

Country Update

Syria

(February 15, 2021)

Context and government response:

As of February 15, 2021, Syria has registered 14,863 cases of COVID-19, including 978 deaths.

The first official COVID-19 related death was recorded on March 30th in Syria. The Syrian government introduced a number of measures to slow the spread of the virus, predominantly relating to movement restriction, closures of schools and restaurants, and a nationwide curfew.

The accuracy of official case reporting has been questioned, and experts have accused the government of minimizing the Syrian COVID-19 death toll for political motives. In April 2020, COVID-19 testing numbers were as low as 100 per day, predominantly in the Syrian capital Damascus. As of September 2020, Syria had reported significantly fewer cases than any other Middle Eastern country, and in August the deputy director for health in Damascus estimated that the actual number of cases rests around 112,500 in Damascus alone.

An official request was submitted by the Syrian government on December 15, 2020, to partake in the COVAX facility. It is unclear whether this plan includes the whole country and the Syrian government has repeatedly withheld vital food, medicine, and aid from political opponents and civilians. In a statement made by the Syrian health minister on January 21, 2021, he stated that ensuring vaccine procurement and distribution does not “impact Syria’s sovereignty” is the most important condition, suggesting that the government does not intend to make the vaccine available to all regions of Syria.



Summary of impacts:

The economic and social impacts of the pandemic have been tremendous in Syria and have been compounded by multiple concurrent factors. The underlying fragility of the Syrian economy was augmented by multiple shocks between mid-2019 and 2020, and the coronavirus measures have had a major economic impact on the war-torn country. Initial phases of pandemic –related restrictions thus had a disproportional effect on the wellbeing on the Syrian population, deeply affecting employment opportunities across the country and further worsening already dire socio-economic indicators. In early June 2020, the value of the Syrian pound fell rapidly, trading at 3,000 to the US dollar on the black market (as opposed to 47 to the dollar before the civil war), creating vast market panic, and resulting in wide scale shortages of food and medicine products.

Sanctions imposed by the US in July 2020 further deepened the economic crisis, targeting any foreign person who has knowingly provided significant financial, material, or technological support to the government of Syria. Moreover, the Lebanese economic crisis caused a further accelerate the Syrian economy.

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In June 2020, the compounding impacts of the economic and social crises effect of these forces culminated in rare civilian protests in the Syrian capital, which descended into clashes, with supporters of Iran-backed Hezbollah calling for the toppling of the Assad government.

Food insecurity in Syria remains a nationwide concern. The food security situation in Syria, which had already been deteriorating has since accelerated due to the global, regional and local impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the associated mitigation measures, including restrictions to agricultural, commercial and industrial activities as well as population movement. Already high due to widespread inflation, the price of food continued to rise during and after the lockdown period in May 2020, and June 2020 saw the highest national average price of the World Food Programme standard reference food basket since 2011, as well as a worsening in purchasing power of Syrian households and of key household food security indicators.



Commercial supply chains in Syria have faced significant disruptions as a result of the pandemic and were further impacted in August 2020 by the 4 August explosion in the Port of Beirut. As of August, 2020, humanitarian operations were reaching 7.2 million people every month, with food assistance reaching 5.4 million per month.

For Syrian women and girls, the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities which cannot be disconnected from the violence and trauma of war and displacement. The containment and prevention measures to counter the pandemic have been largely focused in urban areas. The impacts of these measures on women and girls from conflict-ridden, marginalised, and rural parts of Syria are largely undocumented, particularly those regarding access to information, education, sexual and reproductive services and child and forced marriage. Executive Director of UNFPA, Dr. Natalia Kanem, noted in June 2020 that “With COVID-19, the risks women and girls face are rising and so is the urgency to provide information and services to protect their health and safety”.

Responses led by women:

The Centre for Civil Society and Democracy (CCSD) has worked throughout the pandemic to contribute to reducing the spread of the pandemic in all Syrian region. CCSC have worked on initiatives both internal and external to Syria to raise awareness among Syrians about the importance of precautionary measures and increase protection, predominantly through online programmes. The CCSD have also written to the UNSC to call on them to work to install and ceasefire in Syria, as well as push for further medical aid and supplies. Furthermore, the organisation have expressed concern about health conditions in Syrian detention centers, where many detainees were arrested because of their participation in peaceful protests, or for expression of opposing political opinions, largely arbitrarily with no cause.

