtha.
- Closely monitor the status of the ceasefire in the North West, in anticipation of increased humanitarian need in the event of renewed fighting. Consider bringing the vote on humanitarian access forward in recognition of the heightened risk presented by a collapse in the ceasefire.
- Prioritise the continuity of the cross-border mechanism in the light of a growing COVID-19 epidemic in Syria's North West, and the need for additional support to the health-care system.

²⁷ A high level series of talks between Russia, Iran and Turkey aimed at bringing an end to the conflict in Syria

²⁸ Council for Foreign Relations 2020 Syria Case Study

²⁹ International Crisis Group 2020 Silencing the Guns in Syria's Idlib Middle East Report No. 213 15 May 2020

(2) Protect humanitarian aid workers and civilians

In spite of multiple resolutions to protect non-parties to the conflict, 2020 saw Syria listed as the most dangerous country in the world for humanitarian aid workers. Attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure are always illegal and reprehensible, and the UNSCR must resist these and hold their perpetrators to account.

“FROM SYRIA, TO LIBYA, TO YEMEN, OUR APPROACH WILL BE DRIVEN BY A PROFOUND CONCERN FOR PROTECTING CITIZENS AND IMPROVING HUMANITARIAN CONDITIONS... HUMANITARIAN WORKERS MUST BE ABLE TO WORK SAFELY WHILE HELPING THE MOST VULNERABLE.”

- Taoiseach Micheál Martin, Speech to the UN General Assembly 75 26th September 2020

- 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 initiatives

- Emphasise to all actors, but particularly Russia, China and their supporters on the Security Council, the urgency of maintaining the current ceasefire in the North West of Syria, in order to protect civilians from humanitarian disaster, and nurture conditions for 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, by ensuring that women and young people are represented among negotiating parties and mediators, and that gender perspectives are integrated in talks.

- Use all available opportunities to call for confidence-building measures between government and opposition as part of a broad political process, including the release of detainees and abductees and information on the fate of missing persons.

(4) Broader initiatives on the UNSC

The crisis in Syria is exactly the sort of situation the UNSC was established to prevent, but the structural limitations of that body have made it almost impossible for the Security Council to take meaningful action. For that reason, GOAL urges Ireland to support Security Council reform and to back broader initiatives which may serve to unlock further opportunities for Syria.

“WE HAVE SEEN THE VETO REPEATEDLY ABUSED OVER RECENT YEARS, TO PREVENT THE COUNCIL FROM TAKING NECESSARY ACTIONS, INCLUDING ON ACCESS TO VITAL HUMANITARIAN RELIEF AND IN RESPONSE TO THE USE OF CHEMICAL WEAPONS IN SYRIA.”

- Taoiseach Micheál Martin, Speech to the UN General Assembly 75 26th September 2020

- Support the calls of the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres for a global ceasefire, in response to the crisis of COVID-19³⁰.
- Work for reform of the UN Security Council, in particular reform of the veto of the Permanent 5 members of the Council in cases of genocide and large-scale human rights abuse. In the long term, change to the veto is necessary to enable the UNSC to play the role envisioned for it, and Syria is a key exemplar of this.
- Continue to work with the ACT group at the United Nations to limit the use of the veto as

³⁰ This call was most recently renewed on 24th October 2020 <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/october-2020/un-day-sg-renews-call-global-ceasefire-silencingtheguns/>

well as working for a more open relationship between the Security Council and the broader UN system.

(5) Outside of the UN Security Council

Given the significant limitations of the Security Council to act with regard to the Syrian conflict, GOAL urges Ireland to pursue the same foreign policy goals with regard to Syria outside of the Security Council: consistent humanitarian access; protection of civilians and humanitarian aid workers; and support for peacebuilding. We urge Ireland to take a similarly robust position within the European Union, and as a humanitarian donor through Irish Aid:

- Oppose any obligatory return of refugees to Syria. There is a need for comprehensive and ongoing support from the international community to the Syrian diaspora in bordering countries, Europe and elsewhere. Any repatriation must be voluntary, safe and dignified.
- Cover the gaps in the humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis, which received only 49% of the requested funding in 2020³¹.
- Plan to ensure continuity of service in health centres and no funding gaps. A high peak of Covid-19 cases is expected to come in the winter.
- 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.

³¹ NGO Forum 2020 Press statement from the humanitarian organisations working in North West Syria and responding to Covid-19 pandemic. Idleb, 28/10/20

GOAL