

## **In World Health Day, Syria is unable to respond to “COVID-19” with the current health situation Violation Documentation Center in Syria – 7 April 2020**

The ongoing military operations led by the Syrian government for nine years now have drained all life aspects in Syria, and they largely affected the Syrian health sector since the government forces transformed hospitals and medical centers to barracks, such as the National Rastan Hospital and Jisr al-Shughur National Hospital. The Syrian government forces and Russia, have shelled dozens of hospitals located in areas beyond their control.

In a [press](#) statement released on Monday the 3rd of February 2020, the World Health Organization raised alarm over critical health threats facing hundreds of thousands of Syrians forced to flee “due to intensified hostilities in northwest Syria and attacks on health care”, stressing that 53 health facilities had suspended services since January, due to insecurity, threats of attacks, or the fact that entire areas have been deserted by civilians seeking refuge from violence and daily bombardments.

As for areas beyond the control of the Syrian government, medical services are weak and largely devoted for the military services.

Amid the global spread of the “COVID-19” pandemic reaching Syria, it should be noted that Syria has two PCR machines only that can detect the virus “SARS-CoV-2” that causes “COVID-19”. One of these machines is in Idlib run by the emergency laboratory of the Syrian Interim Government (the opposition), and the other one is under the administration of the Syrian government. It is noteworthy that both parties lack the necessary laboratory detectors for tests, and they only possess a few of them that are barely enough to test a limited number of people.

Through this paper, the Violations Documentation Center VDC sheds the light on the conditions of the Syrian health sector according to the controlling forces:

- 1- Areas under the control of the Syrian opposition factions (parts of Idlib and Aleppo provinces).
- 2- Areas under the control of the “Syrian Democratic Forces SDF” (most of Al-Hasakah, Deir Elzur and Raqqah provinces) where the Syrian government forces share control of few parts.
- 3- Areas under the control of the Syrian government (Hama, Homs, Damascus, the countryside of Damascus, Daraa, Suwayda, Latakia and Tartus provinces).

### **1- Areas under the control of Syrian opposition factions:**

The health sector in these areas is facing a major crisis in securing medical supplies and medicines. Moreover, the situation has worsened after the Syrian government forces, supported by military Russian fighters, targeted dozens of hospitals, health centers and ambulances; and left them out of service once and for all. Beside the killing of many medical personnel and paramedics. VDC documented the targeting of (54) health facilities in Idlib and the west countryside of Aleppo between February 2019 and March 2020.

The health sector in north Syria depends on the support of the humanitarian organizations which provides the minimum level of securing medicines and medical equipment. Furthermore, several medical facilities were closed in the past few years due to the suspension of support.

Due to the global spread of "COVID-19", serious concerns of spreading to north Syria are raised, especially with 4 million people residing there, mostly internal displaced people IDP living in crowded camps and lacking minimum basic services.

Medical personnel in north Syria have warned that the reach of the virus to the province would create a major humanitarian disaster. According to the health directorate of Idlib reporting to VDC, this area has 200 beds of intense care and less than 100 ventilators, knowing that the availability of these basic tools is vital in treating those who are infected with the virus.

According to Dr. Rick Brennan from the WHO, the north-west of Syria is one of the major humanitarian crises "Northwest Syria represents one of the world's most severe humanitarian crises". He added "The current situation in northwest Syria – characterized by lack of access and medicine, insufficient hygiene, chaos and mass displacement – poses a significant risk of outbreaks of measles, diarrheal diseases and other diseases".<sup>1</sup>

## **2- Areas under the control of SDF:**

Areas under the SDF and "Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria NES" have several difficulties in the health sector, especially after the decision of closing the only crossing point leading to Kurdistan Region in Iraq due to the spread of "COVID-19". As a result, shipments of medicines and medical equipment necessary for hospitals cannot enter these areas. On the other hand, the Syrian government abstained from supplying these areas with the required medicines and medical equipment which negatively affected medical personnel and health facilities there.

Furthermore, NES does not have and could not provide the necessary PCR machine to run tests for people suspected of carrying the virus. As a result, samples are sent to the laboratory in Damascus to acquire results, despite the fact that the Syrian government has only a limited number of laboratory detectors that are necessary to run the tests.

Moreover, the situation in east Syria raises alarm due to the lack of equipment to detect the virus, which can affect the whole population consisting of about two million there,

## **3- Areas under the control of the Syrian government:**

Areas controlled by the Syrian government have recorded 16 cases of "COVID-19" including two deaths. One of the deceased was a woman in an advanced stage of the disease who did not have proper health care in a hospital, and remained in her house until death.

Journalists in areas controlled by the Syrian government have released videos showing the bad conditions of quarantines, and the fact that no serious procedures were taken to maintain the safety of those who are suspected to carry the virus. The videos also showed the lack of soaps in a quarantine located in "Doueir" village in Damascus' countryside. Further, masks and gloves were not distributed to those who were quarantined. Moreover, people were allowed to sit with each other and receive outside visitors without any safety measures.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/02/1056552>

Medical centers and hospitals of the Syrian government suffer from major difficulties where they lack readiness and proper hygiene. Activists have published videos that show the accumulation of garbage in the entrances of hospitals and the lack of concern for hygiene. In addition, during several periods of time, the Syrian government transformed its public hospitals to centers that receive military deaths and injuries which impacted the ability to accommodate citizens.

In view of the above, VDC recommends WHO and international humanitarian organizations to play a serious role in Syria by securing enough medical machines to detect the virus, along with necessary laboratory scanners. An immediate action plan should be put to deal with the deteriorating health situation, beside the urgency of monitoring the work of the health sector in all areas.

VDC calls on all actors to immediately stop all hostilities in north-west Syria to enhance all efforts of combating the "COVID-19" pandemic, including targeting civilians and civilian facilities, and facilitate humanitarian activities.

VDC calls on all actors to allow humanitarian actors and medical personnel to access IDP camps and other shelters, to help those who live in crowded camps and unofficial sites, inspect the conditions, assess the needs, and allow the reach of humanitarian aid including medical supplies.

