



Syria Heads Toward A Health Crisis

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The coronavirus has come to Syria. On March 29th, the regime of dictator Bashar al-Assad documented its first confirmed death from the disease, and the country now has nearly a dozen reported cases of COVID-19 – a figure which will unquestionably rise in coming days.

That the pandemic would eventually reach Syria was a foregone conclusion. Since its outbreak in China's Wuhan Province in December of last year, the virus has spread globally. Today, there is virtually no country on earth that has not been at least marginally affected by the illness. By the time it burns out, epidemiologists predict, all of them will be – and many will be impacted severely. But the political realities of the Syrian civil war, which has raged since 2011 and which has entered a new spasm of violence in recent weeks, virtually guarantee that the disease will have disastrous effects there.

Indeed, even before the coronavirus had fully taken hold abroad, the United Nations was sounding the alarm over the deteriorating situation in Syria, where a new cycle of violence has taken hold. In mid-February, Mark Lowcock, the UN's Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, warned that the conflict – now localized in northwest Syria, where Syrian government forces are clashing with Turkish-backed rebels – had reached a "horrifying new level." In just the last few weeks, Lowcock laid out, nearly a million Syrians (the vast majority of them women and children) had been displaced as a result of the fighting.

This, however, marks just the latest escalation in what has become a long-running humanitarian catastrophe. Already prior to this winter, the UN was estimating that nearly three million Syrians – three-quarters of the population of northwestern Syria – was "in need of humanitarian assistance." Today, even more are, with many located in refugee camps where the necessary precautions that need to be taken against the coronavirus (such as social distancing and stepped-up hygiene procedures) are simply not possible.

The country's current political divisions, meanwhile, have kept a comprehensive response to the disease out of reach. As Aaron Zelin and Oula Alrifai of The Washington Institute have explained, there are at least three separate pandemic policies now being employed in the country. The Assad regime is "manipulating the emergency" and – much like its strategic partner, Iran – trying to use the crisis to facilitate a lifting of international sanctions. The so-called "Salvation Government" (the political front of Islamist group *Hayat Tahrir al-Sham*), is behaving more constructively with its limited resources, closing public places in areas under its control and working to raise awareness and safety standards among the local population. The Kurdish-led Autonomous Administration in the country's north, meanwhile, remains woefully unprepared for the health emergency, lacking adequate supplies of critical equipment (like ventilators).

At the same time, the Syrian regime's choice of strategic partners is making the country sicker still. Over the past half-decade, the Islamic Republic has marshalled a massive force of Shi'a irregulars – drawn from places like Iraq, Pakistan and Yemen – that it has trained and dispatched to the Syrian battlefield in support of the Assad regime. These militias, in turn, have played an instrumental role in helping Damascus turn the tide of the Syrian civil war. But these same forces also appear to be responsible for bringing the coronavirus into the country in the first place. According to a new analysis by the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), the disease arrived in the country weeks earlier than publicly admitted by Damascus, and was brought there primarily by members of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and pro-Iran militias. Syrian opposition websites have cited numerous cases of coronavirus infections throughout the country, with Iranian and Iranian-supported militiamen serving as a key vector of its spread.

Russia, meanwhile, has continued to back the Assad regime in its efforts to eliminate opposition enclaves, notwithstanding an October 2018 Memorandum of Understanding with Turkey designed to impose a ceasefire in the country's north. At the same time, Moscow has used its veto power at the United Nations to block any resolute multilateral action that might reign in Damascus and blunt its local aggression.

The consequences leave Syria without a clear path forward in the face of the looming pandemic. The result is likely to be a dramatic expansion of the country's already-severe humanitarian crisis – one that the region, and the world, will be forced to step in and manage.