



Security Council

Distr.: General
21 February 2020

Original: English

Review of alternative modalities for the border crossing of Ya‘rubiyah

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present review is submitted pursuant to paragraph 6 of Security Council resolution [2504 \(2020\)](#), in which the Council requested the Secretary-General to report to the Council by the end of February 2020 on the feasibility of using alternative modalities for the border crossing of Ya‘rubiyah in order to ensure that humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, reaches people in need throughout the Syrian Arab Republic through the most direct routes and in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence.

2. The information contained herein is based on available data from the United Nations system and obtained from the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and other relevant sources, including field visits and a desk review, up to 19 February 2020.

II. Humanitarian situation in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic

3. Civilians in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic are among the country’s most vulnerable. An estimated 1.9 million people are assessed to be in need of humanitarian assistance in that region, the vast majority of whom – 1.34 million people – are in areas not under government control. Some 70,000 people remain displaced in the north-east as a result of the launch of Operation Peace Spring on 9 October 2019. Prior to 9 October, the north-east already hosted approximately 710,000 displaced civilians. Children account for 42 per cent of the 710,000 displaced persons, most of whom are hosted by local communities. More than 480,000 of those displaced in the north-east are in areas not under government control, including more than 66,000 people who reside in Hawl camp, almost 44,000 of whom are children. More than 14,000 displaced persons are accommodated in collective shelters, almost all of which were previously schools.

4. Needs in the north-east are extremely high. As at the end of 2019, only 2 out of 16 public hospitals and 4 out of 279 primary health centres across the north-east were functioning at full capacity. The challenges to health care, combined with major gaps



in the availability of safe water, have resulted in several outbreaks of infectious diseases in the past years across the north-east. Significant contamination from explosive weapons continues to limit movement, making access to services even more difficult.

5. Local actors report that, at current consumption rates, medical stocks are expected to run out in the coming months. Reproductive health kit stocks could be depleted by March. This means that, unless alternative modalities are found, items needed to undertake medical procedures related to maternal health, such as delivery by caesarian section, will not be available. By May, there is likely to be broader gaps in basic medicines in medical facilities previously supplied by the United Nations cross-border operation, should an alternative to Ya‘rubiyah not be found. The impact of such gaps would be significant, limiting the ability of medical providers to deliver a broad range of critical medical treatments to people in need. As detailed below, delivery capacity is also a major challenge.

6. On 15 October 2019, in a letter to United Nations entities in the Syrian Arab Republic, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic requested “the United Nations humanitarian team to take immediate action by sending convoys of relief items, such as food and medical items”, to the north-east of the country. On 21 October, in a letter to the Secretary-General, the Government pledged to do everything possible to facilitate the delivery of such assistance, in coordination with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and government agencies.

Humanitarian access

7. Prior to the adoption of resolution [2504 \(2020\)](#), the United Nations and international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs) had access from both within the Syrian Arab Republic and across the border to populations in need in the country. The choice between these two modalities depended on changes in control, access routes for the provision of supplies, security and the consent of local authorities. The United Nations no longer conducts cross-border operations into the north-east following the adoption of resolution [2504 \(2020\)](#).

8. The humanitarian country team for the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic is based in Qamishli. It brings together United Nations entities and one non-governmental humanitarian partner. A total of 9 international and 20 Syrian NGOs registered with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic are present in the north-east. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent is present in all three governorates in the north-east. In addition, more than 30 international NGOs and numerous Syrian NGOs conduct cross-border operations into the north-east. Despite initial disruptions to programmes after 9 October, NGO activities continue. Details about the United Nations and NGO humanitarian presence in the north-east can be found in table 1.

9. United Nations entities are in the process of increasing their presence in the north-east of the country. A total of 159 United Nations staff are based in Qamishli and 25 staff have deployed on surge missions of up to two months, since October 2019. On 22 January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) requested approval from the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to increase its full-time staff presence in Qamishli. The United Nations is still awaiting a response from the Government.

10. The United Nations and non-governmental organizations registered with the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic have regular and sustained humanitarian access in most parts of Raqqah and Hasakah Governorates. They report similar levels of access in Dayr al-Zawr Governorate, west of the Euphrates River. In December 2019 and January 2020, the United Nations completed 324 missions in the north-east from within the country, with the consent of the Government. Manbij and Ayn al-Arab remain difficult to access owing to the lack of agreement between parties in control

and insecurity. Areas east of the Euphrates in Dayr al-Zawr Governorate remain difficult to access for some humanitarian organizations, mainly owing to explosive ordnance contamination and insecurity.

11. Non-governmental organizations conducting cross-border operations have mostly regular and sustained access in Raqqah and Hasakah Governorates. Currently, international NGO staff have limited presence in western areas, including Manbij and Ayn al-Arab districts. Operations continue in Dayr al-Zawr Governorate subject to the security constraints mentioned in paragraph 10 above.

Table 1
Total number of humanitarian workers operating in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, as at 31 December 2019

<i>Response modality</i>	<i>Within the Syrian Arab Republic</i>	<i>From across the border</i>
International United Nations staff	17 ^a	0
National United Nations staff	142	0
International NGO staff	183	242
National NGO staff	4 558	6 039
Syrian Arab Red Crescent staff/volunteers	1 350	0
Total	6 250	6 281

^a This total does not reflect the staff deployed on surge missions to Qamishli from other duty stations in the Syrian Arab Republic to support ongoing operations.

Humanitarian response

12. The humanitarian response in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic involves providing assistance to hundreds of thousands of people in need each month. Organizations within the country deliver assistance and provide support for basic services, in particular in camps for internally displaced persons, host communities and major cities. NGOs conducting cross-border operations provide basic services to much of the population, including health services, where government services (or those of the local authorities) are unavailable or inadequate. Until 10 January 2020, the United Nations complemented these activities with the delivery of cross-border assistance, mainly health services and medical items that could not be consistently delivered from within the Syrian Arab Republic or by NGO cross-border operations.

13. Humanitarian organizations scaled up activities in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic in 2019. Between July and November, the response from within the country increased by 36 per cent compared with the preceding six months, to reach an average of 990,000 people per month. In November, the latest period for which there is data, the United Nations reached 729,000 people with food aid and provided life-saving water, sanitation and hygiene support to 200,000 people.

14. Since October 2019, NGOs conducting cross-border operations have also scaled up emergency activities. This is in response to the significant number of internally displaced people in the north-east of the country. These NGOs have regular access to displaced families located in collective centres, informal settlements and newly established sites, as well as those living with host communities in both urban and rural locations. Overall, the NGOs ensure sustained service provision in the north-east, including education and other essential services, and provide food and non-food items to people in need.

15. In the health sector, in 2019, WHO provided more than 2.54 million medical treatments in the north-east, as well as significant amounts of medical equipment, in

total weighing some 451 tons. This medical assistance was delivered by air from Damascus to Qamishli. Many health facilities not in government-controlled areas could not be reached with supplies sent by air from Damascus to Qamishli.

16. There were no United Nations road convoys carrying medical items from Damascus to the north-east in 2019. One road convoy carrying medical supplies has been completed so far in 2020 (see para. 42).

17. WHO also shipped 1.43 million medical treatments and other medical equipment, weighing some 210 tons, through the Ya‘rubiyah border crossing in 2019. Trauma kits, inter-agency emergency health kits and other essential medicines and medical supplies comprised the majority of the cross-border consignments. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) dispatched 200 emergency reproductive health kits in two convoys through Ya‘rubiyah in 2019. These kits are designed to facilitate the provision of priority reproductive health services to displaced people without medical facilities or to places where medical facilities are disrupted during a crisis.

18. The health items delivered from within the Syrian Arab Republic went to a range of actors providing humanitarian support in the north-east, including the Ministry of Health, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, NGOs and directly to local health facilities. Through these actors, 77 health facilities received some form of support from within the country in 2019, including 5 hospitals, 22 primary health facilities and health posts and 34 mobile units.

19. Service provision by NGOs conducting cross-border operations is focused heavily on the operation of medical facilities. In December 2019, those NGOs were supporting 103 medical facilities across the north-east, including 13 hospitals, 46 primary health facilities and health posts and 35 mobile units, as well as facilities providing specialized services for leishmaniasis, physical rehabilitation and dialysis. All of these medical facilities received a significant amount of their medical supplies from the United Nations through Ya‘rubiyah. At least 50 of the medical facilities, located in 12 subdistricts in the north-east, were supported solely with medicines provided from across the border.

III. Ya‘rubiyah border crossing

20. United Nations operations through the Ya‘rubiyah border crossing began in early 2018, following improved security and changes in control in the area. Between March 2018 and January 2020, 19 consignments crossed through Ya‘rubiyah, comprising a total of 109 trucks. All assistance delivered was trans-shipped directly from United Nations trucks onto trucks of partner organizations at the border for delivery to their places of operation. As detailed in table 2, four United Nations entities used the border crossing.

Table 2

Total number of trucks sent through the Ya‘rubiyah border crossing, per year, per entity

<i>Year</i>	<i>2018</i>	<i>2019</i>	<i>Total</i>
World Health Organization	37	34	71
United Nations Population Fund	15	3	18
United Nations Children’s Fund	13	3	16
International Organization for Migration	4	0	4
Total	69	40	109

21. Aid delivered through the Ya‘rubiyah border crossing largely consisted of medical items, as described in paragraph 17 above.

IV. Alternative cross-border modalities

Border crossings into areas not under the control of the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic

22. The relevant border crossings between Iraq, the Syrian Arab Republic and Turkey are shown in the annex to the present report.

Border crossings from Iraq

23. There are two border crossings from Iraq into non-government controlled areas in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic within 45 km of Ya‘rubiyah. The Walid border crossing lies 25 km north of Ya‘rubiyah, and the Fish Khabur border crossing lies 20 km north of Walid. While the Government of Iraq controls the Iraqi side of Ya‘rubiyah, the Kurdistan Regional Government controls the Iraqi side of both the Walid and Fish Khabur border crossings. Both are less practical options than Ya‘rubiyah for the delivery of United Nations humanitarian assistance, as Walid is only an informal border crossing and Fish Khabur operates over pontoon bridges. Given their geographic proximity to Ya‘rubiyah and given their respective limited capacities, they are not presented in the context of the present report as alternatives to the Ya‘rubiyah border crossing.

Border crossings from Turkey

24. Tall Abyad is one of the six border crossings between Turkey and territory controlled by non-State armed groups in the Syrian Arab Republic. From a logistical perspective, it is a large, fully functional border crossing, which restarted operations on 15 October 2019, following Operation Peace Spring. It has a 40,000-m² customs area, space to accommodate the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism for the Syrian Arab Republic, can accommodate up to 250 trucks crossing per day and is connected on both sides of the border by paved roads that can support increased traffic. Within the Syrian Arab Republic, the M4 highway, which runs from east to west through the north-east, is 30 km south of the border crossing.

25. Tall Abyad has been proposed as a border crossing that could support needs across the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. The Government of Turkey has provided assurances, based solely on United Nations independent assessments of need, that aid could cross from Turkey into all areas of the north-east. There has been some humanitarian access into the area that changed control during Operation Peace Spring, although such access has been limited.

26. For Tall Abyad to be a viable alternative to Ya‘rubiyah, aid would need to be moved across conflict lines to all parts of the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, requiring all relevant parties to allow safe, sustained and unimpeded access. In addition, NGOs currently supporting medical operations in the north-east would need to be authorized to work from Turkey. They would need to be able to enter Turkey for the trans-shipment and delivery of humanitarian aid.

27. The issues noted above regarding Tall Abyad apply to the other five border crossings from Turkey into areas under the control of non-State armed groups in the Syrian Arab Republic. In addition, using these crossings as alternatives to Ya‘rubiyah is likely to be more problematic, owing to security challenges and the need to cross multiple lines of control. Furthermore, none of these options have logistical capabilities comparable to Tall Abyad.

28. The three border crossings that link directly to areas under the control of local authorities, Ayn al-Arab, Derbassiyeh and Diwar, would face fewer access challenges compared with crossings into areas under the control of non-State armed groups, as no conflict lines would need to be crossed. These border crossings, however, are less well developed to provide the necessary logistical support. Furthermore, security considerations at these border crossings pose additional challenges. Humanitarian organizations would need to require the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and other military forces active in the area to facilitate safe passage before aid deliveries could proceed.

29. Another option would be to use the border crossing currently authorized under resolution [2504 \(2020\)](#) at Bab al-Salam. It is fully functioning, and the United Nations Monitoring Mechanism could be scaled up to support additional deliveries. However, access to the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic from areas further west of Tall Abyad is particularly difficult. Insecurity prevents reliable access along the M4 highway. Multiple lines of control need to be crossed to move through the Manbij area since 9 October. As with Tall Abyad, some NGOs would require authorization from the Government of Turkey to use the border crossing.

Border crossings into areas controlled by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic

30. Another option would be to deliver aid through border crossings controlled by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Governments of neighbouring countries.

31. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic has identified Albu Kamal as a viable border crossing to import humanitarian aid into the north-east of the country. On 29 January 2020, in response to the request by WHO to import medical materials through Ya'rubiyah, the Government informed WHO that a consignment could be delivered through the Albu Kamal border crossing. On 16 February, WHO informed the Government that, based on their security and logistics assessment, conditions were not conducive for the consignment to be transported through Albu Kamal. WHO requested the Government to identify an alternative border crossing.

32. Any delivery through the Abu Kamal border crossing would require multiple security guarantees from many parties across areas of control, which, experience suggests, would be difficult to secure. Travel from Baghdad can take up to eight hours, which would require staff to stay overnight in insecure and unsafe areas. Different security interlocutors and non-State armed groups, including groups designated by the Security Council as terrorist organizations, operate in Anbar Province, making safe humanitarian access very challenging. On the Syrian side of the border, security concerns limit the United Nations humanitarian access along the Euphrates valley and beyond.

33. A further alternative would be to use the border crossing between Qamishli and Nusaybin. In 2014, this border crossing provided an important pipeline for humanitarian aid into the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. In late 2014, however, it was closed, and it has yet to be reopened. If the border reopens and aid deliveries resume, humanitarian organizations would need to secure the necessary approvals and guarantees of safe passage to transport materials across conflict lines from Qamishli to areas in the north-east of the country previously supported by United Nations cross-border operations.

General considerations

34. Were the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to consent to their use by the United Nations, none of the above options would require Security Council

authorization. The consent of the Government of Turkey or the Government of Iraq would also be required, depending on the border crossing.

V. Alternative cross-line modalities

35. Aid for nearly 1 million people is delivered from within the Syrian Arab Republic to the north-east of the country every month. Except for medical items, the cross-line operation has improved since the Ministry of Foreign Affairs approved the use of land deliveries in July 2017. However, a number of significant restrictions remain.

36. The cross-line delivery of medical items is particularly restricted. As noted in paragraph 16 above, no road convoys carrying medical items went from Damascus to the north-east in 2019. Trucks moving to the north-east often face bureaucratic impediments as they exit government-controlled areas. Delays have become further extended since November, with reports from agencies that trucks have been held at checkpoints for up to five days. There are also impediments within the north-east imposed by the local authorities, including on United Nations entities and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent. Once all the necessary approvals have been received, convoys may still be subject to delay or cancellation because of security conditions on the ground.

37. In March and October 2019, WHO requested the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to use land routes to deliver medical supplies to the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. Neither request was approved. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs informed the United Nations in writing in March 2019 that health items sent to Hasakah must be transported “by air freight exclusively”. Although the Ministry of Health gave WHO verbal approval for land deliveries on 6 January 2020, formal approval has not been provided in writing. Such approval would be required if the United Nations is to increase the delivery of health materials to the north-east in a sustainable manner because air freight is significantly more expensive than road convoys.

Cross-line delivery of aid into the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic

38. The process to gain approval for deliveries of medical supplies by land or air to the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic requires agencies to provide a request to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Government of the Syrian Arab Republic usually takes three to four months to respond.

39. On 29 January 2020, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested that United Nations entities provide a list of all humanitarian supplies (medical and non-medical) pending approval for importation into the Syrian Arab Republic so that they could be expedited. WHO reports that, since 3 February, 11 of 36 pending requests for importation have been approved.

40. Once the medical supplies are imported into the Syrian Arab Republic, approval is required for each convoy and for each agency that is part of the convoy. Each request requires a load list that identifies the quantity of assistance due to be dispatched to each destination. The Ministry of Health may then issue a signed facilitation letter for each agency. This approval process usually takes one week. Once the facilitation letters are received, additional approvals from the Ministry of Health and the security services must be granted at the warehouses before the supplies can be loaded. Further clearances are then required at the airport for shipments sent by air.

41. United Nations entities report that the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic sometimes is slow to respond or does not respond at all to approval requests. Security

officials at warehouses sometimes do not accept ministerial approvals. These refusals can cause shipments to be cancelled or delayed. UNFPA reported a case in July 2019, when security officials at the warehouse did not approve an air shipment, which led to the delivery being cancelled.

42. Following the removal of authorization for the use of Ya‘rubiyah by the United Nations and its implementing partners, WHO, on 21 and 22 January 2020, and UNFPA, on 28 January, submitted requests for the delivery by land of medical items to the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic. A response to the WHO requests is still pending. On 3 February, the Ministry of Local Administration approved the UNFPA request to transport 54 reproductive health kits and 100,000 doses of an oral contraceptive. On 13 February, UNFPA dispatched these items by road from Damascus to Qamishli. On 18 February, the materials arrived to UNFPA warehouses in Qamishli. (As noted in paragraph 18 above, Qamishli has supplied a limited range of medical facilities in the north-east. As noted in paragraph 19, many have not been supplied from there.)

VI. Observations

43. In 2019, the United Nations and its humanitarian partners reached a record number of people in need in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic, with supplies delivered through Ya‘rubiyah and from within the country. Nonetheless, significant gaps remained in helping the estimated 1.3 million people in need in the area. If viable alternatives to Ya‘rubiyah are not found for medical items, the gap between the humanitarian response and humanitarian needs will increase further. As I noted in my report of December 2019 on the Syrian Arab Republic ([S/2019/949](#)), any reduction in humanitarian access would cause further suffering. This remains true today.

44. New options are needed to fill these significant gaps and to continue the humanitarian assistance previously delivered through Ya‘rubiyah. Under current conditions, a combination of more cross-border and cross-line access is required to sustain recent levels of, and preferably increase, humanitarian assistance in the north-east of the country.

45. Under international humanitarian law, all parties to the conflict must allow and facilitate rapid and unimpeded passage of humanitarian relief for civilians in need. The Security Council has recalled that depriving civilians of objects indispensable to their survival, including wilfully impeding relief supply and access, can constitute a violation of international humanitarian law.

46. In order for all humanitarian needs to be met, the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic would need to facilitate greater cross-line access to the north-east of the country, in particular for medical assistance. The Government would also need to consent to the delivery of humanitarian assistance through cross-border operations into the north-east, at safe and logistically feasible border crossings, using the most direct routes.

47. In order for cross-line modalities to work effectively, the following is required: (a) timely approval by the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic to import all necessary medical supplies into the country; (b) a simplified, expedited and reliable approval process by the Government to enable regular and predictable deliveries from Damascus into the north-east by land; (c) approval by the Government to access all areas and facilities within the north-east to ensure that assistance reaches all people in need, impartially and without discrimination; and (d) facilitation of deliveries by local authorities in the north-east to all locations without delay.

48. Should the steps outlined in paragraph 47 above not be taken, and in the absence of consent from the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic or neighbouring countries to use border crossings into the north-east of the country, the Security Council would need to authorize the United Nations and its implementing partners to use additional crossings. Several options are available; however, from a security and logistical perspective, in the current context, the Tall Abyad border crossing would constitute the most feasible alternative to the Ya‘rubiyah border crossing.

49. The humanitarian imperative in the Syrian Arab Republic remains the same as it was when the Security Council adopted resolution 2165 (2014), namely the need to ensure that humanitarian assistance, including medical and surgical supplies, reaches people in need throughout the Syrian Arab Republic through the most direct routes and the need for all border crossings to be used efficiently for United Nations humanitarian operations. Since the adoption of resolution 2165 (2014), humanitarian needs have increased even further. All parties to the conflict and the Council itself must live up to their responsibilities to ensure that the people in the north-east of the country receive the assistance they so desperately need.

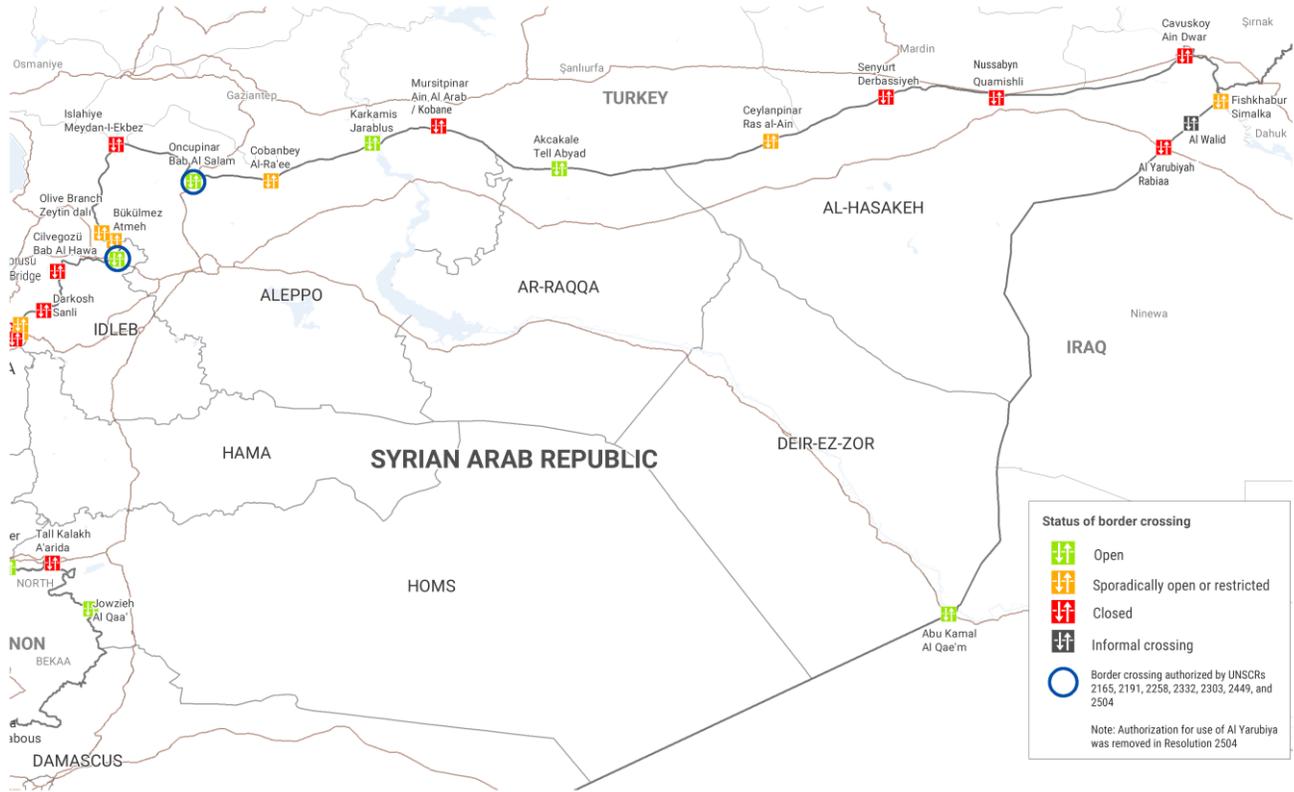
Annex

Map of border crossings in the north-east of the Syrian Arab Republic



SYRIAN ARAB REPUBLIC
Border crossing points

(as of 19 Feb 2020)



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.
For Feedback Contact: Regional Office for the Syria Crisis (ochaosy@un.org)