

Corona virus in Syria

19 March 2020

About 16 million people currently live in Syria in all areas of control. According to the World Health Organisation, the ongoing conflict has destroyed the Syrian health care system, where more than half of public hospitals and public health care centers have been closed or are not operating at full capacity. The total number of people in need of health assistance exceeds 11.3 million people, three million of whom live with serious injuries and disabilities. This situation describes the health sector in Syria before the Corona virus, which could potentially turn into a huge disaster in case the epidemic spreads through Syrian citizens.

The Syrian government has not reported any confirmed cases of coronavirus infection up to the date of preparing this report, and has limited itself to taking precautionary measures and announcing cases of suspicion. However, Syrians in the Regime-controlled areas are reporting news about people who have been quarantined in public hospitals, and then quarantine their families in Damascus and Homs.

Some observers attribute the incomprehensible secrecy about the outbreak of the virus by the Syrian government to the fact that cases are most rampant among the ranks of foreign militias. The first case was recorded in Albukamal, Northeastern Syria among the army, of a Pakistani recruiter coming from Iran. This news remains in circulation without denial or confirmation, amid great coyness over the existence of any case registered by the official health authorities.

The Syrian government and self-administration have taken many legal and health measures and decisions. Meanwhile, to a lesser extent the health directorate in the interim government that has been satisfied with general prevention instructions. However, there is a clear disregard for the decisions issued and the measures taken by the de facto authorities at the societal level, as life in the streets and markets remains normal without any significant change.

Evaluating procedures in each area of Syrian control:

First - in the areas controlled by the Syrian Regime:

No official cases have been recorded, but there are reports of the burial of three people upon their death in the (Al-Swaidaa) in the National Hospital, as well as, the death of two people in Qudsaya Hospital and their burial without the usual washing or prayer of the dead, along with checks for the family of the two people from Qudsaya in the countryside Damascus. A similar case was also reported about the death of a person in Homs Hospital and quarantining of his family after his death. There are also reports of 134 people in quarantine in the (Al-Dwair) area, who were coming from Damascus International Airport, with pictures being circulated of the quarantine site, which was did not appear to be equipped to confront the virus.

Actions taken by local authorities:

The government has taken a set of measures, developed a precautionary implementation plan, and formed a follow-up team to ensure the optimal implementation of decisions with high responsibility and to monitor the spread of the virus regionally and internationally:

- The Syrian Ministry of Health, affiliated with the government of the Syrian Regime, has launched campaigns to sterilize streets and public transportation in several at-risk governorates in order to contain the virus.
- The Damascus Governorate issued decisions to shut down sports clubs, gyms and Internet cafes, and to close all cinemas and private and public theaters. All wedding halls, events, solace and all social events halls were also shut down. The delivery of hookahs in all restaurants and cafes in closed and open places as also ceased. The need for complete sterilization for every facility that prepares or serves food, exposing food items outside the stores was also emphasized.
- Some organizations launched awareness campaigns about the virus and ways to prevent it, and relief organizations distributed cleaning supplies and sterilizers to some of the displaced. However, the response remains inadequate due to the lack of a financial contingency plan.
- In some areas, the community is taking initiatives to collect sterilization materials and distribute them to those who cannot afford them, and alternately help older people who live alone to purchase their groceries so that they do not have to leave homes. Entry and exit for stores was also organized to reduce numbers inside.

In the face of high prices and the lack of purchasing power of the population, some people in the community sew washable cotton muzzles or prepared sterile materials at home (using white vinegar and water to disinfect surfaces) and (Aloe Vera gel mixed with alcohol to sterilize hands) and distributed them for free.

Muzzles/masks are available in shops but at high prices, for instance, the price of a single disposable muzzle exceeds 500 pounds (half a dollar), and some pharmacies have registered the price at 2000 pounds (\$ 2). Sterilizers are available in commercial stores at high prices ranging between 2500 and 4000 (\$ 2.5-4) for local supplies and between 6000 and 10,000 (\$ 6-10) for branded supplies.

Generally, there are some citizens who adhere to the home quarantine guidelines, but the majority do not follow any safety and non-assembly rules.

Second - in the regions of Northeastern Syria:

No official cases of coronavirus infection have been reported in the North-Eastern regions administered by self-administration / as well as some security boxes of the Syrian Regime. There are some rumors about the existence of cases, but there is no information available on the transmission of cases.

Sterilizers and muzzles are also available, but there are reports of merchants beginning to monopolize these items. Currently, the price of a single muzzle is 200 Syrian pounds while the price of a small sterile box is 300 pounds, and a small can of alcohol is 800 Syrian pounds. Disparities in price do exist between regions and governorates.

Actions taken by local authorities:

The Health Directorate of the Syrian government in Hasaka has allocated two quarantine sections at the Pearl Medical Center in the city of Hasaka, and at the National Hospital in Qamishli to isolate patients with confirmed cases of Coronavirus, and the Health Directorate confirmed that no cases of Corona virus were recorded in the governorate until the time of preparing the report.

As for the Self-Administration in Northeastern Syria, it issued a package of decisions starting on the date of 12/3/2020, according to which all the gatherings in the self-management areas of Northeastern Syria were canceled, and the following decisions were issued:

- All schools, universities and institutes are suspended until further notice.
- It is forbidden to let any person enter through any of the crossings of the self-administration, except residents of Northeastern Syria, with entry restricted to only Tuesdays of every week.
- Crossings, schools, universities and institutes will be reopened pending a decision of the joint presidency of the Executive Council for North and East Syria, to be issued later.
- Suspending all activities of local and international organizations in relation to rehabilitation and training workshops and closed meetings except for activities related to the distribution of food and non-food baskets until a decision is issued by the Self-Administration - this circular has no relation to activities inside camps and the authority in this regard rests with the camp management.
- The organizations affairs offices remain open for the necessity of work, with one or two employees present - all official departments of the Self-Administration for Northeast Syria are suspended from Monday 16/3/2020 until Thursday on 19/3/2020 except for the departments that require work to continue to provide a platform for medical committees to sterilize all residential complexes, institutions and public buildings.
- In a related context, the Fatwa Committee in the Islamic Democratic Society of the Self-Administration announced the suspension of collective prayer, including Friday prayers, in all mosques in its areas of control until further notice, as well as the cancellation of all religious gatherings and social events and the suspension of all religious lessons in mosques.

On the other hand, the Social Justice Council of the Self-Administration announced the suspension of all meetings and gatherings in the councils of social justice in the civil and Self-Administrations, the Court for the Defense of the People and the Academy (Mesopotamia) for social justice until further notice.

The Self-Administration has allocated \$ 100,000 as a budget for the Health Authority to take measures to prevent the Corona epidemic, and a special crisis cell has been formed to take the necessary measures as it issued several decisions after its first meeting that included increasing hygiene campaigns and starting to sterilize all institutions and departments of the Self-Administration.

The crisis group of the Self-Administration issued a number of orders in its areas of control as part of the precautionary measures to prevent corona virus, the most important of which are:

- Banning all gatherings, sports activities, events, weddings, parties, public meetings, funeral councils, meetings in institutions, including training academies.
- Initiate awareness campaigns that families should not leave their homes except for necessity and to avoid gatherings in markets, restaurants, cafes, and others.
- Monitor markets and pharmacies to prevent them from monopolizing supplies.
- Sterilization and hygiene campaigns include all facilities and arenas, suspending visits to prisons, and the work of municipal buses.
- Providing health centers with all required supplies, tightening health control over the crossings, and setting up medical points in the camps.

In Deir Ezzor:

Based on the decisions of the Self-Administration, the Syrian Democratic Forces closed the land crossing at Al-Salihiya, which connects between the Self-Administration areas and the areas of Regime control in Deir Ezzor Governorate, as part of the precautionary measures to prevent corona virus.

The Chairman of the Organizations Committee, Tariq Al-Rashed, issued a circular (via WhatsApp) to all organizations and associations operating in Deir Ezzor, according to which it is necessary to obtain approval and a letter for the Organizations Committee about any voluntary activity, otherwise it will be subject to suspension of the license.

The movement of markets in general was normal and roads, but less than normal.

In Raqqa:

A circular has been published for the people of Raqqa, asking everyone to sterilize the walls, lands and tools used in the work and sanitize even vegetables and fruits with sterilizers available in pharmacies, and use masks and gloves to protect themselves from the virus.

On the medical level, an emergency department was opened in the National Hospital of Raqqa in anticipation of patients infected with the Coronavirus, as well as preparing 10 beds with an equipped and trained medical staff to receive any emergency condition. The center was also completely sterilized. Thermometers/Thermal devices that were distributed to all health centers to aid in initial examinations for patients and to all hospitals and government departments, as well as government crossings. Two buildings were also equipped for the purpose of isolation and accommodates twenty beds.

The Youth and Sports Committee suspended all sporting activities and events until further notice in order to avoid gatherings. As for the organizations in Raqqa, none of the organizations was suspended until the date of preparing this report.

Life in general seems to be normal without any change in the movement of people and markets, and none of the shops and markets have shut down, and it is noted that there are no preventive measures in place by the people.

Many local organizations and media platforms have started awareness campaigns to prevent Coronavirus through the Internet and flyers distributed in the streets. Many rallies and parties have issued decisions to cancel all their activities and gatherings.

Awareness and seriousness are still low in the region, as most people continue to lead lives naturally without adhering to coronavirus prevention standards.

Third - in the Northwest regions:

No coronavirus cases were reported in the Northwest, and no casualties were officially announced by the Ministry of Free Health. However, rumors are circulating about cases in Afrin, which were denied and termed as propaganda to incite terror among the population.

Actions taken by local authorities:

The Civil Defense and the Syrian Response Coordinators and the Health Directorate issued a statement to combat the disease, which included directives to prevent the virus. Schools and universities were also suspended for a week in the Northwest, and directives were issued to prevent Friday prayers in congregation, and to call for suspension of gatherings.

The crossings were closed with the Regime's control areas and with Turkey.

Response of civil and humanitarian organizations operating:

IRC canceled all activities that contain gatherings and only went ahead with individual activities. Bhar Organization/Green Hands suspended its work for one day and then followed up on individual activities, either. They also canceled activities that involve gatherings and is pondering over a plan to reduce working hours in its centers, according to an employee.

The dispensary (Ataa) in Atma gatherings prevented auditors from gathering in the waiting room and took precautionary measures for its employees by wearing surgical gloves and masks.

As for the Children's and Women's Hospital (Hand), muzzles were distributed to the auditors and the floors were sterilized every hour, as well as special masks for the medical staff. They also directed everyone to wear paws during working hours.

As for the availability of the necessary materials such as sterilizers and muzzles:

There are sterilizers and muzzles in pharmacies, and their prices vary from one pharmacy to another. Pharmacists have raised their prices due to the high demand for these supplies. The price currently ranges between 150 to 250 Syrian pounds, equivalent to a quarter of a dollar or less per muzzle, between 220 to 400 pounds Syria (between a quarter and a half dollars) for a three-ply muzzle.

As for sterilizers, the prices for a small package ranged from: 650 Syrian pounds (half a dollar) for a 50ml bottle and is 3500 (3 and a half dollars) for a 250 ml bottle. However, some of them cost up to 5,000 Syrian pounds (\$ 5). Prices vary according to the type and manufacturer name. Masks/muzzles are beginning to appear in short supply in pharmacies in the camps.

The camps constitute an environment conducive to the spread of the Coronavirus in the event of disease outbreaks due to the large number of gatherings, the lack of sterilization tools, means of protection and the difficulty of quarantine, and are considered threatened by a humanitarian disaster in the event of the disease.

Recommendations:

The World Health Organization, the United Nations and supportive organizations must:

- supply Syria and various control areas with sanitizers for hands and disinfectants for public places, with support provided for quarantine buildings
- conduct intensive awareness campaigns to emphasize upon the seriousness of the current epidemic and on prevention of the virus.
- Intensify general sterilization campaigns, and provide free hand sanitizers to all people
- Distribute private respirators free of charge to the elderly and the injured.
- Give support to medical personnel to deal with quarantine.
- Continue food relief, and intensification of the population.
- Instruct that there be precautionary measures, including not allowing large gatherings in the waiting room when visiting clinics and devising ways to avoid gathering