COVID-19

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› Criticism of Damascus reconstruction plans grows among local communities, loyalist circles
COVID-19 cases in and around Damascus overwhelm Syrian healthcare system

On 17 July, local sources stated that the Syrian Ministry of Health instructed government hospitals in Damascus and Rural Damascus governorates to stop taking in COVID-19 patients. The Ministry reportedly instructed COVID-19 patients who have no severe symptoms (and do not need hospital treatment) to quarantine themselves inside their homes. The move comes as government hospitals lack sufficient numbers of beds and ventilators to deal with higher numbers of COVID-19 patients, an issue compounded by the fact that the already low number of ventilators in circulation are not operating at full capacity due to low electricity provided by hospital generators. The Syrian government also does not allow private hospitals to take in COVID-19 cases, instead asking that any patient displaying symptoms be directed to the government hospital where the Ministry can conduct polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests on the patient.

COVID-19 cases highest in Damascus

Local sources state that the rate of COVID-19 cases is particularly high in Damascus and Rural Damascus, adding that those cases reported by the government are of individuals that have been submitted to government hospitals, and exclude random testing results. Syrian government figures, as

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<tr>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Number of active cases</th>
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<tr>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>179</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural Damascus</td>
<td>74</td>
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<tr>
<td>Quneitra</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>29</td>
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<td>Lattakia</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>Hama</td>
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<td>Homs</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>As-Sweida</td>
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<td>Dar’a</td>
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Table 1: Active cases of COVID-19 by governorate (Source: Syrian Ministry of Health)
of 21 July, show that Damascus governorate has the highest number of active cases, followed by Rural Damascus.

**New measures point to inaccuracy of Syrian government’s COVID-19 reporting**

According to a recent study entitled ‘COVID-19 Pandemic: Syria’s Response and Healthcare Capacity’ conducted by the London School of Economics, Syrian government hospitals in Damascus have 96 ICU beds with ventilators, while in Rural Damascus ICU beds number just 11. The government-reported cases alone, when compared to the reported available ICU/ventilator beds, show that the hospitals may already be operating over capacity. However, the maximum capacity threshold for ‘rationing measures,’ (akin to the recent measures reported above), is 1,920 cases for Damascus and 220 for Rural Damascus – suggesting that Syrian government figures may be lower than actual prevalence.

**COVID-19 outbreak in northwest Syria leads to restrictions on freedom of movement**

Following the recent detection of the first COVID-19 cases in Syria’s northwest, Idlib, western and northern Aleppo saw a return to implementation of COVID-19 precautionary measures.

On 18 July, the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) issued Statement No. 54 calling on civilians to take all necessary measures to avoid gatherings in groups in public areas, and statement No. 55 ordering the closure of public swimming pools, public gardens and children’s playgrounds, while stipulating that restaurants only work delivery services and barbershops adhere to safety regulations (by enforcing the wearing of masks and use of hand sterilizers).

On 19 July, the SSG also issued Statement No. 70 suspending Quranic teachings in mosques, and calling on local imams and preachers to invite worshippers to adhere to preventive measures.

Whereas the Bab ElHawa border crossing was initially closed a week earlier, the crossing's managing authorities rescinded the decision on 20 July, allowing civilian access to and from Turkey. The crossing’s authorities did, however, issue a statement calling on travellers to take all precautions to limit the spread of COVID-19 by wearing masks, regularly washing hands and maintaining a safe distance of at least one and a half meters from others.

**Negative knock-on effects**

Measures were also placed on the Deir Ballut–Ghazawiyeh crossing in the Aleppo countryside, meaning that only military personnel and those with a permit from the local council are allowed to cross until further notice. The decree excludes military families, civilians and traders. There have been accounts of local doctors and relief workers facing restricted access at the checkpoint as a result.

Previous rounds of preventative measures indicate that restrictions on freedom of movement...
movement, coupled with a lack of government aid alternatives, can produce a range of negative knock-on effects in the region. These include a noticeable increase in crime, crossline smuggling of goods, inter-armed opposition group clashes as well as protests in both administrative zones of the northwest. Precautionary measures have also heavily affected the local populations’ access to humanitarian supplies as crossline checkpoint closures have restricted the availability of goods and access to proper healthcare and many hospitals have halted cold case operations.

SDF’s anti-ISIS operation in Deir-ez-Zor accused of overreach

On the morning of 17 July, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and US-led International Coalition launched the second phase of their ‘Deter Terror’ campaign targeting ISIS sleeper cells in Deir-ez-Zor and Al-Hasakeh governorate. The search and raid operation in Deir-ez-Zor, which lasted a total of four days (ending on 20 July), was mainly concentrated in the towns of Shiheil, Sabha, and Zir (Basira subdistrict), Dahleh and Jdid Ekeidat (Khasham subdistrict), as well as to a lesser extent Jidet Bikara (Khasham subdistrict). The SDF imposed a curfew in the region and erected military checkpoints inside and at the entrances of the town of Shiheil, prevented Friday prayers, restricted the free movement of civilians during the first and second days of the operation, and only allowed the movement of women (to secure their basic needs) in the last two days of the operation.

The SDF also raided the illegal smuggling crossing in the town of Shiheil and confiscated a number of ferries reportedly used to smuggle raw materials and fuel, causing a number of smugglers to take refuge in the Syrian government-controlled areas west of the Euphrates, particularly in the town of Baqras (Al-Mayadin subdistrict).

During the course of the operation, the SDF arrested a total of 37 individuals, the majority of whom were civilians accused of being either ISIS members or collaborators with the hard-line organisation.

Local council leader arrested

The operation, however, has been criticized by local communities for overreaching its stated aims. Primarily, the head of the Shiheil city local council, Hammoud Al-Nawfal, was temporarily arrested and photographed alongside other detainees beside weapons reportedly confiscated from ISIS cells. Nawfal, who enjoys good relations with the self-administration and havals (local administrators), had met with commander-in-chief of the SDF, Ferhat Abdi Şahin, known by his nom de guerre as Mazlum Abdi, on 14 July as part of a delegation of local community leaders and sheikhs.

Freedom of movement restricted

Residents and IDPs in the area were reportedly obliged to travel a distance of 2–3km to secure bread; as a result of the SDF campaign the majority of bakeries were forced to stop operating in the area and local businesses also forced to close. Finally, the campaign disrupted the work of organizations present in the area as employees were prevented from moving freely within the region.
The SDF excluded members of the Abu-Kamal clan from engaging in the search and arrest operations in Shiheil, as the majority of the town's residents hail from the clan, amid fears this could worsen Arab-Kurdish relations in the area.

Clan members who did take part in the operation included the Al-Bakir and Al-Shaitat clans in Shiheil (which is majority-Abu-Kamal); Al-Shaitat clan members in the town of Sabha, Braiha and Jdaidit Akidat (which are majority-Al-Bakir). Still, there remains a risk of heightening tribal sensitivities in the region, particularly among the Al-Bakir, Al-Shu'a'itat, Al-Bukamil and AlBou-Ezzeddine clans, which reportedly have many unresolved conflicts that could be exacerbated by current events.

**Deteriorating security situation in northern Aleppo**

Areas of northern Aleppo witnessed a military escalation between Syrian government forces (backed by Russia) on the one hand and the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army (SNA) on the other.

Ten civilians, including a woman and eight children, were wounded as a result of Russian airstrikes that targeted residential neighborhoods in the city of al-Bab on 17 July. On 20 July, Syrian government forces shelled Grad rockets in the vicinity of the village of Brat near the city of al-Bab, killing two civilians and wounding another. Turkish army artillery targeted Syrian government forces based in Daghelbash (al-Bab subdistrict). As a result, the SNA fortified its checkpoints within the al-Bab area on the instructions of the Turkish army.

The Russian air force attack on the city of al-Bab is the first Russian attack on the city, which is considered the largest population centre under the control of the Turkish-backed SNA. The town is also home to the largest Turkish military base within Syria. Areas under direct Turkish influence have previously been isolated from military operations and shelling given that Turkish forces are stationed in those areas. Some sources suggest the aerial bombardment may have been in response to a roadside bombing that targeted a Russian–Turkish joint military patrol on the M4 highway in Idleb countryside on 14 July, resulting in the wounding of three Russian soldiers.

**SNA and Turkish military clashes with the Kurdish Militias**

Clashes also erupted between the SNA and the Kurdish militia on the western outskirts of Azaz. The Turkish military bombed the Kurdish-held village of Maraanaz in response to the attack. Kurdish militia attacks have occurred despite an agreement reached by Turkey and Russia on 22 October 2019, which provides for the removal of all Kurdish militias and their weapons from the areas of Manbij and Tall Refaat in Aleppo governorate.

At the same time, northern Aleppo has witnessed a series of explosions during the past week. A vehicle-based IED exploded a military vehicle belonging to the Turkish-backed Failaq al-Sham on 19 July on the Jandairis road in Afrin city, injuring three Failaq al-Sham members as well as ten civilians, including six children. On the same day, a car bomb exploded on the Sajo roundabout on the Bab AlSalameh crossing road north of the city of Azaz, killing 12 and...
wounding more than a 100 people. The SNA accused Kurdish militias of being responsible for this explosion.

**Recent anti-government attack in Jasim reflects continuing grievances in Dar’a**

On 18 July, Jasim township’s local police branch was targeted with an IED explosion that was heard across the town’s neighborhoods. The explosion was followed by several simultaneous attacks conducted by unknown gunmen against Syrian government checkpoints and positions across Jasim, including the State Security branch located near the town’s cultural center. While the identity of the unknown gunmen (likely former opposition fighters) remains unknown, local sources stated that the main motivation behind the attacks was to warn and deter the government of Syria from conducting further arrests in the township.

**Syrian government accused of kidnapping and assassinating Jasim residents**

Jasim township has been experiencing chronic instability since the Syrian government captured the town through a reconciliation agreement in July 2018. Kidnappings and assassinations – largely targeting former opposition fighters and commanders – have been frequent since then. On 12 July, former opposition leader and Dar’a Central Committee member Yasser Ibrahim Al Dafinat was reportedly shot, before succumbing to his wounds and dying the following day. On 23 June, former leader of the opposition faction Jaysh Ababil, Fadi Ahmad Mahasna, was kidnapped in front of his home by armed men before local former-opposition fighters deployed in the town, setting up checkpoints, imposing a curfew and accusing the Syrian government of carrying out the kidnapping.

**Instability in Jasim synonymous with that of Dar’a**

The instability in Jasim is just one microcosm of the wider security situation in Dar’a governorate as a whole, where kidnappings, arrests and assassinations take place almost on a daily basis. Indeed, the Dar’a Martyrs Documentation office stated that 16 assassinations took place in the month of June alone. Such actions usually result in a backlash from former-opposition fighters, who view such acts as being violations of the July 2018 reconciliation agreement, leading them to retaliate through insurgent attacks that further contribute to the governorate’s instability.

**Criticism of Damascus reconstruction plans grows among local communities, loyalist circles**

Approved in a special session of Damascus governorate’s council on 25 June, reconstruction plans for Qaboun, to the east of Damascus, and Yarmouk camp in the southern Damascus suburbs, have since attracted criticism from a broad range of civil society groups in the capital, as well as ordinary citizens displaced from the two suburbs during the course of the conflict.

While this kind of criticism would have been almost unthinkable in Syria before 2011, it reflects a growing awareness about the plans’ potentially catastrophic impacts on the humanitarian conditions and housing, land
and property (HLP) rights of affected former property owners and residents.

The organizational plans have been in the offing for years, and were originally slated to be implemented under Law 10/2018 – the Syrian government’s set-piece reconstruction legislation. Human rights groups have been warning for years that the law provides a procedural veneer to HLP violations carried out by the Syrian government and its allies since the beginning of the conflict, including arbitrary demolitions and property expropriations. However, it now appears that Qaboun and Yarmuk will be redeveloped under other laws: namely Law 23/2015 and Law 5/1982. That second law will crucially deny former residents the housing support and alternative housing options stipulated in Law 10, meaning they will only be offered ‘shares’ in the development.

'Selling off' Yarmuk

Public criticism of reconstruction proposals are not unheard of in government-held Syria, although criticism related to the Yarmouk plans seems broader in nature – perhaps in part because of the generally higher levels of political organization that existed in Palestinian-Syrian camps than Syrian communities before 2011 (through, for example, Palestinian factions, civil society networks and local political associations), but also the many promises of return offered by government officials to Yarmuk residents in recent years.

On 18 July, a robustly worded open letter criticising the plans began circulating on social media; it has since been signed by at least 350 signatories comprising journalists, writers and community figures as well as activists now in the diaspora who were previously affiliated with post-2011 civil society movements in Yarmuk. Around the same time, the General Union of Palestinian Engineers in Syria issued a more muted statement, addressed to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad directly, questioning the efficacy of the plans.

Lawyers and community figures have launched an online campaign in an attempt to help former residents identify their homes and verify ownership in line with requirements stipulated in Law 10 and other HLP laws.

There has already been some rankling within Palestinian loyalist circles. On 25 June, a meeting of the Damascus-based Alliance of Palestinian Forces, attended by senior factional representatives including Talal Naji, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP-GC)’s assistant secretary-general, criticised the Yarmuk plan because it would prevent the return of large sections of the camp’s former residents. It remains unclear what leverage, if any, pro-government Palestinian factions actually have to push for changes to the plan. It’s also worthy of note that factions are not united on the issue: days ago, a voice note attributed to Khalid Jibril, son of PFLP-GC Secretary-General Ahmad Jibril, circulated widely on WhatsApp and Palestinian-Syrian social media channels. In the recording, Jibril appeared to blame displaced Palestinian

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11 The Alliance of Palestinian Forces (also previously known as the ‘Alliance of 10’) was originally formed as a grouping of Damascus-aligned Palestinian factions in rejection of the Oslo Accords signed between Israel and the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah in 1993.
residents from Yarmuk for “selling off Yarmuk” by fleeing the country and seeking asylum in Europe.

Former property owners and residents now have two weeks left in which to officially lodge objections about the organisational plan for Yarmuk, after which Damascus Governorate is supposed to address objections and amend plans accordingly.

Longstanding disputes over Qaboun redevelopment

Similar complaints in the past have not been enough to change the broad brushstrokes of the Syrian government’s reconstruction plans. Qaboun, the other area now earmarked for redevelopment under the 25 June plans, has been the subject of fierce debate between local business owners and industrialist associations in the capital since around 2018 when Damascus Governorate first began floating the possibility of implementing Law 10/2018 in the area.

Damascene industrialists and business owners who previously owned factories, workshops or small businesses in Qaboun are particularly angered by proposals that will see the area’s former industrial zone – the only one of its kind actually within the city-limits – razed and relocated to Adra industrial City (on the northeastern outskirts of Damascus). Informal settlements once home to some 90,000 residents have already been almost completely razed ready for redevelopment. There are indications that business interests with close links to President Assad, namely pro-government tycoon Muhammad Hamsho and the Shaleesh family (which oversaw reconciliation and evacuation negotiations in the area), are preparing to invest in the area and ensure that Qaboun is re-zoned and redeveloped as a lucrative real estate opportunity rather than an area rehabilitated for the benefit of its former business owners and residents.

Humanitarian impacts written-in to Syrian government’s HLP plans

HAT is closely following developments surrounding the recent approved reconstruction plans for Qaboun and Yarmuk, and will shortly release an in-depth thematic report detailing the possible humanitarian impacts resulting from the proposed redevelopments along with recommendations for how humanitarian agencies could respond in the future.

Although HLP violations in Syria are often talked about in theoretic and/or legalistic terms, it’s important to note the increasingly obvious humanitarian challenges that will result from them. Despite conflicting and contradictory statements from Damascus governorate officials in the past, it now appears that both the Qaboun and Yarmuk developments will cement war-time displacements – impacting hundreds of thousands of property owners and former residents at a time of unprecedented economic crisis in Syria. The fact that those displacements will now occur without alternative housing or rent support payments provided could prove critical for many former residents of the two areas.
CONTACT

Nicholas Bodanac
Humanitarian Access Team
nbodanac@mercy corps.org

The Humanitarian Access Team (HAT) was established in Beirut in March 2015 in response to the collective challenges facing the remote humanitarian response in Syria. Successful humanitarian and development interventions require a nuanced and objective understanding of the human ecosystems in which these interventions occur. To this end, the HAT’s most important function is to collect, triangulate, synthesize, analyze and operationalize disparate data and information. Since 2015, HAT analysis has provided a forward-looking template for international interventions in Syria, and facilitated an increasingly nimble, adaptive, integrated, and ultimately impactful international response to the Syrian conflict.