

CCSD COVID-19 11th Report for Syria Second half of July 2020

The reality in Syria creates a picture that warns of a humanitarian catastrophe due to the increasing speed of the spread of COVID-19 across the country. This is exacerbated by the broken-down health system exhausted by a war that has lasted for more than 9 years. There is a lack of preventative measures in place, nor the capacity to support the high volume of sick patients coming into hospitals or healthcare clinics for treatment which creates a burden for the already overwhelmed medical and healthcare providers.

The eleventh monitoring report covers the movement of the virus outbreak in various regions of Syria and the measures taken to control it for the second half of July 2020.

Syrian Regime-controlled areas:

The second half of July witnessed a clear increase in the number of COVID-19; the Ministry of Health of the Syrian regime recorded 299 infections, bringing the total number of infected people to 757. The Ministry of Health indicated that 97 cases of recovery were recorded from the virus in the same month, bringing the total of those recovering to 237. The Ministry also recorded 21 deaths from COVID-19, bringing the total deaths to 43.

Syrians living in areas controlled by the Syrian regime indicated that the number of cases is much greater than what has been reported, and has become evident by the number of dead bodies that have been counted. (A.M.) from Daraa Province said:

"The regime has only announced several cases in the governorate, but in reality, there are a large number of infections. In the town of Tal Shehab, a university student was confirmed infected, and her infection was transmitted to her mother. A large number of family contacts in the same town were also suspected of being infected, and they were not examined or documented. The number of infected people in the town of Tal Shehab is estimated to be more than 20 people."

In the countryside of Damascus, another citizen, (Kh.E.) said,

"The disease has spread to all of the Damascus and its countryside. Ambulances are entering most areas every day, for example in Qudsya. The number of deaths are increasing and every day it is normal to see 5 or 6 deaths."

Civil society activists are circulating news of a large number of infections among medical personnel and are unable to reach an accurate figure for the number of deaths among medical personnel. Information is scarce, especially that of what the regime gives to the public about COVID-19 updates.

Governmental procedures and local policies:

- The quarantine policy in the town of Jadidat Al-Fadl was lifted after conducting a town wide medical survey to find out the status of the spread of COVID-19 that resulted in a reduced number than the initial survey showed. The quarantine in the town of Ras al-Maarrah has also been lifted as of July 23, 2020.
- On July 20, 2020, the Ministry of Health announced that the Council of Ministers had taken the decision to close wedding and funeral halls starting on July 24, 2020.
- On July 22, 2020, the Ministry of Endowments announced the suspension of Eid al-Adha prayers in the governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus, due to the social customs that lead to crowding. School, council meetings, religious teaching seminars, and the activities of the Assad institutes in the mosques of Damascus and Rural Damascus were also suspended until further notice. The public was told that they could continue to hold congregational prayers on Fridays in Damascus, Rural Damascus and all governorates, provided that they follow the health rules and precautionary measures that are currently being enforced.
- On July 23, 2020, the Ministry of Tourism issued the following instructions:
 - Social events and weddings conducted in halls licensed to tourism are suspended;
 - Holding any artistic parties such as an engagement or weddings in closed tourist catering facilities (restaurants, tea rooms, cafeterias) should follow adherence to the conditions of the maximum occupancy rate of 50%.
 - An investment factor of no more than 40% is applied when holding parties in open halls attached to tourist facilities, while adhering to all instructions issued by the government in charge of measures addressing COVID-19, and the instructions of the Ministry of Tourism.
- The ministry will take legal measures against violating the new rules of the establishments, and organizing the necessary controls under penalty of closure.

The Ministry of Health has designated four new centers to conduct a PCR test for those wishing to travel outside Syria. It has also been announced that the repatriation of citizens stranded abroad will continue gradually and in multiple stages. The government will continue to monitor the epidemiological situation and prepare quarantine and isolation centers accordingly. For citizens who wish to travel abroad, PCR tests will be available starting July 21, 2020 in specific centers, and a document will be issued to show that the person who took the test either has COVID_19 or does not.

On July 23, 2020, the Ministry of Health announced that it received medical aid to support the health sectors efforts to respond to COVID-19 from the Russian Rusal Association and the Russian International Organization (the Palestinian Orthodox Imperial Association). Aid included protective clothing for health workers, medicines and heat detectors.

A workshop was organized for media professionals on the developments of the COVID-19 pandemic in Syria and the role of the media in sharing COVID-19 messages to the public, encouraging adherence to individual and community preventative measure for social distancing. These messages will include the requesting of avoiding gatherings, wearing masks and frequent hand washing, in cooperation between the Ministry of Health and the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF.

The economic and social situation in the areas controlled by the Syrian regime:

The last days of July 2020, it was recorded that there was an increase in the exchange rate of the dollar against the Syrian pound, which caused an increase in the prices of basic commodities. Some commercial sectors are suffering from closures of business operations because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of customers. (M.T.D) said:

"I work in a shop that sells sweets. My work has almost completely stopped with the spread of the virus in the country. People can't and don't buy anything but the basic and necessary things from the stores, and sweets are considered a luxury so my work stops. I am currently unemployed and suffering from a major financial crisis."

Theft has significantly increased and has been monitored by the regime law enforcement and this is mostly due to the deteriorating economic conditions. Cases of theft were recorded in Damascus, the countryside of Damascus, and the countryside of Daraa Governorate, and has affected shops, homes, and some industrial and agricultural equipment. (M.A.), a technician in the maintenance of pumps and electrical generators, said:

"The number of thefts in Daraa Governorate is high, and in the past two weeks, in the Muzayrib district, more than ten water pumps were stolen from the agricultural lands. Many times, I know that the pump I repaired is stolen and by who. I can't face the thief because I'm afraid of retaliation and the person(s) sabotaging my store."

Pharmacies in the governorate of Damascus reported a large shortage of medicine and civilians complained of not being able to obtain necessary medicine.

The Syrian government has continued to close a number of money exchange companies under the pretext they have dealt illegally with foreign remittances, which has affected a large number of civilians who are dependent on what their expatriate children have sent from abroad. The Syrian regime seeks to limit companies that transfer money to Syria to companies that are committed at the exchange rate set by the central bank, which is much lower than the real exchange rate.

Civic activity: It has been observed that there is a physical absence of public civil society activities implemented by organizations and associations due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been a transformation from interactive activities towards awareness raising and preventative measures of safety related to COVID-19 through social media.

Northwest Syria

The second half of July saw an increased number of people infected by COVID-19 in the northwest regions and the total has become 31 people and 3,439 people have been tested negative, where 16 cases have been reported positive and there has been no death from the virus up to date. The spread of the infection is concentrated in the regions of Sarmada, Sarmin, Atma, Azaz, Al-Bab, Akhtar and Idlib.

An infection that caused controversy in the countryside of Aleppo has caused an uproar across the community. It was recorded on July 17, 2020 when a Turkish ambulance doctor working in Al-Bab Hospital was reported to have the virus and it spread to other workers and patients. Um Alaa, a displaced person from the countryside of Idlib, said: *"If the medical staff had taken precautions against the virus, no one would have been infected in the area."*

On July 18, 4 new cases of the virus were recorded, which increased people's fear in knowing that the current healthcare system does not have the capacity to manage the community's needs in the northwest. Umm Abdo, a displaced woman from Khan Sheikhoun, said,

"Fear creeps into my heart every day from the spread of the disease. Of course, if it spreads more than that, the situation will become unbearable. Here there are no hospitals. I swear that I am thinking of leaving to Turkey with my husband. We will sell our house that we spent our entire lives in in order to build our lives again and pay off smugglers to get us through the border. At least there are hospitals and medicine there. If I get sick there, I know there is a hospital available to treat me and there will be medicine. By God, the big countries also have not been able to treat this virus. We are here in liberated areas of Syria but we will not find a treatment for COVID-19. The best decision for us is to leave Syria."

On July 21, 2020, there were 3 positive cases reported that were in contact with people who had COVID-19. On July 24, a new infection was recorded in the city of Sarmin, from someone who recently came from regime-held areas. Tracing work was done to count all those in contact with the case of the city of Sarmin. An appeal was issued, "all families are requested to follow the measures to prevent COVID-19 from spreading and report suspected cases by visiting the nearest medical center or by calling the numbers assigned by the health directorates and the referral system." The request includes home quarantine for 14 days before going out in public.

Governmental procedures:

The Ministry of Health in Idlib called upon visitors to Bab al-Hawa Hospital to follow instructions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and an official decision was approved to close the Darat Azza - Ghazawiya crossing and Atma crossing - Deir Ballut from Friday July 17, 2020 at 8:00 am until further notice. The two crossings will remain accessible only to the military personnel (without their families), for the sake of combat readiness, and to switch soldiers at the points of Rabat. Passage at the crossing will also be allowed for those with special approvals issued by the local councils of the Interim Government area. On July 20, 2020, the transit movement of travelers to and from Turkey was resumed, with confirmation that the crossing may be re-closed at any time on the Turkish side. Those stranded in Syria or Turkey were asked to travel directly without delay and with emphasis on strict adherence to following preventive measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 in areas under the control of the opposition, stressing the wearing of medical masks and maintaining a safe distance between each person. This includes using hand sanitation and avoiding shaking hands or body friction with others.

The Ministry of Health in the Interim Government, within the areas under its control, closed the public roads leading to the town of Sarmin and imposed a quarantine on the city after recording a case of a COVID-19 infection coming from Damascus and coming into contact with a number of residents in the city. The ban will be gradually lifted after positive consultations between the Ministry of Health, the local council, and those concerned in Sarmin. A crossing was opened from the northern side of the city, Binnish Junction, Al Sharqiya, and Al Qaws. Sterilization and examination teams were placed there at the crossing to ensure safety for all those passing through.

Work at Bab al-Hawa Hospital was suspended for a week between the dates of July 19 to July 26, 2020 because the hospital was not ready to implement full safety standards for staff and patients. This happened as a result of the increase of new COVID-19 infections in Sarmada and its proximity to Bab al-Hawa Hospital. Sarmada is an economic center in the northwest, with a large population density. There are exceptions from the suspension related to the hospital which include the departments of Obstetrics and Vaccination.

Humanitarian organizations:

Humanitarian organizations operating in the northwest are active and have isolation tents at the door of each medical center in the northwest. The personnel present in the tent work to sterilize the patients' hands and measure their temperature. Personnel also stress to patients the importance of washing hands with soap and social distancing when entering waiting rooms. In some medical centers, like the Maternity and Child Hospital in "Qah", patient's feet are also sterilized before entering the hospital for additional protection. Patients are also asked to limit their companions accompanying them into the medical center to 1 person.

Civil defense teams continue disinfection and sterilization campaigns for public facilities and the camp(s). Many organizations have moved their activities and programs online and some relief organizations have followed the methods of delivering relief to the beneficiaries' homes to ensure social distancing.

Northeast Syria

The Autonomous Administration issued a set of decisions related to COVID-19 for all regions in northeastern Syria on July 24, 2020. This was prompted by four new and confirmed cases in north and eastern Syria. The Co--presidency of the Executive Council of North and East Syria decided on the following policy implementation rules:

- All border crossings will be closed starting Friday morning, July 24, 2020.
- The cities will be subject to quarantine for a period of 14 days including anyone who enters the jurisdiction area of the Autonomous Administration starting July 24, 2020.
- The funerals of the dead due to the Corona pandemic are not allowed to enter the Autonomous Administration areas in northern and eastern Syria.
- Gatherings, celebrations, weddings and funeral tents are prohibited in order to protect public health.
- Collective prayers are prohibited in all places of worship in order to protect public health.
- Restaurants will only be open to fulfill external orders, no dine in options.

- Everyone in north and east Syria is required to adhere to the rules of health protection and social distancing in all places (workplaces, public places).
- Formal institutions at the crossings are required to follow strict health measures at the crossings (goods, people).
- The duration of this decision is fifteen days from the date of its publication.

In Al-Hasakeh Province:

On July 23, 2020, the Health Authority within the Autonomous Administration announced that 4 people had been infected with the COVID-19 (3 in Qamishli and 1 in Al-Hassakeh). On July 30, 2020, medical teams in the Autonomous Administration regions recorded 17 new COVID-19 infections. The Health Authority in the Autonomous Administration lifted a ban on a building in the Al-Arbouya neighborhood, south of Qamishli, almost 10 days after it was quarantined after a case of COVID-19 was suspected.

On July 27, 2020, the Qamishli Airport received two planes carrying more than 700 passengers from the Damascus airport. Hours after their arrival, the Syrian government and the Autonomous Administration announced that new infections with the COVID-19 were recorded and arrivals were asked to go to quarantine centers, but instead they headed to their original destinations, or homes.

With the continuing spread of COVID-19, the Crisis Unit in the Al-Jazeera region decided to take several measures on July 29, 2020:

1. Imposing curfews and movement between cities and sub-districts and a complete ban during the Eid Al-Adha holiday, except for emergency cases.
2. Prohibiting all forms of gatherings (weddings - funerals - public parks - parks - places of worship - swimming pools - gyms - restaurants – cafes, and etc.).
3. Suspending working hours at Rojava University, training centers, nurseries and kindergartens until a new decision is issued.
4. The necessity of full adherence to home quarantine for all suspected cases that do not need to be transferred to health centers.
5. The necessity of adhering to the rules of social distancing in all public places, and the necessity for owners of shops, bakeries and other places to abide by preventive measures.
6. All visits to prisons are prohibited.
7. Stopping internal transportation buses within city.
8. The decisions will be effective starting July 30, 2020.

A resident of Al-Hassakeh, who works in a Health shop said,

“I work in a healthy ware store, and during the first period of the ban I was very damaged because I received a weekly salary, and this affected me a lot. Now they are talking about a new ban. I am very afraid of my economic situation, because of the high prices. We cannot secure the necessities of life. Sometimes external transfers come to me, otherwise we would have had hunger and God helps everyone.”

The International Committee of the Red Cross, in cooperation with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United Nations Children's Fund and the United Nations World Health Organization, on July 22, 2020, established a special isolation center to confront the

"Covid-19" pandemic in the Al-Hol camp in the Al-Hassakeh Governorate (eastern Syria). This was done to prepare for any possible spread of COVID-19. The isolation center includes 80 beds, equipped with an emergency room and a laboratory for analyzing tests. On July 26, 2020 sterilization operations of public facilities and shelter schools took place in the town of Tal Tamer in the countryside of Al-Hassakeh, to prevent the spread of "Corona". The number of COVID-19 infections in Al-Hassakeh increased to 8 reported cases.

In Deir Ezzor Province:

The COVID-19 Unit announced an emergency meeting on Sunday, July 26, 2020 and decided on the following measures:

1. Work towards supporting medical personnel to be ready for increased COVID-19 cases.
2. Providing an oxygen generator and bringing it into service within a maximum period of one week.
3. Providing quarantine centers with all the necessary equipment, medicines and medical personnel in anticipation of any emergency.
4. Asking the concerned authorities and international organizations to urgently secure a PCR test device.
5. Equipping and training specialized health teams in all regions.
6. Supplying quarantine centers and hospitals with large quantities of oxygen cylinders.
7. Working with local media outlets to spread health awareness and education to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
8. Allocating emergency numbers in the event of any new occurrence regarding a suspected case.
9. Closing all crossings and stressing prohibition on smuggling from other regions and jurisdictions. Imposing strict penalties on violators, amounting to imprisonment.
10. Avoid gatherings, no dine in restaurants, except for outside orders and take away, and stay away from events, funerals and places of worship.

On July 27, 2020, Al-Kasra Hospital adhered to strict measures after discovering that a suspected COVID-19 case had come into contact with a number of hospital staff. On July 29, 2020 two cases of COVID-19 were confirmed in the town of Abu Ham

The economic situation is deteriorating further because of the COVID-19 virus. The owner of one of the small stalls in the governorate said,

"I am a woman who owns a stall and I support my family of five. Because of Corona the markets will be closed, and I cannot support my family because my only source is this stall and so the situation is very difficult for me. In the first period of prohibition, there was a great impact on my family, and we suffered a lot. Now, with further restrictions, we fear this problem will continue. God knows what we will do."

Also, an employee of a civil society organization said:

"I am an employee of an organization, and the living situation is difficult and became more difficult due to the inflated prices after this COVID-19 situation. Of course, this negatively affects our lives and our livelihoods."

May God help people who do not have a breadwinner in the family. We ask God for relief for this people".

In Al-Raqqa Province:

Several suspected cases of Coronavirus were recorded in Al-Raqqa Governorate, where two suspected samples were tested on July 22, 2020 and on July 31, 2020, and 3 cases of Coronavirus were recorded in Raqqa Province. Cases are subject to quarantine, according to the statement of the Autonomous Administration.

On July 15, 2020, the Health Committee in the Autonomous Administration in Raqqa announced that it had tightened its precautionary measures in the centers, points and hospitals that it directly supervises in the city of Raqqa and its countryside, coinciding with the preventive measures recently announced by the Autonomous Administration to prevent the outbreak of the Coronavirus. These specialized medical centers in the countryside are: (3 centers are dispensaries in Al-Akirchi, Abu Kabaie, and Al-Ziyarat area, 3 centers in Hamrat Nasir, Al-Karama and Khus Ajil, 3 centers in Al-Khatounia, Al-Sahbiya and Kadiran, 3 centers in Al-Qahtaniyah, Al-Sukoura and Al-Rafiqah, 4 centers in Tal Al-Samen, Khnaiz and Hazima. As for the centers located in the city center, they are: (Saif al-Dawla clinic, al-Rashid clinic, Raqqa National Hospital)

The National Hospital in Raqqa is not adequately equipped. It contains only seven respirators, and there is one isolation room to accommodate an entire city population.

In addition, mismanagement of suspected cases was observed by the teams working in the governorate, from the moment they case of COVID-19 was discovered to the moment they were informed. One of the women coming from the areas controlled by the Syrian regime said:

"When they reached the entrance checkpoint of the SDF at the entrance to the governorate, the checkpoint person conducted a COVID-19 examination. It resulted in an elderly woman testing positive and her companions negative. The checkpoint person insisted that they all should be transferred to one room including the negative cases for sanitary isolation."

One of the women's relatives adds that because of the irresponsible behavior of the local authorities even if people were suspected of having COVID-19, despite not having it, they were exposed to social bullying on social media and in their surrounding community, despite the denial of this. The social stigma of having COVID-19 is taking its toll on citizens and has heavily impacted the mental health of those who test positive. Haifa, 55, said,

"The biggest misfortune is when you feel you are infected. The feeling that you are carrying an entire epidemic that can affect everyone is not easy. The feeling that other people are infectious is an indescribable feeling. It's weird because I know I have not felt any symptoms, but because of the societal taboo, you are constantly fearful of getting the diseases and spreading it."

COVID-19 also has had a negative impact on the economy. A woman living in the governorate said:

"I have a women's salon, and because of COVID-19 and the changing local governance policies, life has become more difficult. I am no longer able to

take any customers because everyone is fearful of getting infected although I have made sure that I take preventative precautions but it doesn't matter. I have canceled work that is close to the face, such as make-up application, for fear of infection. God forbid, this affects the income of the salon further, because it has already negatively affected me and my family."

A journeyman worker in a clothing store added:

"Our work depends on an open shop, but because of the ban, we could not open up our stores and we suffered a real economic loss. I am afraid that the ban that will be applied again after the Eid holidays and it will not be for only 10 days. I will suffer a great loss as I work as journeyman, and I have no other savings. Where will I and my family find money to buy food from? How will we eat?"