

COMMENTARY



# Fighting on Two Fronts

The Syrian military's efforts to contain the Covid-19 pandemic have not greatly affected its operations.

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Published on June 9, 2020

On March 23, Syria's Health Ministry announced the country's first confirmed case of the novel coronavirus. By June 7, the figure had risen to 141, with 77 active cases, and the authorities imposed measures similar to those taken by other countries. These measures were extended to the country's military, but the suspension of unit activities, personnel availability, medical services, and loyalist militia operations did not significantly affect its ability to maintain combat readiness or launch widescale operations in the face of the pandemic.

The General Headquarters of the Armed Forces suspended a number of unit activities to prevent the spread of the illness, even though it has not reported any cases of Covid-19 in its ranks. On March 14, it announced a seventeen-day holiday at officer training colleges—subsequently extending this to April 20, then to May 27—and it halted military sports and social activities that involved gatherings.

General Headquarters also suspended the work of departments and institutions at the Defense Ministry that were not necessary to fight the virus, but excluded ministry factories supplying the armed forces. An exception was also made for healthcare authorities linked to the ministry, such as the Public Blood Bank and Medical Manufacturing Institute, the Cooperation and First Aid Fund, and other units involved in fighting the disease. A subsequent order clarified that activity was only to be suspended if it would not affect the armed forces' combat readiness or supplies of equipment.

In addition to leading to the suspension of unit activities, the pandemic also affected recruitment and personnel availability. From March 20 to April 22,

General Headquarters **suspended** recruitment and the call up of conscripts to allow for the inspection of public institutions, hospitals, and health facilities without fear of spreading the disease. Leave was also cancelled in all combat units, confining troops to their barracks until further notice. **Social media campaigns** by the Defense Ministry warned of the dangers of the coronavirus and promoted **routine weekly countermeasures**.

General Headquarters also issued two unexpected administrative orders on March 29. The **first** released from service and canceled the call-up of officers in the reserves who had completed three years or more of service, with the exception of doctors and health service experts. It instructed the director of the military's Medical Services Administration to decide whether and when to discharge doctors, based on how essential their work was.

The **second order** demobilized enlisted personnel in the reserves—noncommissioned officers and normal soldiers—who began their service prior to 2013, in order to cut the number of long-serving personnel and free the military from retaining them as the pandemic loomed. Fighters from loyalist militias have already made up for this reduction in active personnel, meaning that combat readiness has not been affected—especially as the main battleground in Idlib Governorate has witnessed a lull since a **Russian-Turkish deal** of March 5. Loyalist forces have thus turned the coronavirus pandemic into an opportunity to thin out congestion in the ranks.

The appointment of new medical personnel, starting in March, demonstrated the Defense Ministry's urgent need to staff its military hospitals with doctors, nurses, and male and female graduates from intermediate colleges. General Headquarters subsequently announced the appointment of **medical school graduates** and resident doctors as officer graduates, meaning that they would be relieved of service in combat units and undergo a one-month military training program. It also announced the recruitment of **medical staff** from medical institutes and nursing schools, as well as **graduates** from health and medical institutes. It even announced that it would recruit students who had yet to graduate, raising questions about how widely the virus had actually spread.

As for medical needs, the military's Medical Services Administration issued several tenders to procure medical goods and services. These included a team specializing in polymerase chain reaction (for DNA analysis) and full-body medical suits for use in quarantine units. Both are well-known requirements for the detection and treatment of Covid-19, but they are also largely unavailable for direct purchase by the Syrian government, due to sanctions.

Despite these measures, the Syrian military has only a limited supply of masks and sanitizing products, often obtained through civilian or community campaigns, or through private initiatives by unit commanders. The Defense Ministry has promoted the use of gloves and masks without saying from where they would come, and it appears that some personnel have complained about the financial burden this places on them, since the price of such items has multiplied at least sixfold. Videos of the army's celebrations of the "March 8 Revolution" and the anniversary of the founding of the Ba'th Party revealed few masks and little social distancing, suggesting a lack of serious countermeasures against the virus. A video of Defense Minister 'Ali 'Abdullah Ayoub's May 24 visit to a military medical center showed primitive equipment and a lack of medical instruments, and only employees of the center were wearing medical masks, not soldiers or officers.

In parallel, loyalist militias are also taking preemptive measures, suggesting the coronavirus outbreak is more widespread than has been reported. These militias have transported combat materiel northward from the Sa'sa' base in the Damascus region, justifying the move as a mitigation against Israeli airstrikes. But Iranian forces have maintained a presence at these bases and redeployed personnel to other positions to rein in the virus. Iranian forces have also done this in Deir Ezzor and on the outskirts of Idlib Governorate.

On the other hand, the cross-border movement of pro-Iranian militia members has not stopped, perhaps unsurprisingly, given that these groups are in near total control of the crossings. The militias have also anceled gatherings and religious celebrations, boosting disinfection operations and opening workshops to make masks. The Sayyida Zeinab area near Damascus, a gathering point for Shi'a militias and pilgrims, has been closed since early April on the grounds that it is densely populated. Iran, however, has said it would open its borders to pilgrims who follow health guidelines. The number

of flights between Tehran and Damascus has fallen significantly because of the pandemic, but they have not stopped, raising questions about the Syrian government's ability to enforce its closure of Sayyida Zeinab.

The accelerating measures taken by the Syrian government to tackle the virus have helped it to maintain its forces' combat readiness, particularly on the outskirts of Idlib where Russia and Turkey are finding it difficult to organize joint patrols along the M4 highway, foreshadowing future military operations. The Defense Ministry's preventive strategy may not be enough, however. A spread of the virus among military personnel would have devastating consequences and would inevitably affect combat readiness, especially given the weakness of Syria's health system even before the conflict began.

Despite this, the spread of the disease will not likely lead to fragmentation or disloyalty within the armed forces, given that what remains of its personnel have already endured greater challenges.

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