As the death toll rises and more days pass with thousands of survivors trying to find shelter in freezing temperatures in earthquake-hit (and [war-ravaged](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2023/02/06/Turkiye-Syria-earthquake)) northwest Syria, many people are asking a simple question: Why can’t the UN send aid straight into the region from wherever it wants?

Unfortunately, it’s not that simple.

Although it is relatively quiet at the moment, the war is ongoing and the UN’s access to the rebel-held northwest, [which is home to more than 4 million people](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2023/02/07/quake-crisis-Syria-rebel-held-northwest) – many already in desperate need of help before the quakes – depends on a UN Security Council Resolution. That resolution was first passed in the early years of Syria’s war, after clear obstruction of aid to border regions, or parts of the country seen as rebellious, by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Starting in 2014, this resolution (and subsequent versions of it) allowed the UN to bring aid into Syria through specific border crossings — two from Türkiye, one from Jordan, and one from Iraq. This resolution meant the UN, which works with multiple NGOs to deliver assistance across Syria’s borders, only had to notify al-Assad, not seek his permission.

Al-Assad (often aided by his allies in Moscow on the Security Council) has long seen this “cross-border” aid operation as an affront to Syria’s sovereignty, and over the years the resolution has been reduced to one crossing into the northwest – Bab al-Hawa. A [small convoy of six UN trucks](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/first-un-aid-quake-convoy-reaches-syria-sources-say-2023-02-09/) crossed there on Thursday, although roads had been closed earlier due to damage, pointing to some of the other major problems in moving assistance from one quake-hit area to another.

Aid to parts of the country run by al-Assad and his allies, including UN aid, is coordinated through Damascus. Relief can in theory be sent across front lines within Syria (from Damascus to Idlib, for example) but this approach requires permission from al-Assad and often other groups. It has not worked on any large scale in the past – a look back at [convoys to besieged rebel areas](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/analysis/2016/01/12/briefing-all-you-need-know-about-sieges-syria) of Syria earlier in the war is a sad reminder of this.

While there have been calls by Western officials, notably [US Secretary of State Antony Blinken](https://tr.usembassy.gov/statement-by-secretary-of-state-blinken-on-u-s-assistance-to-emergency-earthquake-response-efforts-in-turkiye-and-syria/), for al-Assad to open up more routes for UN aid into Syria, that’s a tough negotiation, wrapped up in years of politics that the Security Council has failed to crack.

It’s worth noting that UN aid is far from the only aid, or way to get supplies, into the northwest. Turkish and Syrian NGOs have long had a long presence in the region, and there is commercial traffic too. But the UN does play an important logistical role in coordinating aid.

With all eyes currently on Bab al-Hawa, here’s a round-up of our coverage on the cross-border aid debate, humanitarian convoys, and why it matters to millions of people.