

COVID-19 Impact on IDPs in Syria

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Syria's Context and COVID-19 Response

Syria was entering its tenth year of civil conflict when the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020. Its longstanding crisis has decimated the public health system, destroyed livelihoods, and forced more than 12 million Syrians to flee their homes – over half of whom have been displaced within the countryⁱ. Syria is incapable of absorbing the impact of a pandemic. Just over half of Government of Syria (GoS) public hospitals are fully-functioningⁱⁱ, and estimates suggest they have only 325 intensive care unit beds with ventilatorsⁱⁱⁱ.

The country quickly took steps to limit the possible spread of COVID-19, even before the first positive case was reported on March 22^{iv}. On March 13, the GoS suspended group gatherings (such as schools and sports), reduced working hours and mandated quarantine for travellers from infected areas^v. On March 18, a crucial border crossing, which is used to transport humanitarian goods between Iraq and Northeast Syria (NES), was closed^{vi}. These measures may have helped reduce the spread of COVID-19, but they could not stop it entirely.

As of June 15, Syria had 177 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and six deaths^{vii}. However, there is recognition that a severe lack of testing capacity may be responsible for low case numbers^{viii}. The country is starting to re-open – the GoS lifted curfew and permitted the return of markets on May 26. However, as of June 14, a curfew is still in place in NES^{ix}. The border between NES and Iraq is now open to humanitarian goods and personnel one day per week^x. Yet, like the rest of the world, the risk of COVID-19 infections still looms large.

Impact on Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Though the tally of confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths have – so far – been below estimates, preventative restrictions have taken a toll on the daily activities of Syrians. Like elsewhere in the world, the closure of businesses during lockdown has drastically cut income, which is debilitating for vulnerable people with no savings. The impact of lost livelihoods is compounded by higher prices due to closed borders and disrupted supply chains^{xi}. These issues are further exacerbated by a devalued exchange rate for the Syrian Pound, which has lost 70% of its value against the US dollar in the past year^{xii}. Prices for food staples, fuel and personal hygiene items have increased dramatically since mid-March^{xiii}, at a time when people have less money to purchase their basic needs.

Vulnerable Syrians, especially the country's large population of IDPs, are highly reliant on NGO assistance. Estimates suggest one-third of people in Northwest Syria are living in IDP camps, where they have neither adequate shelter nor means to earn an income^{xiv}. Yet, vital aid distributions to them have been disrupted since March. When travel restrictions and border closures were announced, NGOs braced themselves for disruptions to distributions of essential items such as food^{xv}. Most new aid projects require government approval to begin, however, these have been delayed due to the shortened work hours of public institutions^{xvi}. In a time of increased demand for health services, 44% of NGOs report their activities have been constrained by the imposed restrictions^{xvii}. In a context of increasing needs, aid agencies are facing more barriers to working and this has knock-on effects for vulnerable Syrians.



A young girl outside a tent in a Syrian IDP camp. Photo credit: Darna

As hopeful steps are made around the world to ease pandemic restrictions, vulnerable Syrians, including IDPs, are also trying to rebound. However, the virus is still spreading – and an outbreak in the fragile and under-resourced IDP camps would be catastrophic. Furthermore, Syria's pre-pandemic situation was already one of crisis that has only been made worse by COVID-19. CAFOD's support has been enabling our local experts to respond to the Syrian crisis since 2012. During this pandemic they have continued providing emergency assistance to the country's most vulnerable. To learn more about our work, visit <http://cafod.org.uk/syria>.

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- ⁱ UNHCR. (2020). Syria Refugee Crisis. Retrieved 1 June 2020 from <https://www.unrefugees.org/emergencies/syria/>
- ⁱⁱ OCHA. (30 May 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 11
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gharibah, Mazen and Mehchy, Zaki (2020) COVID-19 pandemic: Syria's response and healthcare capacity. Policy Memo. Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.
- ^{iv} OCHA. (30 May 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 11
- ^v OCHA. (25 March 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 03
- ^{vi} Human Rights Watch. (28 April 2020) Syria: Aid restrictions hinder COVID-19 response. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/28/syria-aid-restrictions-hinder-COVID-19-response>. The border crossing in reference is at Fishkhabour-Semalka. The border crossing of Al Yaroubia has been, and remains, closed since January owing to UNSC resolution (2504).
- ^{vii} Worldometer. (15 June 2020) Syria. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/syria/>
- ^{viii} Human Rights Watch. (28 April 2020) Syria: Aid restrictions hinder COVID-19 response. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/28/syria-aid-restrictions-hinder-COVID-19-response>
- ^{ix} OCHA. (14 June 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 12
- ^x OCHA. (30 May 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 11
- ^{xi} OCHA. (9 May 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 09
- ^{xii} OCHA. (29 May 2020) Recent developments in Northwest Syria: Flash Update
- ^{xiii} OCHA. (9 May 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 09
- ^{xiv} OCHA. (29 May 2020) Recent developments in Northwest Syria: Flash Update
- ^{xv} OCHA. (30 May 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 11
- ^{xvi} OCHA. (9 May 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 09
- ^{xvii} OCHA. (9 May 2020) Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Humanitarian Update No. 09