IRAN'S PROXIES & CORONAVIRUS IN DEIR EZZOR: GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY?

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INTRODUCTION

On the 22nd of March 2020, the Syrian Ministry of Health reported the first documented Coronavirus case in Syria for a person coming from abroad, amidst regional and international skepticism over the country's medical capacity. While the Syrian government announced it measures to handle the case, it adopted a set of precautionary actions in an attempt to limit mass gatherings of people and to restrict their movement across governorates. Yet measuring the success of the government's response is tricky. Syria remains the country with the lowest regional figures and, when compared to neighboring countries, notably the last one to officially report a Coronavirus case.

Coronavirus in Syria can lead to unprecedented consequences. Not only is the country's territory fragmented under the control of various rival actors, Syria's medical facilities are also at a low point. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) 70 percent of total worldwide attacks targeting health care facilities have occurred inside Syria.[1] Furthermore, many doctors and

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Syria's nine years of conflict exhausted the country's medical capacity.

- Coronavirus was present in Deir Ezzor governorate prior to the Syrian Government's official announcement on March 22nd.

- The presence of Iranian proxies may have facilitated the outbreak of Coronavirus in Syria.

- The Syrian Government's delay in reporting the first official Coronavirus cases raises questions over their transparency.

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[1]"Impacts of Attacks on Healthcare in Syria - Syrian Arab Republic," ReliefWeb, accessed March 20, 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/impacts-attacks-healthcare-syria.

medical personnel left the war-torn country and many others died. Since March 2011, more than 900 medical personnel were killed in the course of the ongoing conflict.[2]

Based on primary data collected through interviews conducted by the BIC research team with local partners, this policy brief discusses the outbreak of Coronavirus from Deir Ezzor and elaborates on how the Syrian government has been responding.

CORONAVIRUS OUTBREAK IN SYRIA

"There are no injuries [Coronavirus cases] in Syria, the Syrian army annihilated all viruses" stated Syrian health minister Nizar al-Yazji in a response made before March 22nd.[3] The words made by the Syrian official, who in theory should be leading the frontlines against the pandemic, were met by controversy. Not only that Syria is not immune to Coronavirus, but the country was also still receiving personnel coming from a country affected by the outbreak, such as Iran. On the 21st of March, only one day prior to Syria's official announcement of its first case, approximately one person was dying every ten minutes in Iran as a result of Coronavirus.[4]

Although many early reports warned that Iranian activity in Syria would eventually lead to the outbreak of Coronavirus in the war-torn country, foreign Iranian elements continued their activity in Syria (whether through moving between governorates or entering Syria from Iraq via Deir Ezzor).[5]

According to an interview with a local resident in Deir Ezzor who agreed to talk to BIC on condition of anonymity, Iranian-backed militias maintained their routine in eastern Syria. The interviewee explained that they "don't see a difference, nothing has changed [before and after Coronavirus]. They're operating with total disregard of human well-being.[6] The interviewee

added that the Iranian-backed militias' movement was not only limited to entry from the Iraqi side but also within Syrian governorates.

The recent activities of Iranian-backed militias in Deir Ezzor were followed by suspicious cases of Coronavirus in the area. Some reports, prior to March 22nd, speculated that some Iranian militants were confirmed to be dead as a result of Coronavirus.[7] While Damascus repudiates these claims, there remains stronger evidence that should be consulted. In an interview with a partner in Deir Ezzor that maintains contact with local medical personnel, the interviewee explained that "it's not a secret. Many residents of the area know that the cases were confirmed [of Coronavirus] (...) but no one is allowed to talk about it."[8] These claims were also validated by a local Deir Ezzor doctor who agreed to talk to BIC on conditions of anonymity for security reasons, explaining that his medical team was instructed to label Pneumonitis as the cause of death despite signs of Coronavirus symptoms.[9]

THE SYRIAN GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

The danger of spreading Coronavirus in Syria wasn't limited only to the presence of Iranian militants. Despite the drastic outbreak of the virus in Iran, the Syrian government didn't suspend flights with Tehran. As a host for religious destinations such as Sayida Zaynab in Rural Damascus, Syria kept Sayida Zaynab open for religious pilgrimages before shutting it down ten days after the first case was officially reported in Syria. [10]

Despite the delay in closing religious destinations, the Syrian government adopted other precautionary measures, attempting to limit the spread of Coronavirus. In collaboration with the Syrian Red Crescent,[11] several disinfection and cleaning campaigns were launched in public spaces across different governorates, including medical and educational institutions. Furthermore, a night curfew was imposed and all

[2]"A Map of Attacks on Health Care in Syria," Physicians for Human Rights, February 2020, http://syriamap.phr.org/#/en/findings.
[3] Salem Nasif, "Syria: Late measures to prevent the spread of Corona and lack of transparency accusations. (In Arabic)," *El-7al* (blog), March 2020, https://bit.ly/2Kjqt9i.
[4] "Iran: Coronavirus Death Toll Rises to 1,556," Middle East Monitor, March 21, 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200321-iran-coronavirus-death-toll-rises-to-1556/.
[5] "Will Iran relocate its militias in Syria becuse of Corona (in Arabic)," Enabbaladi, March 2020, https://enabbaladi.net/archives/372133.

[6] Interview with local activist, Deir Ezzor, March 2020.
[7] Nasif, "سوريا."
[8] Interview with local activist, Deir Ezzor, March 2020.
[9] Interview with local doctor, Deir Ezzor, March 2020.
[10]"Isolating Sayida Zaynab city in southern Damascus as precaution for Corona spread. (in Arabic)," 24, April 2020, https://bit.ly/2VjQ4W3.
[11] "Disinfection Campaign in Streets and Neighborhoods of Damascus Continues," Syrian Arab News Agency, March 27, 2020, https://sana.sy/en/?p=189015.

forms of mass public and private transportations between governorates were suspended.[12]

The Syrian government prepared and equipped [13] isolation centers to deal with cases of Coronavirus. Al-Zabadany national hospital in Rural Damascus was also prepared to serve as the primary center for dealing with Coronavirus cases.[13] According to reports, these centers were equipped with beds and intensive care units as well as a trained medical staff.[14] Additionally, Syria received medical supplies and Coronavirus testing kits from some countries, including China. However, these supplies were given to the Syrian government. On the other hand, other medical supplies were sent by WHO to northern Syria.

KEY INSIGHTS & CONCLUSIONS

Since March 2011, Coronavirus is probably the first instance in which a common threat is posed over the security of all rival actors operating inside Syria. The country's fragmented territory, the presence of rival factions and the events of violence that persist are all challenging any efforts against Coronavirus.

The outbreak of Coronavirus in Syria was only a question of time. Nonetheless, the presence of foreign Iranian elements inside the war-torn country may have accelerated the entrance of the virus into Syria. Despite the skyrocketing figures that hit Iran, the Syrian government was very late in responding with cohesive measures.

Coronavirus can pave the way for unprecedented consequences inside Syria. Beyond the territorial fragmentation between rival actors, Syria's medical capacity is limited. The country's medical institutions are both exhausted and destroyed as a result of nine years of conflict with a medical staff that has also suffered considerable loses.

The Syrian government's delay in reporting its first official Coronavirus case along with its policy of alleviating the actual number of cases are reasons for concern. This poses legitimate questions over the government's transparency, the measures it has taken to contain the situation, and its capacity to implement necessary responses in the future.

BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Access to medical supplies and humanitarian support is a basic human right. Any endeavors to provide assistance to the health system and make humanitarian aid more effective in Syria should be based on and guaranteed by no regime interference into the activities of the WHO and other local actors such as Syrian Red Crescent.

- The EU and WHO should demand that the Syrian government be transparent about the actual number of Coronavirus cases in order to provide more accurate assistance. The WHO, therefore, should deploy inspection teams to visit Syria's hospitals and prisons too.

- The EU's future negotiations with Iran on the nuclear framework should accommodate the departure of Iranian-backed militias from neighboring Arab states.

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[12] "Syria Adds Night Curfew to Coronavirus Curbs," *Reuters*, March 25, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-syria-idUSKBN21C351.
[13] "Al-Zabadani Hospital Designated as Medical Isolation Center,"

Syrian Arab News Agency, March 22, 2020, https://sana.sy/en/?p=188635.
[14] Ibid.

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