



# CVID-19:

Exploring The Impact Of The  
Pandemic On The Lives Of  
Syrians And Iraqis

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Exploring The Impact Of The Pandemic  
On The Lives Of Syrians And Iraqis**

The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) is a German political foundation whose civic education programs aim at promoting freedom and liberty, peace and justice. The KAS Syria/Iraq Office deals with the political and social situation in both countries, questions regarding the stability of the region, the refugee situation and security implications arising from the Syrian civil war and the emergence of the Islamic State. In addition to strengthening political dialogue within the region and between Europe and the Middle East, KAS work focuses on reconciliation and civil society support, good governance and rule of law, as well as research and analysis.

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Beirut, August 2020

Dear readers,

The compounding effects of the lingering war in Syria, an ongoing governmental and socioeconomic crisis in Iraq, spiraling US-Iran tensions on Iraqi soil as well as in Syria, the resurgence of so-called ISIS and Turkish military actions along its Southern border exacerbate the suffering of countless people, and certainly the lives of the refugees who are often trapped in poorly equipped camps. 2020 has proven very challenging for Syria, Iraq and its neighbors so far. Building on that the global Covid-19-pandemic further aggravated tensions and amplified the already dire living conditions of the regional populations.

The pandemic, which is labelled as the most significant global crisis of the 21st century by the World Health Organization (WHO), is sure to have serious transformational effects on every individual, society and country in the world – Syria and Iraq are no exception to this. Covid-19 has been, and is still, spreading rapidly in a region where most countries are not equipped to contain it.

Therefore, we would like to give voice to twelve promising young researchers, journalists and activists from Northern Syria and all over Iraq to picture their experience of the Covid-19-pandemic and its impact on their life and communities.

Their contributions have created a compendium that portrays different perspectives on socioeconomic, political as well as psychological and very personal implications of the pandemic. The essays cover country-level and global economic numbers, micro episodes of daily life during lockdown as well as considerations on how the pandemic shapes political activism, as for instance the ongoing popular protests in Iraq, and lasting systemic change.

The twelve essays give an insight into the repercussions of Covid-19 and what it means for many Syrians and Iraqis. We truly hope that these accounts will help to further the reporting on the severe impact Covid-19 has on this already crisis-ridden context and inspire discussions on how to support its people. With that we wish you a fruitful read and all the best for your health!

Gregor Jaecke  
Head of KAS Syria / Iraq Office



## Domestic Violence during Quarantine

### Abdulmageed Ganem Mageed

At a midday in April, Malak, from Najaf, stood in front of her husband and poured several liters of oil to set herself on fire, after he handed her the lighter and provoked her into doing so, and she did.

In this way, the 20-year-old wife decided to put an end to her suffering with her husband and his family. She has been through frequent domestic violence that has worsened with the lockdown.

Recently, and especially during the quarantine, the number of abuse and violence cases has doubled inside the Iraqi society. However, there are no new official statistics on abused women and children, knowing that the latest data of the Ministry of Interior collected by the Directorate of Women and Child Protection were in 2014.

In the capital, Baghdad, a girl in her twentieth, wrapped her shawl around her neck and tied it to the ceiling of a dilapidated room, and then kicked over a plastic chair she was standing on. She hanged herself during the quarantine, and reports indicate that the cause of suicide is repeated physical abuse by her relatives.

In Babel, a woman in her forties climbed over a bridge fence erected over a sub river, and jumped. Witnesses said that her body was showing signs of bruising, after they transferred her body to the forensic medicine department.

Others are being abused daily, without anyone knowing their cause, due to their fear of social norms or their ignorance of how to report the abuse to the competent authorities. The exhausting economic situation of most of these families provides a framework for understanding how economic stress may contribute to violence, and explains why most women in Iraq are psychological victims of the lockdown.

A man in Baghdad offers his children for sale, and another ties them with iron chains every day, because of their inability to provide the necessary needs, in addition to the psychological disorders that these people suffer from.

### COVID-19 Causes Economic Downturn and Deepens Violence

Many people were affected by the government-imposed closures due to coronavirus. Thousands of people around the world lost their jobs amid the said crisis. According to the International Labor Organization, more than 81 percent of people in the global workforce are currently affected by full or partial workplace closures and a huge number of workers worldwide, particularly the ones working in the informal sector are at risk. So, how would be the case in a country like Iraq that is dealing with crises on multiple fronts, mainly unemployment?

Coronavirus hit Iraq at all levels and revealed the fragility of the federal government and its unwillingness to confront urgent situations in the country; along with the absence of planning to ensure food safety for families that are living hand to mouth. In other words, only two days of curfew threaten the lives of these people. Here social solidarity stands out among citizens to help



those who live below the poverty line.

Other problems start to reemerge, case in point domestic violence. Those problems have been around for a while, yet they were overshadowed by other issues, and therefore, shall be seriously addressed.

"The Commissioner reports cases of domestic violence in all governorates of Iraq," said Faten al-Hilfi, a member of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

She emphasized that "domestic violence is rooted in the Iraqi society and is not new, rather it has not been in the media spotlight, until recently. This increase in reported cases is due to the increase in awareness."

"There may be a problem in reporting abuse due to social norms against the abusive man, because some women do not want to complain against the brother, husband or father," al-Hilfi said, noting that "the complaint is submitted through the Commissioner or the Family Protection Directorate in the Ministry of Interior."

She added that, "divorce is on the increase in Iraq, as it currently has the third highest divorce rate among the Arab and neighboring countries, after it was the seventh."

According to a study conducted by the Iraqi Ministry of Planning in 2012, at least 36 percent of married women complained of psychological harm by their husbands, 23 percent of verbal abuse, 6 percent of physical violence, and 9 percent of sexual violence.

According to the report issued by the Ministry of Planning in 2018, a comparison was made among women being exposed to violence between 2016 and 2017. Those figures involve complaints of female victims only, which is a small percentage relative to the total number.

*Table: Number of women who experienced various types of violence and submitted complaints for the years 2016 and 2017*

Violence	Physical	Psychological	Verbal	Sexual	Total
Violence for the year 2016	5419	0	1703	169	7291
Violence for the year 2017	4712	1384	0	187	6283

*Source: Data of the Ministry of Interior – Directorate of Planning and Follow-up*

That is, domestic violence is not the result of this crisis, rather, it is an old phenomenon that has worsened today. In such a tribal society, abusive husbands break their promises to their wives and practice spousal abuse every now and then due to their psychological disorders. The wife may not find a shelter if she decides to get out of this abusive relationship, rather she may be exposed to criticism and contempt.



An 18-year-old woman tells Human Rights Watch that her brother forced her to marry a friend when she was 14 years old. Her family, police, and local judge refused to help her when she told them that she was beaten and forced into prostitution by her husband. When she fled, her brother began searching for her to kill her, and says "It is normal in my family to kill a person. My grandfather killed his sister and my uncle killed his sister too."

Raseef22 platform published the story of a battered girl that was exposed to severe beatings, before coronavirus outbreak.

"In the Salah al-Din governorate in central Iraq, Hoda (a nickname) imposed a curfew on herself before even the government did. Seven months before the coronavirus outbreak, she isolated herself in her small room inside her house, after she was exposed to violence by her father and older brother, and repeated insults by her mother.

The 31-year-old lady avoids places where her parents might be. In fact, her father prevents her siblings from speaking to or sitting with her, until she "eats her heart out", as he says.

Last year, Hoda was beaten by her father, for the first time in her life, urged by her brother. She was having lunch with her younger brother, and suddenly her father came and started beating her on the shoulder, back, and chest.

Hoda's relationship with her father and older brother changed when she decided, like any girl of her age, to marry, settle, and start a family. Her father objected to all marriage proposals that were offered to her.

After an intense debate between them (herself, the father and the older brother) she fell to the ground and then, she was transferred to the hospital. She was diagnosed with fatigue, tachycardia and shortness of breath, so she decided to quit her job in an international organization, knowing that her salary was good, nearly one million and half a million Iraqi dinars (USD1200) per month.

"My father is an arrogant person, and my brother is a criminal. I lost faith in my family to the point that I lock the door of my room so tightly that they would not come in and kill me. As I told my friends that if I was killed one day, my family would be responsible," Hoda says.

### **International Endeavors Demanding Deterrent Actions from Iraq**

The UN in Iraq urges the Iraqi Parliament to speed up the endorsement of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law amid alarming reports of a rise in gender-based and domestic violence cases perpetrated across the country.

This came in a joint statement, whereby the international organization expressed its "great concern at the rising number in domestic violence cases during the Corona pandemic." And media reports reveal a huge number of violence cases during the lockdown.

Moreover, the organization provided examples of recent domestic violence cases in Iraq. Multiple reports emerged of the rape of a woman with special needs, suicide due to domestic abuse, immolation and self-immolation as well as self-inflicted injuries due to spousal abuse, and sexual harassment of minors among other crimes.



The statement added, "Such crimes raise the alarm for the urgency to endorse the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in Iraq."

The UN in Iraq calls upon authorities to ensure that the judicial systems continue to prosecute abusers, invest more in hotline and online services that support survivors of gender-based violence.

As United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres said, "Many women under lockdown for COVID-19 face violence where they should be safest: in their own homes."

Moreover, the UN asked the authorities in Iraq to prioritize the protection of women and children as part of their COVID-19 response.

As it indicated that the adoption of a law on Domestic Violence will help to ensure that perpetrators of gender-based violence in Iraq, such as those who carried out the heinous incidents seen in recent past, are held accountable.

On the 13th of May, the Iraqis were shocked by the news of a father, who tortured and threw his six-year-old daughter to her death from the apartment.

A member of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ali al-Bayati, stressed that Iraq needs to legislate an anti-domestic violence law, noting the importance of defining sanctions and identifying mechanisms to support victims of this type of violence, amid the recent surge in violence cases in the country.

Adding that "Iraq signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1986, and we have not legislate a law against domestic violence yet."

### **Statistics Double and the Law Loosens**

Rania (a nickname) tells the story of her sixth pregnancy:

She prays every day that she gives birth to a boy, because her husband warns her of a bitter fate if their sixth child is a girl. "I have five daughters and my husband threatens to harm me if the newborn is a girl as well. I do not know what the future will bring," she says.

Then, she added, "I may face a tragic fate. Not to mention my current situation. He beats and insults me every time he comes home angry."

Feminist activist Zeinab says, "According to the Immigration Organization, the percentage of domestic violence rose during quarantine from 30 to 50 per cent depending on the regions. 80 per cent of men prevent women from filing a complaint, and the same percentage of women will not tell the police for fear of further violence. However, all these statistics are unofficial and we do not know the reason behind the absence of official statistics by the concerned authorities, but we are now leading campaigns to pressure the government to pass the Domestic Violence Law that was referred to Parliament previously and has not been approved yet."

A Legal expert Sattar al-Jbouri says: "There is ambiguity surrounding the terms (education and punishment) in Iraqi law, as a provision thereof may give the husband the right to discipline "his



wife within limits."

### **Quarantine Is Unsafe!**

The houses closed their doors to prevent the coronavirus outbreak. Despite the effectiveness of this method to prevent the spread of the virus, but it did not prevent the continuation of domestic violence infection locally and globally. The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned of "the horrific global surge in domestic violence against women and girls."

There is nothing worse than turning a home from a safe haven into a place of fear and panic.

Domestic violence in the world has reached an extent that the UN Secretary-General issued a statement thereon.

### **Decent Living**

In the past year, members of the Commissioner for Human Rights called for legislation to guarantee the right to a housing unit of women below the poverty line. They addressed their appeal to the Prime Minister and to the Council of Representatives, on the need to legislate a law that guarantees that Iraqi women who are below the poverty line have right to a housing unit and to a decent life; knowing that the housing crisis in Iraq is a type of violence directed against families suffering from extreme poverty and poor living conditions. Besides, government agencies and humanitarian organizations working in Iraq were urged to support all plans and projects that contribute to lifting the injustice on working women, families of martyrs, and abused women, in conjunction with the initiative to distribute housing plots by the government. As they expressed their willingness to receive requests of women asking for the right to housing, particularly the poor and the needy, and following the same up with the competent authorities, if the above-mentioned categories are included.

These demands are back on the scene, because cases of domestic violence are likely to rise even after the crisis in conjunction with the expected economic constraints. Fears run high, due to the constraints that humanitarian organizations and organizations concerned with women and children in Iraq are facing, not to mention the absence of monasteries that shelter and secure abused males and females. Thus, their chances of salvation from a painful reality are very slim.



## Effects of the Spread of Coronavirus on Northern Syria

As Syrian regime-controlled areas reported first cases of COVID-19, local and international organizations sounded the alarm and expressed their fears of the spread of COVID-19 amid hard living circumstances of around 4 million civilians in northern Syria, the destruction of health facilities and hospitals and the persisted targeting of Civil Defense centers.

After the report of the first coronavirus case by the Syrian Ministry of Health, “the liberated Northern Doctors Syndicate” demanded the total closure of crossings with the regime, especially “Abou Al-Zandin” crossing in Al-Bab city in the countryside of Aleppo, to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in northern Syria.

According to a statement by the Syndicate, this demand came after news that infected travelers from Iran arrived to regime-controlled areas without undergoing any testing or screening on Syria’s borders since they are “the occupying power”.

The Syndicate stated, “To competent authorities and the public... due to the high risk of transferring the virus through commercial crossings in the Eastern and Northern countryside of Aleppo, where the crossing movement continue, we, the members of the Association, address competent authorities warning them that if the crossings aren’t immediately closed, the North will be at risk of an outbreak of the virus.”

Dr. Walid al-Tamer, the head of the liberated Northern Doctors Syndicate says, “Northern Syria is a narrow geographic area where 4 million people live in dire circumstances. As for the Turkish borders, they are regularly controlled and the Turkish government implements drastic health measures.”

“Our only source of concern is these crossings in Northern Aleppo, where people move between regime-controlled and liberated areas, especially that all UN reports indicated that many cases were reported in regime-controlled areas because Iranian militias had arrived there without any supervision or health measures on the border leading to the spread of COVID-19 in these areas,” he adds.

Regarding measures taken by the Syndicate to fight the virus, al-Tamer indicates: “First, we called several times for the closure of these crossings. Then, we conducted major awareness campaigns for the public through seminars and flyers in which we focused on the risks of the virus and the most at-risk factions, in particular elderly people and people with pulmonary diseases. We also started preparing our health facilities to face the virus. In addition, we sent doctors to Ankara to conduct clinical diagnosis in laboratories so they will be able to conduct specialized tests.”

Civil Society organizations and Civil Defense troops work intensively to disinfect public spaces and camps and to distribute disinfectants, alcohol-based products, and cleaning supplies in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, knowing that no civilian has yet been infected.

In his turn, head of the Syrian Civil Defense Raed Saleh says, “Direct medical measures to fight COVID-19 such as analytical laboratories and preparation of hospitals are the responsibility of



the medical sector in North-West Syria. The work of Civil Defense is primarily to prevent and raise awareness. It cooperates with medical authorities to establish quarantine centers and to prepare special emergency response team to deal with any coronavirus case.”

Regarding measures taken by the Syrian Civil Defense, Saleh announces, “To protect civilians from coronavirus, the Syrian Civil Defense launched, on March 18, a disinfection campaign to prevent coronavirus. It aims at disinfecting public facilities such as schools, hospitals, camps, accommodation centers and public establishments. To disinfect, trained groups of the Civil Defense spray “Benli”, a disinfectant that has no side effects.”

“From March 18 until April 26, 7000 vital facilities and establishments in North-West Syria were disinfected, including 1262 camps, around 1500 schools, more than 600 medical establishments and hospitals and hundreds of other vital establishments. We will continue working until we cover all the establishments in northern Syria. In concomitance with disinfection campaigns, the White Helmets launched an awareness campaign which includes holding the slogan “Stay at home” in the streets to encourage citizens to stay at home as much as possible,” he adds.

The Syrian Civil Defense called the citizens not to leave their houses unless absolute necessity. It distributed flyers that explain the nature of the virus, its symptoms and precautionary measures. White Helmets volunteers launched awareness campaigns directly targeting civilians, especially in camps. Until April 26, awareness campaigns have been conducted in around 1879 places.

In this regard, Saleh indicates, “The campaign directly aims at providing urgent financial support for households, such as refugees, women who run households, people with disability, elderly people and teachers whether they are inside Syria or in neighboring countries (Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey). It also aims at shedding the light on the essential humanitarian needs of Syrians who live in dire circumstances after 9 years of war. As confinement measures were taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19, their situation began to deteriorate further.”

“In fact, the effects of coronavirus were visible in all walks of life worldwide. We noticed how many countries changed their lifestyles to fight the virus and took emergency plans which also applies to northern Syria where many organizations, driven by the fear of the coronavirus spread, have halted part of their plans and projects to focus on fighting the virus,” he adds.

As regards the effects of the virus on civil society work, he comments: “The virus has, directly or indirectly, paralyzed the work of Civil Society. Measures taken by organizations and institutions, whether inside their offices, workplaces or projects, have caused the delay or halt of several projects. In addition, the worldwide spread of coronavirus has directly affected the wire transfer for these organizations.”

On April 21, several civil, humanitarian and medical organizations working in northern Syria, including the Syrian Civil Defense, created “a national response team for COVID-19 in Syria” which aims at coordinating efforts, following up on plans, guaranteeing the utilization of all cognitive, financial and human resources to fight the virus in northern Syria through coordinating and communicating with all concerned parties in the health sector and other sectors, the UN and its organizations.

Deputy Director of Idlib's Healthcare Directorate announced, “With around a million and 100 thousand refugees in camps living in difficult economic conditions and without an infrastructure



prepared to fight the virus, which has infected 3 million people worldwide, we fear a major outbreak if the virus reaches northern Syria.”

“Our health system is fragile. We have been working under an emergency situation for 9 years. 5% of the infected will be admitted to intensive care units (ICU) meaning they will need surgical masks, ventilators and other equipment whereas our equipment almost doesn't suffice the need of regular patients. Thus, we don't have any available ICU to take care of coronavirus patients,” he added.

Regarding medical measures to fight COVID-19, he said: “We mainly rely on prevention, awareness campaigns (done by several volunteers for coronavirus) and online trainings for the medical personnel. We are creating 28 community confinement units in coordination with the World Health Organization (WHO).”

Furthermore, on April 27, 2020, several humanitarian Syrian organizations and institutions launched a humanitarian campaign named “Natakafal” (help each other) to support Syrians affected by the war and whose suffering recently increased because of coronavirus precautionary measures inside Syria and in neighboring countries that host refugees.

Civil Society organizations fear a later outbreak in northern Syria because it will cause a humanitarian crisis since the health system in Syria is too fragile to treat coronavirus cases. Civil Society organizations, which help refugees in northern Syria, will be paralyzed too.

In this regard, a training center official says, “We started preparing confinement units and hospitals for coronavirus patients. We trained the personnel of hospitals, such as doctors, midwives and pharmacists, so they can treat patients more efficiently.”

“The virus obstructs humanitarian work, political events, schools, market activities, hospitals operation in northern Syrian. It also affects the work of organizations by decreasing the number of personnel, the suspension of work, like education and protection, to lower the number of assemblies,” he adds.

Meanwhile, because of fears, civil society organizations, political bodies, and women empowerment and mental support centers cancelled a dozen of events and meetings in the countryside of Aleppo and Idlib. They decided to hold small online meetings which would later affect their on-field work.

In her turn, a civil rights activist and director of women support center said, “Coronavirus outbreak affected all walks of life. It caused the halt or suspension of several activities and projects in several sectors, such as the work of Civil Society which is limited now to relief work and awareness about COVID-19.”

“Cultural and sports events, literature competitions, seminars, meetings, training sessions in different sectors and others were suspended. Due to the long duration of the suspension, some organizations and centers started online activities, such as online trainings, seminars, meetings and awareness campaigns,” she added.

According to the WHO, in Syria, only 64% of hospitals and 52% of healthcare centers currently operate. In addition, 70% of health providers fled the country. During the war, the medical personnel has been subject to harassments, such as detention and disappearance, and attacks



that target doctors, nurses and medical facilities and that are often conducted by pro-regime troops.

A humanitarian activist in northern Syria, one of the top 100 influential women in the world chosen by BBC channel, mentions obstacles facing civil and humanitarian events: “Due to fears of coronavirus, the work of organizations is now limited to individual awareness sessions. Several activities were halted, in particular, collective activities inside or outside centers because of fears of an outbreak and precautionary measures taken which are needed to protect people.”

“Several Civil Society organizations are working online only. If there is a training, the number of participants does not exceed 10 participants in one room, after disinfecting the room and forcing participants to wear masks and gloves and apply social distancing in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19,” she adds.

“Working from home caused troubles for employees and put them under psychological pressure. In a poll, civil society employees stated that working in offices is way better than working from home,” she indicates.

“Since no case has yet been reported in northern Syria, humanitarian and political Civil Society events are continuing, but slowly and cautiously. This affects mainly the mental health of people, not their physical health since there has not been any case yet thanks to measures taken by sectors and health organizations,” she further clarifies.

Despite fears of a coronavirus outbreak, humanitarian organizations continued to provide food assistance to refugees and displaced people. However, they applied new measures such as wearing masks and gloves by the humanitarian workers, using hand sanitizers and asking beneficiaries to be disinfected before receiving food assistance.

Ayham Abdullah, a humanitarian activist in the International Association for Relief, says: “As COVID-19 started to spread in northern Syria, we bought and distributed hand sanitizers, alcohol-based products, enough surgical masks, and gloves. All workers in the Association currently wear them all day while working and distributing food assistance.”

“We asked municipalities to divide beneficiaries into separate groups. Each 10-member group comes according to an appointment to receive their food assistance provided that they abide by precautionary measures such as practicing social distancing and sterilizing their hands before and after receiving food assistance,” he adds.

It is worth noting that the Syrian Ministry of Health announced the increase of deaths due to coronavirus to 3 and infections to 39, until today. In a statement cited by SANA, the Syrian regime-owned news agency, the Ministry reported a new infection case as well as a new death, while the Ministry of Health in “the Syrian Interim Government” announced that it had conducted 332 tests, which were all negative.



## Economies in the Wind: Iraq's Economy in Light of the COVID-19 Crisis

### Ahmed Yousif Aljumaily

The COVID-19 pandemic has cast a shadow on the world economy and damaged the world's largest economies. Iraq, a country already suffering from chronic economic, political, and security crises coupled with a failed government does not appear to be exempt from its consequences. Meanwhile, the pandemic continues to claim more victims throughout Iraq's cities and governorates.

Economically speaking, oil prices fell to the lowest levels in decades. Iraq's economy depends almost entirely on oil revenues and faces the possibility of "collapse and an inability to pay its public sector salaries." In the absence of viable economic alternatives, it cannot supplement its public budget.

Iraq is heading towards a difficult ordeal that will force the new government to choose between two options: 1) adopting real reform that changes the state's strategy in managing its resources and institutions and eliminating corruption or 2) continuing the previous government's approach. The situation is very different this time with the world on the verge of a stifling economic crisis and, economies many times the size of Iraq are on the verge of collapse. Both options have high costs and could thrust Iraq into dark scenarios.

The key questions are: What are the expected effects of the pandemic crisis (COVID-19) on the Iraqi economy? What are the government's options to confront the worst-case scenarios?

Oil revenues, the government's main source of income, constitute 98% of total export earnings, 45% of GDP, and 93% of Iraq's total budget revenues. According to the PM's Senior Economic Advisor, the budget for fiscal year 2019 passed with a deficit estimated at \$22.6 billion at a rate of 20% of total public expenditure of \$106 billion. The budget deficit was funded without domestic or foreign borrowing, where rentier financing came from two sources: 1) Circulated surplus no less than \$14.3 billion from the budget of fiscal year 2018, and 2) An increase of oil revenues during 2019, the budget for fiscal year 2019 was based on an export price estimated at \$56 per barrel, but Iraq's crude export price averaged \$64 per barrel with export capacity averaging 3.8 million barrels per day. Taking into consideration the government wages and salary expenditures increased to 57% in the budget.

Oil prices dropped to the lowest level in history due to the collapse in global demand caused by the coronavirus outbreak and the price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia that threatened to overwhelm global markets with an oil surplus. The price of US crude oil crashed to being traded at about \$20 per barrel in contracts for June delivery. Meanwhile, Brent Crude fell below \$26 per barrel. Despite OPEC and its oil-producing allies reaching an agreement on the largest production cutback in history which is approximately about 10 percent of global production (9.7 million barrels per day) for the two months of May and June, demand is still down by much more than that. AxiCorp chief market strategist Stephen Innes says: "Despite the sweeping nature of the cuts, they will not be enough to rebalance the market."<sup>(1)</sup> According to the recent mid-April OPEC+ agreement, Iraq agreed to reduce its production by 1.06 million barrels per day for May

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(1) "Instant View: OPEC+ cuts will not be enough to halt oil collapse - analysts", Reuters, April 9, 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-oil-opec-factbox-instantview/instant-view-opec-cuts-will-not-be-enough-to-halt-oil-collapse-analysts-idUSKCN21R2ZT>.



and June from 4.653 million barrels per day to 3.592 million barrels per day. For the second half of 2020, Iraq agreed to keep its output at 3.804 million barrels per day and from January 2021 through April 2022, Iraq's mandated production quota will be 4.016 million barrels per day, a 637,000 barrels per day reduction from the baseline.<sup>(2)</sup>

According to the April Short-Term Energy Outlook (STEO) of the U.S. Energy Information Administration, global petroleum and liquid fuel demand is estimated to decrease by 5.2 million barrels per day in 2020 from an average of 100.7 million barrels per day last year before increasing by 6.4 million barrels per day in 2021. Lower global oil demand growth for 2020 in the US-published April short-term energy outlook (STEO) reflects growing evidence of significant disruptions to global economic activity along with reduced expected travel globally because of COVID-19. Oil price predictions among banks and energy consultancies for 2020 are a little scattered. While consultant Energy Aspects Ltd and Goldman Sachs lowered their oil price forecast of global benchmark Brent crude to an average of \$20 per barrel in 2020, Fitch Ratings and JP Morgan expected a price average of \$35-\$40 per barrel in 2020.

## **A heavy legacy**

Initially, Iraq's proposed 2020 federal budget stands at around \$135 billion with an approximate deficit of more than \$40 billion, or almost 30%, based on an export price estimated at \$56 per barrel. This budget features the highest deficit in decades for Iraq. As a result of political conflicts and the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi amid ongoing protests last year, the parliament failed to approve the draft budget for the fiscal year 2020.

Due to the political stalemate, Iraqi political factions failed to produce a new government for more than four months. The Iraqi economic scene has also become dramatically more complicated due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Iraq's economy suffers from tremendous difficulties:

- Forecast oil crashes would cost Iraq two-thirds of its net income this year. Iraq's monthly oil revenues were constantly decreasing based on an average export of 3.3 million barrels per day: January \$6.163 billion at an average price of \$60.139 per barrel, in February \$5 billion at an average price of \$51.374 per barrel, in March \$2.989 billion at an average price of \$28.436 per barrel, in April \$1.423 billion at an average price of \$13.801 per barrel.
- A significant expansion of operational expenditures. The public payroll made up 57% of fiscal spending in 2018. This is expected to increase by 10% in 2020 with approximately 500,000 new employees that the resigned government added to the existing public employment system as part of its reforms. This expansion exposes the structural weaknesses in the budget. Projected incomes do not cover expenditure on wages, pensions, and transfers.
- A massive public debt approximately 55% of Iraq's GDP, which is approaching rating agencies' red lines of 60% of economic output. According to the General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers, Iraq's sovereign debt jumped to \$139 billion in 2020.

In the transcript of the April 2020 World Economic Outlook, the IMF forecasted a sharp slowdown in Iraq's economy in 2020, predicting a fall of -4.7% in Iraq's real GDP. Meanwhile, the World Bank forecasted Iraq's GDP growth to decrease by 9.7% in 2020, down from a positive growth of

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(2) "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Iraq's Pledge to Cut Oil Production", Council on Foreign Relations, May 1, 2020, available at: <https://www.cfr.org/blog/between-rock-and-hard-place-iraqs-pledge-cut-oil-production>.



4.4% in 2019, making it the country's worst annual performance since 2003. All these issues will raise an approximate deficit of 30% ranging between 7-8% of GDP. This percentage is inconsistent with what is permitted in a new General Financial Management Law (GFML) adopted by the Iraqi Parliament in 2019 to strengthen the legal framework for public financial management. One of the GFML criteria concerns government finances and requires both that a country's annual deficit does not exceed 3% of GDP and that its national debt does not exceed 60% of GDP.

## **Tough Choices**

In light of the above considerations, the new government is facing much more difficult and complex options to stop the coronavirus-induced economic and financial downturn:

1. Negotiate with oil companies to reduce production quantity and cost production (approximately \$10-12 per barrel) without entailing financial burdens on Iraq. Iraq's government faces problems cutting 1 million barrels per day of crude output to abide by its pledge to reduce oil production as part of the OPEC+ agreement. Majors such as BP, Exxon Mobil, Lukoil, and Eni produce the lion share of Iraq's output and have so far resisted calls for cuts.<sup>(3)</sup>
2. Instead of investment, use external debts, foreign loans, to cover operational expenditures. Foreign borrowing with the inability of the country to pay these debts will cripple the country and burden the public budget with the high interest rate that it carries. That will accumulate debt, rising expenditure to GDP rate (55%), and further increasing each year's fiscal deficit.
3. Choose domestic debt to finance budget deficits. The switch to domestic borrowing could lead to pressure on institutional investors and banks to absorb "too much" government debt. On the other hand, domestic government debt is held mostly by publicly-owned entities, such as Rafidain Bank, Rasheed Bank, the TBI, and the CBI. While they are independent of the government, they would deal with it at much more advantageous terms than those extended by any outside entity.<sup>(4)</sup> That will increase domestic public debt, which amounts to about \$41 billion.
4. Restructuring of budget expenditures. The majority of the public budget of fiscal year 2020 is used for operating expenditures such as salaries and essential financial obligations, but not for investment and other expenses. That will deepen Iraq's unemployment and poverty crisis. The poverty rate in 2020 is estimated at 23% for the entire country, while the unemployment rate is estimated at more than 18%.
5. Maximizing earned governmental incomes by fighting against corruption. Corruption wastes resources and distorts government policy away from its proper goals. Iraq ranks 162 out of 180 countries according to the latest Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International. For example, powerful political parties and armed groups take over border crossings revenue that amounts to about \$10 billion per year, while the government receives from them only about \$2 billion. These entities carry out large smuggling operations through other informal border crossings that are not recognized by the government and have no official customs controls.

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(3) "Iraq faces problems cutting 1 million bpd of crude output: sources", Reuters, April 30, 2020, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-oil/iraq-faces-problems-cutting-1-million-bpd-of-crude-output-sources-idUSKBN22C3OG>.

(4) Ahmed Tabaqchali, "Understanding Iraq's debt: An overview of its status, outlook and origins", Al-Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, 2018, p.11.



There are more tough choices that Iraq will have to face if the COVID-19 pandemic crisis lasts longer. With the escalating conflict between U.S. and Iran, Iraq will face an American economic rage if it does not distance itself from this conflict. Fears are rising over Trump's threat to impose severe sanctions directly on Iraq if it asks the U.S. military to depart the country on an unfriendly basis. American potential sanctions could have a severe effect on Iraq and devastate the country's economy. On the other hand, the salaries' problem of the Kurdistan Region employees deepened Iraq's crisis. The Iraqi Government cut funds used for Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) civil servants' wages and Peshmerga forces due to the KRG refusal to hand over 250,000 barrels per day of crude to state-owned marketer Somo in return for public funding under Iraq's 2019 budget law.<sup>(5)</sup> The KRG has condemned the decision and demanded about \$384 billion in compensation for past damage and abuses against the region.

### **Last Chance**

The new Iraqi government must adopt a serious program that includes political efforts to keep Iranian influence at bay while gaining American political, economic and military support that Iraq desperately needs. Especially with ISIS resuming its terrorist activities by launching attacks against Iraqi security forces in several cities in Diyala, Anbar, Salahuddin, Kirkuk, and Mosul. That support will be based on the assumption that Iraq is a key U.S. partner in the region. In June, the "strategic dialogue" offers what could be the last chance to maintain this supportive trajectory and could salvage a viable long-term U.S. partnership with Iraq.<sup>(6)</sup>

Economically, the government's program must include effective measures to counter the pandemic's destructive effects. The government should take tougher policies in fighting corruption, managing public money, law enforcement, and limiting arms trade to the Iraqi state. In other words, the dissolution of all militias. This must be supported with efforts towards improving the business and investment climate and reforming processes and regulations that hinder investment in Iraq.

Nevertheless, continuing with the same approach of the previous government amid the COVID-19 crisis, the most challenging crisis since World War II, would put Iraq's economy in the wind and thrust Iraq into dark scenarios that may threaten its existence or territorial integrity.

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(5) Dana Taib, "Iraq cuts federal budget from KRG, Kurds defy it as political", Al-Monitor, May 5, 2020, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/05/iraq-kurdistan-budget-economy.html>.

(6) John Hannah and Maseh Zarif, "Elephants in the Room: The U.S.-Iraqi Relationship Is Coming to a Head and That's a Good Thing", Foreign Policy, May 4, 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/04/united-states-iraq-iran-relationship/>.



## **Corona: The Virus of Hunger and Economic Collapse**

### **Ali Abdulhadi Abd Ali Al-Atabi**

I often watched him pass by in front of me carrying his primitive agricultural machine, known in the Iraqi dialect as (al-Mas'hat), to say hello to me and then head to work early in the morning on foot. "Abu Ali", is my poor neighbor, who works as a construction worker with a daily wage of no more than \$13, two days a week and lives in a house that does not belong to him, on the outskirts of our neighborhood. Today Abu Ali is jobless, due to the coronavirus curfew. Most of the economic projects, especially construction projects, have stopped.

"Abu Ali" is among thousands of workers who have lost their daily source of livelihood and are provided with financial support every now and then. Abu Ali, his wife and four children are growing tired.

Semi-formal organizations say that approximately one hundred thousand laborer and daily workers lost their work due to the preventive measures followed by the Iraqi authorities, at a time when other countries during the days of the mandatory quarantine provided monthly financial grants ranging from a minimum of two hundred dollars to a thousand and four hundred dollars in some European countries.

However, according to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries OPEC Iraq, which exports about four million six hundred thousand barrels of oil per day, is unable to compensate the owners of limited incomes for their daily losses due to the drop in global oil prices that reached 20 dollars per barrel, its lowest levels in decades; added to a policy of reducing production that will come into effect starting next months until the end of the year 2021. Thus, Iraq will have to cut nearly one million six hundred thousand barrels, or 23 percent of its total daily production.

Experts in the field of oil and energy stressed that Iraq will suffer heavy losses as a result of its approval of the reduction decision imposed due to the Corona crisis and the weak demand for world oil. Therefore, Iraq will be exporting less than its official share (six million barrels per day) estimated by OPEC.

Iraq is the second largest exporter in the organization after Saudi Arabia, and the cost of producing an Iraqi barrel of oil ranges between 10 -13 dollars a barrel, which specialists see as putting the government in a critical position in front of paying the salaries of its employees, whose numbers have reached more than 4 million employees and they take 60 percent of the total operating budget of the country. This is if we turn away from the economic consequences of Corona, which is expected to continue until the end of the year 2022, especially on the movement of air and water transport, the shipping sector, foodstuffs and tourism.

Iraq Stock Exchange experts believe that the current Iraqi budget, which was calculated according to the price of 52 dollars per barrel, at a time when real prices fell to below 20 dollars will make Iraq suffer a financial deficit estimated at 49 trillion Iraqi dinars. In addition to internal financial obligations that had been promised by the resigned government headed by Adel Abdul Mahdi, after it launched temporary jobs in the form of contracts for 200,000 Iraqis in more than one consumer ministry, especially the Ministry of Education and Higher Education.



However, Iraq is still witnessing a stifling security and health crisis even before the outbreak of the Corona pandemic. Its war against armed terrorist groups in the northwest of the country, and the operations carried out by ISIS cells are still a concern for decision makers in Baghdad, which required Iraq to spend about \$20.5 billion on its military system and strengthen its defense capabilities. According to the annual report issued by the Strategic Studies Institute in the United States of America, Iraq ranks 15th among countries with the highest military spending in 2019.

What complicates the economic situation in Iraq is the permanent crisis between the federal government and the Kurdistan Regional Government, especially with regard to dividing the oil revenues of northern Iraq fields. The Region's Government still refuses to hand the same to the central government despite the conclusion of several agreement stipulating that the Region shall hand over 250 thousand barrels per day to Baghdad through the SOMO National Company, which is not achieved until today according to the Iraqi Oil Ministry, knowing that the central government has paid the salaries of the Region's employees from federal oil revenues.

Although COVID-19 has clearly contributed to the decline of the economy and commercial movement in the country for months, the government may have to take measures that strengthen the national economy, perhaps the most prominent of which are the proposals adopted by the Council of Ministers to reduce foreign spending, prevent the import of luxury goods, strengthen the local agricultural sector, have the Ministry of Agriculture announce that Iraq has reached self-sufficiency in cereal crops and the ministry's ability to export 850,000 tons of barley this year, which is the first time that production has reached record levels in 50 years. Despite the fact that the ministry banned importing 25 types of agricultural and animal crops in support of the national product, this did not actually contribute to reducing public spending or exporting any of the above due to COVID-19 and the closure of international borders, where the exchange was limited to necessary medical materials.

In the meantime, the Iraqi government announced that it would launch an emergency grant for those affected economically by the Corona pandemic, in a move aimed at reducing the catastrophic repercussions on the limited income families, as the Iraqi government indicated that it had set an amount of 30 thousand Iraqi dinars for each affected citizen for the months of April and May 2020, that is equivalent to \$24 per month. In the meantime, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs announced that the number of applicants for this grant amounted to more than 12 million citizens.

Several humanitarian organizations, volunteer teams and some personal initiatives have started to launch extensive relief campaigns in most Iraqi cities, especially southern ones, after inviting religious and social authorities and notables to show solidarity to overcome the Corona crisis. Corona's economic impact was not only limited to those with low incomes, but also included various economic activities. With the delay in developing COVID-19 vaccine and the appeals of the World Health Organization to adhere to preventive measures and not underestimate them, the Iraqi government issued new procedures, preventing the circulation of taxis with more than four passengers, as it re-imposed license plate measures. Under these measures, vehicles are only permitted to drive on alternating days of the week according to whether the license plate ends in odd or even numbers in order to limit traffic on roads and thus stem the spread of corona. Taxi drivers have been forced to stay at home. Security, health and press vehicles are exempt from the measures.

Therefore, it can be said that Iraq is on the verge of an economic recession since the country's economy is mono-cultural and 59 percent of its revenues come from crude oil. Besides, Iraq



witnesses a nearly complete paralysis of economic life and is now under the blow of the coronavirus that in turn has pushed the Iraqi economy to the brink of catastrophe. The crisis could bring more struggles, but not power struggles this time, rather struggle for the few remaining resources between the political parties. The crisis may cast its shadow on Iraq for many years to come if there is no good governance in the country that can save the remaining financial revenues and manage them properly to overcome the crisis.

Lately, serious political and economic transformations took place in Iraq after antigovernment protests ousted Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi. The latter remained in office as caretaker PM without being able to achieve any of the government's objectives. Later, a new government was formed headed by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, Iraq's intelligence chief. The country is still suffering from poverty and hunger and coronavirus makes the situation especially bleak. Media reports indicated that Iraq might resort to compulsory saving and prejudice the salaries of employees, with varying proportions ranging from 12 percent for the most affected classes to 35 percent for the less affected classes according to the actual salary. This proposal faced strong backlash and a major uproar on the Iraqi street, especially since most employees depend entirely on their salaries, as the Iraqi laws in force prevent the public sector employees from practicing any other work. Hence, Iraq's internal economy is highly affected by the volume of spending for public sector employees per month, which affects relatively the exchange rate of the dollar in local markets. Consequently, any prejudice to the fixed wages of employees would spark outbursts of rage similar to the sweeping economic blockade in the early nineties when the Iraqi currency lost its value, causing drastic implications for public sector employees. On the other hand, some parties may claim that the Iraqi situation today is much better, as there is no blockade, its oil production has doubled, and its relationship with its international environment is good, so there is no need to fear an economic crisis. However, the answer is that Iraq does not have any commercial policy, exports oil only, and does not have any significant financial reserves. Not to mention the disappearance of the financial differences for the public budgets for the past fifteen years that exceeded \$100 billion. If this amount was present in the Central Bank of Iraq's reserves, Iraq would have crossed the Corona crisis smoothly, especially as the country's operating budget, which is summed up by the salaries of employees, retirees, and beneficiaries of the social protection network, does not exceed 6 billion dollars per month (approximately 7 trillion Iraqi dinars). However, corruption, waste of public money and expenditures of millions of dollars for secondary and other projects that were not completed, not to mention cash smuggling by influentials contributed to the emptiness of the Iraqi strategic reserve and its dependence on monthly oil imports. Iraq's middle class has been almost completely wiped out, and only two classes remain: the "crushing" class and the "financially crushed." Ultimately, some 4 million employees are expected to fall from the middle class into poverty, if coronavirus continues to impact world oil prices.

Perhaps what heightens concerns about Corona's economic consequences for the whole world is the most challenging crisis we have faced since the Second World War, warning that it would fuel wars and conflicts around the world. In a country like Iraq, where more than 20 percent of its population lives below the poverty line, it will surely be one of the countries most affected by the economic effects of Corona, especially with the fragility of its internal front, the ongoing disputes between the country's leaders, and the spread of corruption in various areas of life.

According to the Central Statistical Organization of the Iraqi Ministry of Planning, Iraq's imports of food commodities and agricultural crops amount to 12.4 billion dollars annually from the total import that exceeds 40 billion. Iraq does not produce locally what can meet its food needs, and thus it will have to face a new challenge of providing money in hard currency to import basic



foodstuffs to the Iraqi people. Moreover, the government policy in Iraq does not actually support the private sector or investment and does not provide local factories and laboratories with any financial or legal facilities to ensure their competition with the imported product. Instead of manufacturing and canning food to keep the local economy alive, many owners of these laboratories were obliged to shut them down and switch to foodstuff trading. If the economic crisis persists, some traders will monopolize goods and food in order to raise their prices later, which is likely to happen, especially as the Iraqi economy is still fragile in the face of financial shocks and has not yet recovered from external financial and debt problems and internal and external debt. Thus, in the worst cases, Iraq may be exposed to two complex problems simultaneously: the first is the collapse of oil prices that represent the backbone of the Iraqi economy, and the second is the continuation of the repercussions of the Corona crisis on the world economically. Consequently, all eyes are on any potential rise in the price of Iraqi oil barrels in the global markets, especially since Iraq's production until March 2020 does not exceed 3 million barrels at an approximate price equal to 20 dollars per barrel, meaning that Iraq's total monthly budget does not exceed \$3 billion, which is equal to half of what Iraq needs to secure employee salaries. In sum, Corona is a virus of hunger and economic collapse.



## The Effects of COVID-19 on Global and Iraqi Economies

Ali Hussain Zani Al Shabaki

### The Effects of COVID-19 on the Global Economy

Since its outbreak, the coronavirus has been destroying the global economy until it has become paralyzed. The virus has disrupted production, supply chains and air transport worldwide, has weakened the global demand, has isolated countries, has forced some of them to implement confinement measures and others to implement curfew and has caused heavy losses for financial, airline, transport and tourism sectors.

The economy of hard-hit countries by the pandemic such as China and Italy will be heavily affected. Their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and exports will decrease and a recession will happen. For example, China's exports plummeted by more than 17% which is a disaster for countries importing from China. Vital industries like cars, their gears and technological equipment are on the decline. Some factories of big tech companies such as Apple and Huawei and car companies such as Toyota, Nissan and others stopped working in China. Thus, according to theories and economic analysis, this will have a major and disastrous economic effect. Italy's situation is similar to that of China. Italy has, in fact, been compelled to declare that the virus threatens the country as a whole, causing a significant decline in the local economy, exports and international trade with other countries. Malls have been closed, major economic events have been suspended, and many employees have been working from home in accordance with the instructions of their companies. The economy of these countries will remain in turmoil until they apply strategies to deal with the crisis.

The coronavirus will obviously reshape the global economy in the next period since giant international companies produce from China, are based in the United States and export their products from there. It was noticed that many viruses have emerged from China where the first outbreak of COVID-19 occurred. Thus, many international companies and production factories may think about changing their strategies, in the upcoming years, and may search for other countries that can provide them with alternatives to China's labor force and raw materials.

### Where Do the Effects of the Coronavirus Appear?

The coronavirus can affect the global economy in many ways, which are:

- 1- **Trade Exchange:** COVID-19 affected trade exchange between countries and within each country. After the outbreak of the virus, hundreds of commercial shipments from China to many countries in the world were cancelled. Vessel traffic in the Persian Gulf, the Pacific Ocean and the Red Sea was completely halted due to fears of the virus transmission between countries. For more than one month, the movement of domestic trade and transportation in many Arab countries such as Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia and other countries such as Iran has stopped due to the virus outbreak and fears of its transmission between cities and governorates.
- 2- **Financial Interdependence:** The financial and moral effect of COVID-19 didn't spare global financial markets which collapsed and had the worst performance since the 2008 financial crisis. Therefore, this performance, which reflects to what extent the virus has



affected the global economy, is making investors pessimistic.

- 3- Tourism and Transport:** The coronavirus has decreased the number of flights, has closed many airports around the world and has affected the global offer and demand. The air transport sector is the most affected by COVID-19 since air flights have plummeted, airplanes have been grounded and many airports have been closed to contain the transmission of the virus within countries and in the world. The number of air flights from/to endemic areas such as China, Italy, Iran, Egypt and others has decreased. Travelling between the United States and Europe has been suspended and many Middle Eastern airports have been closed. The number of air flights from China to other countries in the world has decreased by 56 percent and the number of China Airlines passengers decreased by 85 percent last February in comparison to the same month last year. Korean Airlines has cancelled 80 percent of its international air flights saying that if the situation persists, it will threaten its existence. In the Middle East, the International Air Transport Association stated that airline companies will face a liquidity crisis because people are refraining from travelling and called governments to intervene to help these companies. As air traffic has shrunk, preliminary expectations predicted that some companies would be bankrupt and that losses incurred by international airline companies would exceed \$100 billion, as the market value of airline industry has decreased. For example, Boeing Company has lost 20 percent of its value. Many airline companies demanded help in the form of loans, guarantees and tax exemptions.

### The coronavirus can affect the local economy in three ways:

- 1- The disruption of the economic activity:** through disrupting production, services, transportation, transport, tourism and shopping and through lowering offer and demand. Some cities were under curfew and were transformed into ghost cities like what happened in China and Italy. The number of cities under curfew has increased worldwide.
- 2- The costs of containment and response:** like rescue, support and precautionary measures taken by the health, economic and social sectors at an increasingly high cost.

## Global Recession

The global economy seems undoubtedly heading towards a decline, even a recession. According to the Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), preliminary estimations indicate that the economic growth will decline by 0.5-0.9 percent to 1.5 percent this year and can reach its lowest level since the 2009 financial crisis. The world may face the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression in the 1930s. These likelihoods depend, however, on the duration and scale of the virus spread, the depth of the ensuing crisis coupled with the possibility of a war that can last for months, the end of the year or even until a vaccine is found. The virus may end before that. Nonetheless, the longer the conflict with it persists, the more bankruptcy cases and unemployment rates increase. Vulnerable groups and low-income people will be the most at-risk factions. It will have significant social repercussions and will increase the pressure on governments to strengthen social and economic stability, through different rescue and support plans and through lowering taxes, knowing that their revenues and finances will be directly affected because of paralyzed global and local economies. The coronavirus crisis accompanied with an oil price crash because of the Saudi price war will have a double negative effect on the Middle East and will represent major challenges to countries that are already suffering from precarious economic and social situations and that have not implement convincing reforms after the Arab Spring such as Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria and Egypt.



Global economic growth, which stood at around 2.9 percent in 2019, was set to increase to 3.3 percent in 2020, then slightly to 3.4 percent in 2021. However, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) lowered its expectations for the 2020 global economic growth by at least 0.4 percent, meaning that the global economy would increase by 0.5 percent from last year, which would cost the global economy up to \$2 trillion. These figures are subject to rise if the pandemic lasts longer than expected, amid sharp decline in global demand, consumption, public spending, tourism revenues, supply chains, service and global manufacturing sectors, oil prices and foreign investment.

It is hard to estimate now the true effect of the virus on the global economy because it will have long-term repercussions and because the effect will depend on efforts to contain the virus. Thus, countries should reach an agreement, take decisive measures on financial and monetary levels and provide financial support to limit the virus repercussions on the global economy and avoid a collapse that can cause more damage than expected.

### **\*How Did China Exploit the COVID-19 Crisis in its Favor?**

Despite being the origin of the virus and reporting around 80000 infections and 3000 deaths, China was able to contain and transform the crisis into its favor and restore its economic growth.

Since the virus outbreak, China has bought hundreds of small and big enterprises from foreign investors, in top of whom are American investors, at prices lower than the value of companies, after that foreign investors had owned 48 percent of Chinese companies. China, after buying these companies, became the owner of all working companies in different fields in China and gained \$20 billion from buying foreign companies.

On the other hand, after controlling the COVID-19 crisis, China sold around 4 billion face masks in one month to countries facing the virus. According to Chinese custom services, China's exports of medical equipment to more than 50 countries reached 1.33 billion euros.

### **\*The Effect of COVID-19 on the Iraqi Economy**

**The effect of COVID-19 on the Iraqi economy appears in three points: low international oil prices, a decline in the Chinese demand on Iraqi oil, and a paralyzed economic activity.**

The coronavirus crisis cast a shadow on the Iraqi economy and the life of the poor.

The coronavirus effects on Iraq, where the poverty rate exceeds 20 percent, are clear as the curfew remains. The coronavirus started affecting the Iraqi economy, forcing Iraq to stop air traffic, close commercial crossings and suspend trade exchange with its neighbors, which are "Iran" and "Kuwait".

Iraq is among the most-hit countries by this global economic confusion, since it is the second crude oil exporter to China. The amount of its annual oil exports stands at \$22 billion, which decreased because of the coronavirus.

**The virus caused the decline of oil prices and religious tourism in the country, a confusion in the local market and state institutions, and the increase of the financial deficit.**



## **The Decline of international Oil Prices**

It is well known that the Iraqi economy heavily depends on oil, financially, economically and commercially. Oil revenues represent 90 percent of total revenues. The oil sector represents more than 45 percent of GDP and more than 99 percent of commodity exports.

The decline of international oil prices due to the decrease of global oil demand due to the coronavirus -- which emerged in China, the second biggest economy after the United States, and spread to more than 100 countries-- lowered Iraqi financial revenues affecting the 2020 budget which already suffers from a 50-trillion-dinar deficit.

Over the last weeks, Brent crude oil prices have decreased to \$26 per barrel. They reached currently a new record low since 2003 which is \$16 per barrel due to the decline of oil global demand, after the virus outbreak, and the price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia, the main oil producers.

Iraq, whose oil revenues represent 90 percent of its total revenues, will face huge economic pressures. It should be noted that Iraq is the second oil producing country in The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and exports around 3.5 million barrels per day (B/D).

Iraq is among the most affected countries by this global economic confusion, since it is the second crude oil exporter to China at an amount of \$22 billion per year, which decreased because of the coronavirus.

The decline of the Chinese demand on Iraqi oil caused the collapse of financial revenues, in particular, and the shrinkage of the Iraqi economy, in general.

In its 2020 budget draft, Iraq relied on an estimated oil price of \$56 per barrel. As oil prices have decreased, the net Iraqi income will plunge by 65 percent in 2020, compared to the last year, causing a monthly deficit of \$4 billion allocated only to pay salaries and to maintain the work of the government. Thus, this will lead to a significant collapse in the Iraqi economy forcing it to rely on foreign reserves, standing at \$64 billion, to pay salaries.

## **The Effect of COVID-19 on Iraqi Trade**

After that vessel traffic in the Persian Gulf stopped, ships were banned from entering Iraqi ports, and land borders between Iraq and other countries were closed, many consumption products were no longer available in Iraqi markets. In addition, precautionary measures to contain the virus caused the damage of imported goods in the warehouses of ports in al-Basra province. Furthermore, because Iraqi- Jordanian and Iraqi-Iranian trade was halted, Iraq is incurring daily losses of around 4.6 billion Iraqi dinars.

## **The Effect of COVID-19 on the Iraqi Tourism Sector**

**Iraqi tourism is divided into two:**

First: Religious tourism: Religious tourism in different Iraqi provinces, such as Karbala, Najaf, Samarra, Baghdad and Hilla, represents 75 percent of Iraqi tourism revenues. According to the



World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), tourism revenues in 2017 reached around five billion dollars.

After being heavily damaged by protests, political troubles and US economic sanctions on Iran, the vital Iraqi religious tourism sector was completely destroyed by the coronavirus outbreak. In Karbala, hotels closed. Face masks became more common in the street than “Al-Abaya.” Despite its disinfection twice a day by experts, the number of visitors to the Shrine of Imam Hussain, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, decreased.

In “normal” days, religious tourism creates hundreds of thousands of job opportunities and generates billions of dollars per year, since it is the only touristic income in a country torn by decades of war. While the number of visitors has greatly decreased, Iraq reported six confirmed cases of coronavirus coming from Iran. The first confirmed case was an Iranian studying in al-Hawza in Najaf where the Shrine of Imam Ali bin Abi Taleb, one of the most prominent Shiite holy sites, is located 150 km south of Baghdad.

Iraqi authorities responded by closing land borders with Iran, banning the movement of visitors from the Islamic Republic and other endemic countries. In a rare and exceptional decision, the authorities closed the Shrine of Imam Ali to visitors this week. People usually push each other to take the blessing from the Shrine of Prophet’s Muhammad son-in-law. As for working hotels, their occupation rate variates between 5 to 10 percent only.

COVID-19 dealt the latest blow to religious tourism to holy Shiite Iraqi cities. US sanctions on Iran and their attacks against each other on Iraqi territories forced Iranian visitors to stay at home.

### **Effects on Citizens**

These measures caused heavy losses to the Iraqi religious tourism. Epidemics and diseases greatly affect economic sectors, especially the tourism sector. Iraq was significantly affected because it only has religious tourism. This impact will be greater on citizens than the government, because the latter does not benefit from religious tourism which is beneficial for Iraqi citizens. Since the sales of hotels, restaurants, and shops depend on tourists, the pandemic has caused the halt of their work, the increase of unemployment rates and capital erosion.

Many are the repercussions of the pandemic on each citizen, especially in religious cities which are more commercial than industrial like Karbala, Najaf and Samarra.

According to estimated figures of statistics about losses ensuing from the halt of religious tourism, more than 20% of the citizens of religious city depend on religious tourism, whether domestic or international tourism.

### **Losses by Billions**

In a rare decision, Iraqi authorities closed the Shrine of Imam Ali Bin Abi Taleb after reporting the first coronavirus of a 22-year-old Iranian student in Najaf.

Furthermore, 300 out of 350 hotels were closed in the city. The daily number of Iranian visitors was 4000 people. Today, however, there is no visitor and hotels are empty and scary.

Second: Leisure and cultural tourism: It represents 25% of tourism revenues. Irbil,



Sulaymaniyah, Duhok and Baghdad provinces are among the most important Iraqi touristic destinations.

The coronavirus crisis affected the economic activity in the Kurdistan Region. Tourism has stopped in months during which the tourism recovery should have reached its peak, after that the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) imposed, mid-February, measures -- such as closing restaurants, cafés, banks and other touristic locations-- which totally paralyzed the touristic activity.

On the other hand, due to the suspension of their activities, many sectors, companies and hotels laid off their employees causing another problem which is unemployment.

Reports estimate that the tourism sector in the Kurdistan Region has lost billions of dinars.

After the virus outbreak which caused the halt of land and airline transport movement, and the closure of airports and borders, tourism was completely suspended, negatively impacting the Iraqi economy. Dozens of touristic companies in the private sector have frozen their operations putting 13000 employees and workers out of jobs, causing major financial difficulties for them and their families amid Iraq's hard living circumstances, economic problems and oil price crash.

### **The Effect of COVID-19 on Iraqi Agriculture and Food Security**

Iraqi economists warn that the persistence of the virus outbreak can threaten food security in Iraq since the country almost totally rely on imports, including the import of essential consumption goods, as many countries close their borders because of the pandemic.

According to Central Statistical Body, Iraq's annual total value of imports exceeds \$40 billion, \$12.4 billion of which are allocated to imports of food and agricultural commodities.



## How did the Coronavirus Affect the Economy of Northern and Eastern Syria?

As coronavirus cases have increased in the world nearing 4.5 million cases, the global economy is under tremendous pressure which causes high lay-off rates, forcing governments to come up with economic packages to help business owners.

Coronavirus-induced economic losses are increasing, day after day, due to lockdowns imposed in many countries. This also applies to eastern and northern Syria, where businesses have stopped, economic resources have been disrupted, crossings have closed, and cross-border assistance has been suspended, and where citizens suffer from poverty and unemployment.

Chair of the Economic Body of the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria Salman Baroudou says, "Our economic situation greatly differs from the rest of the world. Citizens of northern and eastern Syria are trying to rebuild themselves, whether politically or militarily, in this narrow region that was able to expel all ISIS members from it and was affected by the Syrian years-long war. Thus, we are in the face of this crisis while we lack economic potentials after years of war and an economic crisis after fighting the strongest terrorist power."

"We must acknowledge that the virus will reshape the political system, policies and economic alliances in the whole world and within the Administration. Thus, we must work together to establish an appropriate mechanism to reinforce economic stability through rescue plans in all different sectors and fields."

### Losses of Crossings "Semalka Derik/ al-Malikiyah Crossing"

Shirzad Othman, the administration official of Semalka/ Faysh Khabur (an unofficial crossing between Iraqi Kurdistan and northern and eastern Syria for passengers and food), clarifies that the crossing activities were affected by the pandemic, especially that closing the crossing was the first precautionary measure taken when the virus broke out. Since Semalka crossing is a vital vein for northern and eastern Syria, days after the suspension of its commercial activities, the Autonomous Administration issued an order to resume them.

As he said that passenger movement has completely stopped. It has little impact on the economy since entry/exit fees to/from the Autonomous Administration through the crossing are symbolic and are not considered a financial resource to the Autonomous Administration.

Therefore, according to Othman, commercial activities are resumed without being affected by the pandemic and the entry of goods has not been suspended until now.

### Manbij Crossings

Manbij city is the last city under the control of the Autonomous Administration of Northern and Eastern Syria, a city that is in the crossfire of the Syrian government and opposition since there are 3 crossings used for people movement and commercial activities between different cities.



These crossings are: Aun al-Dadat crossing for passengers and sometimes goods, Um-Jaloud commercial crossing (two crossings that separate between Administration-controlled areas in Manbij, and areas in northern Syria controlled by the Syrian opposition after the “Euphrates Shield” operation), and Al-Tayha crossing, which is used for passengers and goods, and separates between Administration-controlled areas in Manbij and regime-controlled areas.

A Co-President of the Economic Committee says that these crossings are a pillar for the economic activity in the city, where the movement of goods were occurring previously after coordinating with the parties managing each side of the crossing (the Autonomous Administration, the Syrian opposition and the Syrian government). However, this has changed after the virus worldwide outbreak which totally paralyzed the economy of Manbij city because commercial activities have been suspended from 23/03/2020 until today, due to the lockdown.

He adds that during the lockdown, commercial crossings were only opened for a limited number of products and goods, which were mainly food and medical products and baby milk. As for other goods, traders were no longer importing them due to confinement measures. The Economic Committee played a major role in cooperating with different stakeholders to provide the city, through nearby crossings, with these products during the lockdown and to ensure the safety of products entering through these crossings in cooperation with the Health Committee in the city. All of this happened thanks to the Quadripartite Committee created last March.

### **Economic Decisions to Protect Manbij Traders in the Fight against COVID-19**

In order to protect the local economy of the city, the Economic Committee stopped collecting taxes from traders, self-employees and craft business owners, during and until the end of the lockdown because of the dire economic situation of citizens in this period. The Economic Committee followed up on the virus developments, locally and internationally, to understand it, provide help and take decisions which can ease the life of citizens during this crisis.

### **Devaluation of the Syrian Pound Exchange Rate in the Coronavirus Era**

“Roazan”, an exchange house owner in Kamishli, says that the northern Syrian economy has been affected since the virus outbreak amid the increase of the dollar exchange rate and the curfew. The reason behind that is that traders and food supermarket owners are buying dollars, to sell them in the black market. In addition, traders are buying food products in “dollar” while people are buying, at the same time, food products for the confinement duration and the Holy month of Ramadan, which has increased the demand of traders on dollars.

According to “Roazan”, another reason why citizens are buying dollars is that despite the amount of money in dollars people have in their homes, it will be less than that in the Syrian pound (in case of any attack or in case they were forced to flee their homes).

In the early days of confinement, the dollar significantly increased against the Syrian pound, reaching 1150 Syrian pounds. After the first week of confinement, it increased to 1300 Syrian pounds, then to 1375 Syrian pounds, and then to 1385 Syrian pounds. In some provinces like Idlib, it reached 1400 Syrian pounds.

“Roazan” clarifies that exchange houses would incur losses, because they are often selling the



dollar at a certain rate and then are buying it at a different rate which causes them heavy losses.

He adds, “At the beginning of May, in accordance with a decision by the Autonomous Administration, we started opening our stores from 10am to 3pm. Despite that, prices have remained high which has been negatively reflected on owners of exchange houses, and citizens.”

The Syrian government should pump foreign currency into the market to decrease the dollar rate and to control prices and markets. If not, the dollar will exceed the rate of 1400 Syrian pounds. According to “Rozaan”, small exchange houses compensate their employees because their number is low while bigger exchange houses which hire a higher number of employees will incur heavier losses and may not be able to pay the salaries of their employees during the confinement duration.

### **Public Transport Sector Losses in Kobane due to COVID-19**

The public transport sector, like other sectors, was affected by confinement measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Co-President of the Euphrates Region Transport Directorate says that the transport movement completely stopped from March 23 until April 23, and that the seven agencies regulating the transportation of goods suspended their work in the Euphrates region (which includes regions such as Kobane and is under the Autonomous Administration control) due to the coronavirus. Thus, the Transport Directorate lost around 17 million Syrian pounds in one month. On April 23, the transport movement was resumed and agencies regulating the transportation of goods reopened but the movement was less than usual.

In his turn, “Dalkhaz”, a Director of Al-Mahatta Garage in Kobane, adds, “Confinement measures forced 350 registered taxi drivers, in addition to private taxis, to suspend their work. The majority of taxis work on Kobane routes (Kamishli- Aleppo- Manbej). Some of these taxis are owned by companies like (Bradost Company to Kurdistan Region), (Omar Tourouz Company to Damascus and Lebanon) and (Nouri al-Iman which has a branch in Kobane). The institution lost around 600000 Syrian pounds as monthly fees on cars and flight tickets.

“Dalkhaz” indicates that the losses have not only been limited to the institution but have also affected 350 taxi drivers whom are complain daily about their situation after they stopped working.

In an attempt to solve this issue, “Dalkhaz” says that the Administration submitted a proposal to Euphrates Region municipalities to exempt drivers from monthly fees estimated by 1000 Syrian pounds on each taxi, and providing possible help as reparations. The 4 Garage-owned internal buses whose fees are symbolic (25 Syrian pounds per passenger) no longer work while their drivers receive their salaries from the institution.

### **Unemployment Rate Uptick in Eastern and Northern Syria**

“Aziz”, a taxi driver, says, “I have eight children. This house is my only property. My only source of income is this taxi. For one month and a half, because of precautionary measures, I have stopped working which further deteriorated our living conditions. I used to make a daily earning of 10000 Syrian pounds which was enough. However, because I stopped working and I didn't have any savings, I sold one piece of my wife's gold jewelries to meet our children's needs during the



Holy month of Ramadan.”

“Aziz” stands each day for hours in Al-Garage yard to spend some hours during the Holy month of Ramadan without earning a penny. “I used to cross the borders of my city while driving to reach the borders of Manbej, Kamishli and Al-Rekka, meaning within the borders of the Autonomous Administration. Is it possible to spend a 10-million capital on a car without being able to make ends meet?” he says.

“Ismail”, a public taxi driver, says, “I am from Tal al-Abyad. I fled to Kamishli and then to Al- Rekka. I work on the route of Kobane- Kamishli. I have 4 children and I live in a rented house which is almost destroyed. I am the co-owner of this car.”

“Although the Autonomous Administration allowed many businesses to continue working, it suspended the work of taxis, which has negative impact on us. In fact, I am today asked to pay 300 thousand Syrian pounds as an accumulative debt because of the work suspension. Hunger is a slow death,” he says in a choked-off tone.

Many citizens complain that the Autonomous Administration does not care for their economic situation. Ismail states, “The Administration does not care for us, and does not care if we die from hunger. As a driver, I haven’t earned a penny for two months. I don’t know any other profession to put food on the table. I used to earn 150 Syrian pounds per month and it was enough. The Administration has only exempted us from monthly fees.”

### **Paralyzed Transport Movement in al-Rekka due to Hunger**

The coronavirus affected private and public sectors. Domestic transport means in al-Rekka were heavily affected, since all transportation means from/to al-Rekka stopped as precautionary measures were taken. Taxis were allowed to work only within the city during the temporary lift of confinement measures. According to the Director of Domestic Transport Directorate in al-Rekka, domestic transport sector work is totally halted in al-Rekka city. He indicates that citizens are the most affected by this crisis because they were compelled, after the work of buses was suspended, to use private transport means which are expensive in comparison to public transport.

He adds that bus owners and drivers were also greatly affected and incurred heavy losses because the suspension of travelling between cities.

### **Losses of Families in Amuda City**

“Walid”, a food shop owner in Amuda city, mentions the losses he has incurred, since the confinement began, which are more than 50 thousand Syrian pounds.

“Khaldoun”, a cloth shop owner, says that as shop owners, they were greatly affected. Their products have been piled up, leading to a major economic damage.

### **The Suffering of Al-Shaddadi Citizens**

“Mohammad”, from the countryside of al-Hasakah, indicates that confinement measures due to



COVID-19, have negatively impacted their daily lives. He says, “There is no reparation. Confinement measures continue. I have remained at home for two months and now I have no savings left to spend on my family. We were promised to receive aid, but we haven’t received anything yet.”

The compliance of citizens by confinement measures due to COVID-19 significantly helped prevent the virus spread. Nevertheless, low-income people, who represent the majority of northern Syria community, started to feel the economic damage which deteriorated their living conditions. They are waiting for help from the Autonomous Administration while local and international agencies working in northern Syria are trying to push other parties to help the region citizens. Nonetheless, this hinges on political decisions and a Security Council resolution that allows the opening of al-Waleed crossing between Iraq and northern and eastern Syria, so people can resume their ordinary lives and live in dignity.



## The Influence of Coronavirus Pandemic on the October Revolution of Iraq

Firmesk Othman Rahim

### Introduction

Iraqi streets have witnessed many protests in recent years. People have raised their voices against the government and political parties, but the October Revolution was considered to stand in the tradition of protests since 2003. The protests started in October 2019 in which thousands of people participated against the current political system of Iraq. The number of people participating in the protests was increasing daily while protesters were changing their demands weekly. Despite the large number of killed and injured people, protesters persisted until the coronavirus appeared to stop their activities and sent everyone back to their homes. This article illustrates the effect of the coronavirus pandemic on protesters to determine how the activities of the majority of protesters stopped, and how minorities continued the protest.

### October 2019 Revolution and Coronavirus pandemic

After the fall of Saddam Hussein regime in 2003, Iraq has gone through a period of violence and political turmoil with strong foreign interferences. Beside political unrest, corruption, unemployment, and inefficient public services have determined the life of the Iraqi people. The difficult life of Iraqis has always pushed them to protest and raise their voices against the authorities. For example, in July 2015, most cities in southern Iraq including Baghdad, were engulfed by one of the largest protest movements in the modern history of Iraq. The demonstrations emerged naturally in the cities, especially in Basra, against the deterioration of public services, particularly electricity, at the peak of Basra's summer heat and humidity.<sup>(1)</sup>

Demonstrations continued; in the most recent protest in October 2019, civil activists began to protest against corruption, unemployment, economic crisis and poverty. Protesters started to demand basics rights to improve livelihood, employment, electricity, access to clean water, and other public services. The tragic lifestyle of people pushed the new generations to come out against all leaders who are responsible for the contemporary situation in Iraq.

The recent demonstrations in Iraq consisted of a series of protests. By some accounts the protests have taken the form of a revolution in the modern history of Iraq. The irresponsible reaction of the Iraqi government and the unknown militias made the protesters change their demands from requesting better public services to calling for a national identity, changing the political system of Iraq, and stopping foreign interventions specifically those of Iran.

The situation was getting worse week after week. Hundreds and thousands of young people were killed and injured by unknown militia groups. To assuage the concerns of people in the street, Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi issued some decisions to start reforms in his cabinet, but the protesters refused and asked him to resign. Negotiations, political and governmental meetings couldn't lead anywhere to stop the protesters.

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(1) Faleh Jabar. The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics, LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series, June 2018.



While Iraq was dealing with the political crisis, protests, collapsed oil incomes, tensions between the United States and Iran, and the failure of political elites to address protesters' concerns, countries like China were concerned about the appearance of a new virus called "Corona" that has so far killed thousands of people in Wuhan. The Chinese authorities reported cases of the virus in early December 2019. In a relatively short period of time, dangerous reports about the confirmed cases and deaths numbers came out and the news was announced to the world. Days after China reported its first cases, other countries and regions like Thailand, Iran, Europe and Britain reported confirmed coronavirus cases.

The geographical location of Iraq was helpful for the virus to spread early and easily. Confirmed critical cases in Iran made the Iraqi people and authorities nervous about the breakout of the virus in Iraq. In the middle of the political crisis and demonstrations, the Iraqi Ministry of Health and Environment confirmed the first cases of coronavirus after some Iraqi students returned from Iran. Soon after this confirmation, the government formed lockdown rules and regulations and imposed a curfew. However, protesters did not take the issue too seriously. They refused to leave the demonstrations and give up their demands. Later, from February to March 2020, many cases have been detected in all Iraqi governorates which made protesters and activists take the issue seriously.

According to World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 belongs to a family of viruses that may cause various symptoms such as pneumonia, fever, breathing difficulty, and lung infection. These viruses are common in animals worldwide, but very few cases have been known to affect humans.

<sup>(2)</sup> Later, scholars started to study the virus and they announced that COVID-19 has been found to have higher levels of transmissibility and pandemic risk than the SARS-CoV . These serious announcements frightened world authorities to take actions to stop the virus. The Iraqi authorities soon announced a curfew in the cities in which cases were confirmed. The public health officials that were studying COVID-19 announced that the virus spreads easily and that the only way to prevent it from spreading is by avoiding groups, gatherings, and follow social distancing by staying at least six feet apart, and wear face masks.<sup>(3)</sup>

However, the virus is new and very little scientific material is available to treat it.<sup>(4)</sup> The WHO announcements regarding the new virus influenced the Iraqi government to impose a curfew in all the cities with additional instructions about group gatherings. It also influenced part of the protesters to be concerned about the safety of the people. However, many protesters refused to follow the governmental instructions, but they felt in late February that they were responsible about the safety of the public, especially when high death cases were reported from all over the world.

In this regard, the protesters' main concern shifted from demanding public services and national identity to being cautious to maintain the safety of the nation. Protesters took the responsibility to protect people from this contagious virus. The specialized medical staff in the squares began to

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(2) Sasmita Poudel Adhikari et al. "Epidemiology, causes, clinical manifestation and diagnosis, prevention and control of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) during the early outbreak period: a scoping review. *Infectious Diseases of Poverty*, 2020, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40249-020-00646-x>

(3) David Williams. How Coronavirus spreads from one member to 87% of the singers at a Washington choir Practice. *News on CNN*, May 13, 2020

(4) Said Nadeem. Coronavirus COVID-19: Available Free Literature Provided by Various Companies, Journals and Organizations around the World. *Journal of Ongoing Chemical Research*, 2020.



spread awareness among people about the virus and the required steps to contain it. Activists began to distribute face masks and hand gloves, and to give instructions to people.

In fact, there are different opinions regarding the influence of the pandemic on the protests. One group refers to the virus and the city lockdown as the main reasons behind the decrease of the number of protesters. They believe that the virus was capable of doing what the governmental reforms, speeches, and meetings could not do: halting the protest movement. Another group believes there are different reasons behind the die down of Iraq's protests like the disappointment of people, arresting the activists and punishing them.

In this report, statements of a number of people are documented to determine how the coronavirus pandemic has affected their activities.

A protester named Omer Salman, 29 years, who is a jobless protester says:

“I was participating in the demonstration from the beginning, but then I changed my mind because of two reasons. First, I was disappointed by the way authorities responded to our demands. Second, the government by imposing a curfew stopped us from participating in the protests.”

Another protester Muntadhar al-Zaidi says:

“I have been protesting since the very beginning and I used to stay at the Tahrir Square the whole time. People were supporting us from the start, and I was cooking on a daily basis for the protesters. The food was definitely not expensive: I cooked rice soup for lunch and dinner. People helped us by bringing food on a daily or weekly basis, but this support has stopped now because of the pandemic and the curfew. People do not come to support us as they did before.”

Another protester called M. A. from Baghdad says:

“The coronavirus pandemic has strongly affected our activities in Tahrir Square. In March, at the very beginning of the curfew we took a decision to protect people from the virus. I am a veterinary graduate and I have some knowledge about viruses. With the help of many other protesters, we started cleaning the tents of the protesters in Tahrir. We also managed to give instructions to the protesters to protect themselves from getting the virus, using face masks and hand gloves. But at the end, staying in Tahrir Square was against all health instructions and protesters had to go home, since all people are endangered by the virus. That is the reason we followed the instructions of the Ministry of Health and stayed home.”

Salat Mahmood, advisor to the President of Iraq said the following regarding coronavirus impact:

“There were many reasons behind decreasing Tahrir activities by the protesters. One of them was the appearance of coronavirus. The government imposed a curfew and instructions for people to stay home. In fact, the activities of protesters decreased, but protesters' complaints did not decrease because the government has not responded to the demands of people yet.”



Zahra Kadhim, a political activist and member of Al-Hikma Party said the following about the effect of the coronavirus:

“The virus has definitely had a huge impact on the demonstration. Most people in the square were active people who were visiting the square after finishing their jobs on a daily basis. However, after the pandemic, things have changed, where only a small number of young people have been staying at Tahrir Square.”

The statements above indicate the serious impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the protesters' activities. But there are also minorities that say: "Listen to us coronavirus, come and visit the thieves who stole our wealth, come and take revenge from those who stole our dreams, we only loved our homeland but they killed us".<sup>(5)</sup> There are people who believe that corruption is more dangerous than the coronavirus. They continue to protest in Tahrir Square to show that COVID-19 will not make the protest fade away and will not take away the soul of their brothers martyred by the unknown militia groups.

## **Conclusion**

The article showed that the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic has affected the October Revolution of Iraq in many ways. It made the protesters avoid group gatherings, meetings, and follow social distancing rules which all three make taking part in a protest impossible. The pandemic made the activists concerned about the safety of people. Even though it was hard for protesters to leave Tahrir Square, they followed the restrictions and rules of the government to protect the public. The number of protesters decreased day after day and the economic support became less than it was before the pandemic.

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(5) Hassan Ali Ahmed. Iraqi protesters stand firm, say corruption worse than coronavirus. Al- Monitor, March 7, 2020.



## Coronavirus and Anonymous bullets in Maysan

### Haidar Alhasnee

Dozens of military vehicles including ambulances surrounded Abu Jasan village from Al-Salam side, south the center of Maysan Governorate (420 km south the capital Baghdad) to impose a lockdown on the city, a home to 2000 people, after a citizen (Mahdi Saleh Karim, 39 years old) died from the coronavirus.

These measures taken by the crisis unit were tough for citizens, psychologically and socially. Mortada Saleh Karim (the brother of Mahdi Saleh Karim) says that this unprecedented measure was taken suddenly without any prior notice and had psychological repercussions on citizens.

The lockdown on the village was a preventive measure, since the results of samples taken from the contacts of the dead including his brothers, relatives, wife and 3 daughters were negative, meaning that the village has no infection case.

Mortada argues that the 10-day lockdown was meaningless because his sister-in-law, who was the closest person to his brother during his sickness, tested negative. He confirms that his brother suffered from kidney failure, one year ago, travelled to Iran to be treated, and died- when he returned- because of the same disease. Mortada explains that the burial was more difficult, because he was buried in a remote area and in a hard way while his family was denied the right to take part in the burial.

According to Maysan Health Directorate, 20 days before his death, Mahdi Saleh Karim was in Iran. At his return, he was tested in Baghdad Airport when he visibly showed COVID-19 symptoms. He was quarantined, to be transferred, days later, to al- Sadr educational hospital in al-Amara where he died at 1 pm on March 8. The body was buried in a safe and preventive way.

Karim's family confirms being continuously mocked for a video published on the way he was buried and for the insistence of the Health Directorate that he was infected although medical reports show that he suffered from kidney failure.

Karim's death had another consequence. After his death, his Directorate cut his salary to be transformed into a pension, as an administrative measure. However, due to the lockdown in Iraq, all pension procedures have been halted. Thus, his wife and three girls, the youngest of whom is few-month old, are facing now an economic crisis.

Meanwhile, all walks of the Iraqi life have stopped because of movement restrictions on governorates, vital crossings, and airports. Businesses, public and private sectors, banks, and exchange and transfer houses have been closed which has caused an unprecedented economic recession in Iraq.

Ayoub Malki, an economist and former bank director, tackles the economic recession in Iraq after the lockdown which caused the resurgence of several economic crises including: the complete stop of the labor market except specific sectors including the internet and mobile phone sector owned by investment companies. Meanwhile, others sectors, like local industries, faced many hurdles as well as many traders who have commitments to Arab and international companies.



According to him, the Iraqi government couldn't control the situation and mandated traders and far-reaching people to solve economic issues, knowing that some of them seized the opportunity to increase the prices of consumption goods. In its turn, the banking sector was struggling to survive. In fact, many commercial banks laid off their employees and didn't pay their salaries for 3 months.

He indicates that the government couldn't fulfill its duties including the provision of medical equipment needed to fight the virus like masks and disinfectants which were no longer available in markets few days after the lockdown.

Younes Habib, a 40-year-old transfer money house owner, says that money transfer operations to the governorates stopped on March 19. External money transfer from/to Iraq stopped too, while internal money transfer transactions were shy and sometimes fees were double the transferred amount of money.

Banks cannot also fully conduct their transactions and they were totally closed. Many traders also faced many hurdles in providing liquidity to their work or in meeting their commitments.

Omar Kadem, a 65-year-old trader, clarifies that it has become harder to pay their dues to companies and factories with which they deal, adding that some Gulf countries, which didn't impose a curfew, were demanding them to pay their product and goods dues.

The health sector was also put on hold due to the closure of clinics, and health centers while the government doctors limited their work to major and urgent surgeries. Meanwhile, doctors closed their private clinics without notifying their patients even through social media, which allowed the only private hospital in the governorate to increase its prices.

Hamid Ismail, a kidney failure patient, clarifies that dialysis costs little in the governmental hospital while it costs around \$400 in the Lebanese University Hospital and this amount reaches \$1200 per week, which he can't afford.

He adds, "Other patients and I tried to reopen the ward of kidney failure without any success because the quarantine center is near the ward in al-Sadr educational hospital, which, according to officials, may cause the transmission of the virus."

Amid this turmoil, many Iraqi students who study abroad failed in their attempts to return to their country because restrictions imposed on airports barred them from arriving to Iraq. In addition, after closing transfer houses, Iraqi citizens can no longer transfer money abroad.

Ali Karim (a 34-year-old lawyer who is pursuing his Master's degree in the Iranian city of Mashhad) can no longer receive money from Iraq, neither can 5 of his colleagues, after the closure of exchange houses between Iraq and Iran, all private banks and offices.

Ali says, "Iraqi students and others in Iran were under confinement. Thus, our repatriation became harder because of the protocol between Iraq and Iran on student visas and the need to acquire official approval to return to our country before the fixed date. The situation lasted for around a month from the beginning of February until March 2020."

"During the return flight, airports were overcrowded which was very worrying because hand sanitizers and masks were no longer available in the airport, after pharmacies ran out of stock. I



tried to avoid crowded places as much as possible but inside the plane, it was definitely crowded. I didn't take off my mask during the whole flight. I didn't touch my nose, I didn't eat or drink until I arrived to Maysan," he explains.

Likewise, Iraqi students living in Russia, where some cities imposed a lockdown and closed universities after the virus outbreak, couldn't return home because of restrictions imposed by Iraqi authorities on airports in the country.

Ahmad Rahid, a PhD student in Russia, clarifies that the suspension of the academic year was a painful decision for students, especially those who are about to graduate. Difficulties started to mount when the Iraqi government suspended the work of money exchange and transfer houses, which means students couldn't receive transfers anymore. According to Ahmad, they had two choices: whether to stay in Russia without money while the prices of goods are on the rise or to borrow money and travel back to Iraq through indirect route.

He narrates what happened: they borrowed money from Iraqi and Arab residents in Russia hoping they would pay it back when they return to Iraq. They travelled to countries, like Iran, Lebanon or Dubai, from which they returned to Iraq. According to him, the trip was tiring and costed triple the price of a direct flight to Iraq, while they faced the risk of staying in these countries as the situation due to COVID-19, which is spreading worldwide, became more complicated.

With the fast spread of the coronavirus in China and the high number of cases, the Iraqi government, through the Oil Ministry, issued an order banning the travel from/to Iraq of Chinese employees working in the oil sector. It should be noted that Chinese companies work in Iraq in virtue of contracts of the first and second rounds of license to extract Iraqi oil.

Engineer Adnan Noushi (Director General of Maysan Oil) clarifies that oil companies working in the oil fields of Barzakan and Halfaya prohibited the entry/exit of any Chinese employee to/from Iraqi soils starting from January 6, after the recommendations of the crisis unit not to welcome any comer from coronavirus-hit countries.

He indicates that Chinese companies abided by this order, prohibited their employees from going out, banned the maritime movement outside the workplace, and quarantined and tested their local and foreign employees. After establishing health committees, it was confirmed that no employee was infected.

Protesters halted all their activities and events like taking to the streets of Iraq, including Maysan. These measures were taken as the curfew was announced, and would be implemented until life goes back to normal, especially that the protest squares are usually overcrowded. It is worth mentioning that some people remained in the squares to protect the protest camps.

Abou Ali Malihani (a 52-year-old member of the coordinating committee of Maysan protests) clarifies that the committee recommended that camps and squares should be regularly and completely disinfected to prevent the virus spread among remaining protesters, and that health preventive measures should be respected.

Many were the expected activities in Maysan protests, including condemning the delay in forming a government and demanding from the police of the governorate to publish previous investigations about the death of some activists and protesters, whose number amounts to 24,



and about the injury of at least 250 protesters, after the outbreak of protests on October 2nd last year.

Ali Dahamat, a protester and the brother of assassinated activist Amjad Dahamat, says that they reiterated their demand to publish the investigation, announce its results to the public and reveal the identity of the authors of the crime without any success. The police presented different excuses for not publishing the investigation, knowing that it didn't do anything when his brother was killed 50 meters away from its building. They were set to escalate and demand the publishing of the investigation, but confinement measures were unexpected and forced them to postpone our activities until life goes back to normal.

After reporting 2 coronavirus cases in Maysan which caused a state of panic there, some citizens decided to stay at home even before imposing a lockdown. Some armed groups seized this opportunity to kill Abed al-Kuddus Kassem, one of the most prominent figures of Maysan protests, and his friend Karar Adel on March 11.

Mouhammd Kassem, 36 years old and the brother of Abed al-Kuddus Kassem, says, "We were tremendously shocked by the killing of my brother. In addition, we confronted many hurdles like banning us from entering the Institute of Forensic Medicine because the body of a person dead by the coronavirus was there. We couldn't organize a funeral or take the body to Najaf, 400 km away from Maysan, after that the majority of roads were blocked with sand barriers."

The formation of a local crisis unit from pertinent Directorates to follow up the coronavirus developments raised many problems in the governorate because the unit hid many data and information about patients. Several journalists in the governorate declared that they questioned the announcements and data of the unit because of its ambiguous vision and previous behaviors like hiding data.

Jasem Ansar (Marbad radio correspondent) confirms that the crisis unit paved the way for fake pages on social media to publish horrible fake news about the real number of COVID-19 cases, without denying them. It only leaked its data through non-credible pages without resorting to media outlets working in the governorate.

He adds that the unit purposely didn't invite any journalist to its first meetings and didn't allow any journalist to be a member of the unit. It didn't specify a place for the meeting of members and started meeting in random places like in the Health directorate, the police station, the hall of the oil company and others...

Inmar Iraqi (a nickname of a news page admin on Facebook) indicates that he publishes news on his page after receiving them from a member's bodyguard, who receives, in his turn, the news from the member himself.

Inmar announces that some news were fake but he is keen to increase the number of followers and interactions. Thus, he has to publish attractive titles to make his page the most popular among hundreds of news pages on Facebook.

The local crisis unit continues to publish inaccurate figures about the results of COVID-19 patients and their contacts and about the number of samples taken to plunge the city, every now and then, into terror, triggered by young people who run news pages on social media.



## Effects of the Coronavirus on Political and Civil Society Activity

### Introduction

The coronavirus has upended the situation in the world and within communities on different levels: economy, development, politics, college education, scientific research and fair distribution of resources on the state's sectors, especially health and education sectors which will receive more attention.

Syria (northern and eastern Syria which are the main topic of this article) hasn't been immune neither from these changes nor from the coronavirus spread. The pandemic repercussions will be more significant on the region because of the 10-year-long Syrian war/crisis.

The curfew and social distancing have major repercussions and have been negatively reflected on people's lives and livelihoods. They have an impact on political and social-civil levels.

It seems that the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria<sup>(1)</sup> is the most affected by the pandemic, on political and civil levels, since it lacks resources and its citizens rely on daily earnings. The reason why international and UN agencies aren't responding to the region's needs is the lack of "experience management" expertise.

### Preventing the Collapse

The Autonomous Administration (local administration in northern and eastern Syria) issued a series of orders after the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO). The most prominent orders are:

- Preventive measures to face the COVID-19 crisis like establishing quarantine units, imposing social distancing, closing crossings with neighboring countries and regions, creating centers for receiving and providing care for the coronavirus patients and asking other countries for support.
- The closure of al-Simalka crossing, end February then on March 14, was considered the first preventive measure to limit communication with neighboring countries.
- The Administration issued an order to close all schools, ban all gatherings and cancel all occasions (weddings, funerals and others). On March 19, another order was issued to limit the movement between cities, and to close cafeterias, cafés, malls, public parks and worship places.
- On March 22, a curfew, by which political parties (Syriac, Kurdish, and an elite of clan elders) abided, was imposed and extended several times.
- The cancellation of gatherings during religious and nationalist occasions. The Kurds cancelled the celebration of Nowrouz (a nationalist ceremony) and Syriac parties cancelled gatherings at the occasion of Akitu, which is celebrated on April 1st.

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(1) It is the Administration that has been leading northern and eastern Syria for years. It is militarily controlled by the SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces backed by the international coalition against ISIS) and politically controlled by the Syrian Democratic Council which is the political front for the SDF.



All these measures aimed at preventing any other collapse on different levels.

Day after day, concerns have increased among people, and political, administrative and civic institutions because the health sector lacks medical supplies and equipment for testing infected people and people suspected of being infected and because the Syrian government<sup>(2)</sup> does not support northern and eastern Syria to fight the pandemic. This cast a shadow on the public performance in implementing confinement measures and social distancing.

While the needs of the region were disregarded, on April 23, the Administration of Iraqi Kurdistan sent 2 machines for PCR tests to local authorities, which was seen by many citizens as a “great donation” and a good initiative by the Administration of Iraqi Kurdistan towards the region, especially after the report of a death case, on April 17, in Kamishli city. In fact, a person was infected but the administration of the hospital awaited the arrival of the patient’s test results from Damascus, which didn’t pay any attention to the case. Thus, some citizens of the region started wondering: “Aren’t we Syrian citizens?”

### **The Effect of the Coronavirus on Civil Society Work**

The repercussions of the coronavirus had a major impact on the civil-humanitarian scene. Civil and humanitarian (local) organizations were compelled to transform their goals and their activities into an emergency response plan. Their priority became the participation in awareness campaigns about the virus.<sup>(3)</sup>

The region is full with refugees and camps. It hosts more than 150000 refugees and dozens of camps specifically for the families of ISIS members or new refugees coming from cities where ISIS is conducting security sweep or where Turkey has taken control over like Afrin, Ras al-Ayn/ Sari kani and Tall al-Abyad/Kari Sabi.

3 camps are located in Manbej: old eastern camp, new eastern camp, and Jdeidet EL-Homor camp.

Several camps are located in ar-Raqqa: Tal al-Saman camp, Mahmoudiya camp, and Abu Qubaie camp.

Several camps are located in al-Jazeera province: Rouj, Nowruz, Washokani, al-Arisha and al-Hol camps.

It should be noted that al-Hol camp is one of the most dangerous camps. It hosts mainly the Syrian and foreign wives of ISIS members, former ISIS members who are injured or with disability as well as Iraqi refugees.

In northern and eastern Syria, more than 130 local and international organizations work. They are relief and humanitarian organizations, organizations concerned with awareness and education, and civil society organizations.

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(2) Before receiving 2 coronavirus testing machines from the Administration of Iraqi Kurdistan, Local authorities were compelled to send samples to Damascus to be tested and to publish results, which needed a lot of time.

(3) Some international organizations allowed local partner organizations to allocate part of its program for response like awareness campaigns and social distancing importance.



The majority of their activities are:

- To exert efforts and spread awareness about the virus, and work on implementing and explaining to citizens the importance of social distancing during the pandemic.
- To limit the work of some organizations to disinfecting camps.
- To distribute disinfecting and cleaning supplies to citizens by some other organizations.
- To spread awareness through awareness flyers distributed by the staff of some organizations.
- To spread awareness among Security Forces members by teaching them preventive measures to limit the virus spread.

Media outlets in the region played a major and simultaneous role with civil-humanitarian organizations in spreading awareness through their platforms: TV, radio, and social media.

### **From “Social Cohesion” to “Social Distancing”**

Before the pandemic, political, humanitarian, and civil efforts were focused on “social cohesion” because:

- People have suffered from the scourge of war sweeping across the whole region, which caused a split and a deepening gap between different community components from different ethnicities, religions and sects, and culture. Thus, social cohesion became essential, especially in ISIS-freed regions because:
- ISIS created lifestyles and instilled beliefs, as its legacy, that do not serve the common interest, since it divided people between “Muslims” and “Sinners”.
- The hate speech has increased, not only among local communities, but also among the educated elite and media outlets.
- A clear cleavage exists in the society, even within the same family.

The above-mentioned factors pushed organizations to prioritize “social cohesion” during the pre-coronavirus period.

The main goals that should be achieved became demands such as social balance, a system based on justice and equality, social stability, the culture of democracy, the promotion of all types of social equality.

The coronavirus had many consequences, including compelling people to adhere to “social distancing” while the public lacks online communication system.

It is the duty of media and civil organizations to transform “social distancing” and the priorities of individuals and groups into a means for civil peace which will enhance “social cohesion”.



## The Effects of Coronavirus on the Civil-Political Activity

On the political level, northern and eastern Syria witnessed tremendous civil and political movements: the visits of international envoys, dialogues between the Kurdish National Council and the Democratic Union, political developments in Syria such as the constitutional process, and the intensive activity of international organizations in the region to respond to humanitarian, societal and political needs.

With preventive measures taken by the Autonomous Administration in North and East Syria, public activity has significantly halted which has been negatively reflected on the stability-building dynamics and the strengthening of “social cohesion”. This paved the way for the reemergence of sleeper cells of radical organizations, especially ISIS, in northern and eastern Syria while the SDF approved a ceasefire, upon a call launched by the UN Secretary General and his special envoy Geir Pedersen. Meanwhile, several new challenges contributed to restricting public activity:

- Political activity deadlock: preventive measures heavily affected the political activity in the region. They had an impact also on the dynamics of Civil Society work while regular conferences and events were absent from the scene.  
The new type of communication “video conference” requires communication skills. In addition, this type of communication through video communication applications is a source of concern for competent authorities, because of the confidential information discussed, the lack of confidence in the degree of these apps' encryption and vulnerability to hacking. In addition, this type of communication requires additional resources, knowing that the quality of the Internet, which became a true challenge, is poor in the region.
- The decline in direct communication activities, and in the visits of special envoys which rendered the news reported about political and civil activities inaccurate, inefficient and meaningless.
- Difficulties in communicating with civil international organizations and Diplomats playing a major role in the region, especially that the region desperately needs help.
- The suspension of programs on building bridges between the community components, and on social cohesion which is paramount for social and civil-political stability.
- The impact on the dynamics of political personnel and organizations and on their performance while approaching their political and civil duty in peace-building and social cohesion issues.
- The gap between what is local and national which favored political isolation over collective national spirit.
- The deadlock of politics and communication with parties involved in northern and eastern Syria caused a gap in monitoring and following developments in Turkish-controlled areas. Thus, a change occurred in the demographics of Ras al-Ayn/Sari kani and Tall al-Abyad/Kari Sabi because parties controlling these regions didn't implement preventive measures and social distancing, didn't impose a curfew and didn't quarantine cities or villages...
- The Syrian government and Iranian- affiliated military forces in Deir az-Zur exploited the curfew. They mobilized their loyalist groups in the Autonomous Administration to create a cleavage within the community, destabilize the situation, accuse forces in the region of working for foreign countries and suppress the “Kurdish cause” aiming at managing the region, building stability and fighting terrorism.<sup>(4)</sup>

(4) In a statement in March 2020, Bashar al Assad accused the Kurds of dealing with the occupier, accused “Kurdish groups” of working under the US authority and denied “the Kurdish cause”.



## Negative Consequences on Local Communities and Low-Income People

The decision of the Autonomous Administration to impose a curfew and to close shops had a deep impact on individuals and low-income people like: barbers and beauty experts, and clothing, luxury, car parts and other shop owners. The curfew exempted grocery shops, provided that health recommendations (wearing gloves and face masks) and social distancing are implemented, which caused economic suffering for many people during this bleak situation. Many citizens who rely on daily income complained from their dire economic situation with the absence of response by working organizations.<sup>(5)</sup>

## Solutions

### International organizations should reexamine their programs and:

- Widely support civil and humanitarian organizations in the region, so they meet the needs of people. It is very important to support the most affected during preventive measures.
- Promote programs on "livelihoods", "social cohesion", "enhancing civil peace", "building bridges between political and societal components", democratic development and good governance.
- Structure administrative institutions (governance), programs on reconstructing networks and linkages, and organizations to meet all needs without external help.
- Support the region by peace-building programs and programs for rehabilitating the leaders of the local community, so they can influence and transform "social distancing" into a lifestyle and a base of social stability.

### The responsibility of UN agencies is to:

- Pursue, under the UN auspices, the political settlement by virtue of resolution 2254, and achieve the democratic transition, in which all societal-political components participate.
- Urge the UNESCO to take care of societal cultural heritage, collect archeological archives and the cultural outcome of the region's communities in addition to working on diffusing the culture of dialogue between political and societal components.
- Include the region in the efforts of the WHO to support the elimination of adverse effects of COVID-19.
- Activate the local dialogue, under the auspices of UN-related agencies which work in Syria, by the UN and countries involved in the region.

### What is urgent and necessary?

- To urge for a collaboration between northern and eastern Syria and other Syrian regions to exchange health expertise and information, to open humanitarian crossings between the government-controlled areas, northern- western Syria and northern-eastern Syria, and to create true communication to enhance the public interest.
- To increase support for programs on women who are the cornerstone of any community and state.
- To enhance programs on local civil society role in the public life through special programs and through building the capacities of volunteers who became experienced so they can

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(5) Until the date of this article, the region lacks COVID-19 response and support programs.



play, later on, a role in favor of the common good and to contribute in any process for change and reforms.

- To support social diversity in the region, protect diverse citizens, and promote their interests in staying in this region, and to create a fertile ground that contributes to general public belonging on the basis of local belonging.
- To stand by the most at-risk communities and consolidate the culture of dialogue between different ethnics and religious.



## The Effect of COVID-19 on the Course of the Iraqi Protests

### Mustafa M. Hasan

COVID-19 pandemic created a major challenge for many activities and threatened human life while having some upsetting effects on families, communities and societies all around the world. Different factors including social behavior and communication, preventive measures, social distancing and quarantine had a role in influencing the course of the Iraqi protests that started in October 2019 during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On March 15, 2020, the Iraqi government announced some curfew measures as part of its efforts to limit the spread of the virus in the country amidst a situation that can be described as the perfect storm threatening the world. During the widespread popular protests against corruption and foreign influence in Iraq, 700 protesters were killed and 20,000 were wounded. The Iraqi protests have been representing one of the most prominent issues in Iraq since October 1, 2019. This is the first time in the Iraqi history that a protest causes the resignation of an Iraqi government.

The dynamic impact of the protests thwarted the possibility of forming two governments later under the nomination of Muhammad Tawfeeq Allawi and the Adnan Al-Zarfi who failed to form a new cabinet due to the intense political differences while the majority of Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's cabinet was able to get the parliament's approval, and a new government was formed five months after the resignation of Adel Abdul Mahdi's government.

Despite the concessions that were presented to the protesters in the protest squares by the politicians, demonstrations continued in many cities in Iraq and the major demands such as prohibiting any foreign intervention, ending the sectarian power-sharing system, and demanding a better life, jobs and services all remained unchanged.

### Change of course

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant decline in the number of protesters due to warnings launched by the World Health Organization and the Iraqi Ministry of Health, which marked a change in the course of the protests. Professional syndicates and student unions decided to stop calling for demonstrations and gatherings as part of their commitment to follow recommendations in the wake of the virus outbreak.

The Coordination Committee of the Tahrir Square protests released a couple of decisions related to modifying the course of protests in a manner of preventing and limiting the spread of the virus amongst the protesters. For example, it is only allowed one to two persons to stay in one tent in Tahrir Square. In addition to launching sterilization campaigns, by spraying sterile materials, and awareness campaigns in the vicinity of the Square and different areas in Iraq on a daily basis.

The Coordination Committee of the Tahrir Square protests included the following in their measures:

- Reducing the numbers inside tents by half.
- Quarantining the sit-ins inside the tents and avoiding of any gatherings and marches.



- Continuous sterilization of sit-in tents.
- Gathering volunteers from the sit-ins to spray sterile materials around the square.

Musa Al-Araji, one of the leaders of the Veterinary Union says: "The decisions of continuing the protests were focused on preserving the concept of protest and demands while also preserving the lives of people and protecting them from COVID-19, therefore the efforts were focused on directing the protests into awareness campaigns and helping in the sterilization of surrounding areas near the square." He adds "As for the number of participants in the protests, it has decreased significantly where not more than 1000 people are present at the moment in Tahrir Square".

The protesters did not leave Tahrir Square during the quarantine period to express their political positions or opinions that the protest is still alive and they implemented a number of different events.

Falah Jathir, one of the participants responsible for carrying out these activities in Tahrir Square, says: "I participated with a group of protesters to carry out a number of activities during the quarantine and curfew period. For example, on April 15 we arranged a silent march in accordance with health protection regulations expressing our refusal to assign Mustafa Al-Kadhimi as Iraq's new prime minister. This was followed by a session to remember the martyrs of the revolution where we lit candles on April 22. After that, we continued to work on various activities", and he adds that "our activities were carried out with full commitment to social distancing and we followed the necessary health measures to avoid the spread of the virus".

### **Women's participation**

One of the most prominent phenomena of the October 2019 protests is the increase in women's participation in the protests. The Square witnessed organized women's movements that contributed significantly to their participation in the protest, providing logistical support and medical services for the protesters. However, the pandemic has greatly affected this participation and resulted in the decline of women's participation to almost zero, especially during the first weeks of curfew.

Sarah Azhar is a high school teacher and political activist, who talked about the COVID-19 effect on the protests, said: "Women were completely absent during the first six weeks of the curfew, then three women returned after this period to Tahrir Square; "Umm Ahmed", who volunteered to cook food for the remaining protesters in the Square, or "Umm Haitham", who volunteered to wash clothes, and a journalists who went to cover the news and immediately left the square after that".

### **Virtual alternatives**

Protest activists changed the method of protesting by organizing it through on social media platforms, as most political activists avoided physical gatherings to avoid any escalation in the number of cases. COVID-19 forced activists to use social media for expressing their attitudes and organizing campaigns like objection to Adnan Al-Zarfi's candidacy as prime minister and attitudes related to governors' dismissal who have all exceeded their legal period in their positions.



Muhammad Mithqal, one of the leaders of the protesting students and a member of the Students Union at Al-Israa University, says: “We paused our activities for saving families and society from the pandemic, we do not fear death but we care about whom we love” and he adds: “Instead of our physical presence that is required to protest in Tahrir Square, we started using social media to express our opposition to and criticism for corrupt parties, we are focusing on self-organization and planning for some major protests as the temperature elevates in the summer and hopefully when the pandemic recedes in order to continue with expressing our demands”.

### **Logistical challenges**

It is known that the protest's continuity also depends on the availability of daily logistical resources related to the protest camps.

The economic crisis and decrease in donors' interests due to the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the arrival of financial and food donations to the protests. Donors' priorities right now are supporting poor families instead of supporting the protest camps.

Ahmed Saleh, one of the protesters in Tahrir square said: “The donors stopped supporting protesters and the donations went to the poor families and the people who lost their jobs due to the curfew regulations, and this has greatly affected the course of the protests and the possibility of protesters remaining in the tents”.

### **Splits and differences**

The government's fears were not only about the mobilization of protesters and their gatherings but also about their political vision on political events in the country.

After COVID-19, the protests split into two groups, one of these groups calls for continuous protests, while the second group demands to stop the protests because of the pandemic, and to give the new government a chance to address the challenges in the country.

Ali Adel, one of the participants in the protests, says: “Protesters' opinions were divided due to COVID-19 on whether or not to continue with the protests. The first group supports the protests' continuity by putting pressure on the government until the demands are fully achieved, where they say that the end of everyone involved in corruption is only a matter of time.

While the second group calls for leaving the protests during these difficult times and giving a chance to Al-Kadhimi's government to perform its work and to fix the country's economic and health problems”.

Many criticizing voices arose due to the ambiguity of goals, the dispersion of opinions, and the absence of a unified leadership that is supposed to direct the protest into an organized political movement on the ground.

Ahmed Ali, one of the protest's activists, says: “There is no unified leadership in the protests, every group manages a number of tents, while tents that exercise a political role have many differences because of the incompatibility of goals”, and he adds: “The future of the protests is still unknown and protesters must put a vision and an end to the sit-in protests instead of



consuming valuable time and efforts that can be invested politically in forming an organized opposition within the next parliament”.

### **The latest escalation**

A big group of political activists launched an invitation campaign through social media to ask people to return to the protests under the title “The Promise to Revive the Revolution” on May 10, 2020

This protest took a violent turn that resulted in the injury of an officer and five members of the riot police in Tahrir Square in addition to the injury of more than 20 protesters and the death of 2 in clashes in the city of Basra by “TharAllah” militia office guards

Protesters demand a trial of Adil Abd Al-Mahdi and his cabinet members that are responsible for the death of 700 protesters since October 2019. In addition to dismissing the governors from their positions.

Alaa' Adel one of the participants in the protests, says: “Despite the pandemic, we refuse to get back to our houses. We accepted the call for the 10 May protests to demand the trial of the government of Adel Abdul Mahdi that is held responsible for killing around 700 protesters since October 2019 as well as those involved in this crime including officers and militias in addition to the dismissal of governors who have exceeded their legal period and remain in their positions to this day.” And he added: “If politicians do not respond to our demands, we will work to overthrow the political regime in Iraq”.

### **The future of the protests**

The protest scene seems hazy with the appearance of COVID-19 which has become a true challenge that could stop people from gathering in the protest arenas, but some protests' leaders believe that imposing pressure on the government is an ongoing process that will not stop but needs some planning in order to be more organized when returning in the coming summer.

Mohamed Mithqal says: “We seek to sustain the concept of political change and protests by forming an organized political opposition that is able to enter the next parliament”, he adds, “Despite all our efforts, the situation is unpredictable. The Iraqi political environment is a sand dune that changes every period and whose direction cannot be predicted. But what we know now is that we have not achieved all of our goals and we cannot return soon to the protests”.



## COVID-19 Challenges in Iraq

### Qutaiba Yaseen

Since the report of the first coronavirus case in Iraq on February 26, Iraqi health institutions have been struggling to contain the virus. Controlling the virus may be difficult because the virus has imposed several economic, health and social challenges. The low number of confirmed cases raises questions about the reason behind this number in comparison with that of countries that Iraqis visit like Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

### Vulnerable Health Institutions Because of Corruption

The Iraqi Ministry of Health had the lion's share of corrupt operations by ruling. Although the government allocates 5 percent of the public budget to the Ministry, which is a major allowance in comparison to other ministries, the majority of these allowances go into the pockets of political mafias within the Ministry, depriving it from being developed and supplied with modern and new equipment. These lootings logistically weakened the Ministry and caused the unpreparedness of its health system to face major crises sweeping across the country. The coronavirus was, in fact, a real test to the ability of health institutions to deal with this crisis.

The Iraqi Ministry of Health lacks laboratories that can effectively conduct tests. With the virus outbreak, Baghdad Central Laboratory was the only laboratory that conducts tests received from all the country's provinces. At first, tests were limited to only 500 tests per day, because this number puts a huge pressure on the Laboratory and because of fears that a technical problem may occur causing the breakdown of testing machines. Chinese contributions helped establish another central laboratory in the capital. The Ministry also renovated centers in Najaf and Basra to increase the daily capacity of testing to 2000-3000 tests per day.

Despite that, this number remains low, if compared with that of neighboring countries. The total of tests conducted by Iraq from the first confirmed case until the date of this article reached almost 98000 tests while other countries, like Iran, conducted more than 3 million tests in the same period.

It should be noted that the number of confirmed cases are directly proportional to the number of tests conducted. The more tests are done, the more cases are reported. In addition, according to the Iraqi Minister of Health, hospitals suffer from the low number of available life support equipment, which stands at 1200, which, together with an uptick in confirmed cases, causes a crippling crisis.

### Social and Psychic Restrictions Banning People from Going to Hospitals and Undergoing Tests

In addition to the above-mentioned logistic weakness, social restrictions and obstacles explain why several people abstain from testing themselves to make sure if they are infected or not. These restrictions are deep-rooted in the mindset of Iraqis who think that disease will lead to their stigmatization, and will affect their reputation and that of their family- particularly girls. Thus, they abstain from going to the hospital until symptoms become acute. Many of them refused to send



their daughters and wives because they fear that they will be quarantined or harassed. Few days ago, a video- in which a man refuses that health officials test his wife and threatens them to kill them if they touch her- went viral on social media.

Fear also stems from the lack of people's confidence in the way in which health institutions deal with infection and death cases. Many of these institutions are unqualified to provide care for patients and their quarantine units are below required standards. There is a prejudice that when people visit hospitals, they will contract additional diseases rather than being treated from their illness. Some patients went through a bad experience while in quarantine, represented by the lack of health care services, the lack of cleaning of the halls between patients to prevent the spread of the virus, as well as the isolation of the patients from their families, the fear of dying while being away from their families, and the fear in which the families of these patients live. Once an infection case is reported, several buyers and people stop interacting with the patient's family because they fear the virus transmission.

The way health officials buried dead people due to the coronavirus by allocating special tombs to them raised the complaints of citizens living near these tombs because they fear being infected, despite the reassurances of officials that the dead, who are buried in relatively deep holes, cannot spread the virus. People are concerned about this burying procedure, which, according to them, is humiliating for the dead person, especially that Muslims have special death rituals. They wash and wrap the body before the burial. Now, the dead by the coronavirus are buried in a specific graveyard away from the graveyard of their family and relatives. Can you imagine the sadness of their family members because they cannot have a proper funeral and burial for their beloved ones, they won't be able to receive mourners and they may even be quarantined in houses or hospitals because of fears of being, themselves, infected?

Some health directorates sought recently to establish mobile medical teams and conduct random tests to citizens. These teams were accompanied with ambulances that turned on their sirens and with armed police members. This unprofessional behavior caused the spread of terror and fear among citizens and embarrassment of the families of infected people.

## **Religious and Cultural Beliefs Caused the Lack of Awareness about the Disease**

Religious and cultural beliefs entrenched these misconceptions about the disease. Many consider the disease as God's punishment for sinners. Others fear that their disease will become the talk of the town. Thus, many people denied the existence of the virus and didn't comply with health measures like avoiding crowds and gatherings.

The commemoration of the death of Imam Moussa al-Kadim, the seventh Imam in Shia, and the ensuing religious rituals that demand gatherings and crowds, represented a challenge for health and security officials that called people to go back home and to abstain from visiting the Imam's Shrine to preserve public health and to prevent the virus spread. Many Shiites went out, in a clear challenge to authorities, convinced that thanks to their faith, the Imam- one of the Fourteen Infallibles- will heal them, if infected.

These events came amid mixed Fatawas by different religious authorities. On one hand, in his Fatawas, Supreme Religious Authority Sayyid Ali Sastani called to abide by health measures and scientific recommendations by suspending Friday Prayer, halting religious studies, complying with the ban of gatherings and avoiding them. On the other hand, other religious



authorities had a different opinion. For example, Moktada Sader called his followers to continue visiting the Shrine and not to suspend Friday Prayer provided that they comply with safety measures.

### **The Repercussions of Curfew and Social Distancing Measures on the Economic Situation and People's Livelihoods**

As the number of cases increases, the government has been compelled to carry out strict measures like a total curfew in all provinces. This decision had major repercussions. It paralyzed several economic activities and lucrative and non-lucrative projects. Many daily-income and low-income people were immediately affected amid a governmental failure to provide solutions that can help them. In fact, even the emergency grant, to which 12 million people applied, hasn't seen the light yet because of bureaucracy that hinders its implementation.

The extent of commitment by confinement measures differs between citizens. The citizens of suburbs haven't complied with these measures for many reasons. The bulk of young people living there rely on their daily income. For them, staying at home means dying from hunger. Thus, many of them prefer to risk their lives rather than staying at home. In addition, the houses are small and the family is large, so men spend most of their time out (in al-Sadr city in Baghdad, the size of a house, where 10 people live on average, is usually 140 square meters).

With the coronavirus spread and the decision of the crisis unit to implement a curfew, domestic violence cases have doubled, in comparison to normal times. Almost each week, social media platforms report two to three domestic violence cases in several provinces. Real figures are likely higher than the reported figures. However, some cases may go unreported because of fears of traditions and the closure of courts. The victims of this violence are mostly women and children.

### **Hope Remains...**

The positive side of the crisis was embodied in community solidarity campaigns in which wealthy people provided help. Non-governmental organizations, and young volunteers played a leading role in helping needy households. According to a report by the Secretariat of the government, more than 390 organizations participated in implementing 878 campaigns in all provinces targeting, according to statistics, more than 400000 beneficiaries.

Solidarity campaigns were not only limited to food assistance. Electricity generator owners exempted some people from paying their monthly bill, and real estate owners reduced the rent of houses and shops while people hope that this crisis will end soon. Activist Amir Salam from Najaf province says, "Our humanitarian duty requires that we show solidarity and mercy and that we help households affected by this crisis until it ends and life goes back to normal."

### **Health and Security Threats Sweeping across Iraq**

At the beginning of the crisis, the government imposed a curfew on all citizens. However, Ministry of Health employees and Security Forces members were exempted from the curfew since the government badly needs health officials and security forces members who will supervise the compliance with the curfew, and were, therefore, withdrawn from their bases. While health



officials were fortunate enough to receive safety supplies, Security Forces members didn't receive any, which- according to the daily briefing of the Health directorate in Karkh/Baghdad- caused the infection of 50 members. Meanwhile, the withdrawal of the international coalition against ISIS from its bases because of COVID-19 and the ensuing halt of Security Forces trainings were negatively reflected on the efforts of Security Forces to fight ISIS. In fact, at the beginning of May, ISIS-related armed groups launched many terrorist attacks targeting the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Salah ad-Din province killing 10 fighters. ISIS exploited the withdrawal of Iraqi Security Forces units from their bases and their attempts to impose a curfew due to the coronavirus to launch its attacks. These security violations may sound the bell of a new threat to the country's security, if they are not addressed immediately.

## **A New Government and Several Challenges**

For months, Iraq has lived in a protracted political turmoil after Adel Abdel Mahdi's government resigned and became a caretaker government unable of taking important decisions. This vacuum ended when the parliament gave the confidence to Mostafa al-Kadimi's government. The new government faces several and major challenges like the collapse of oil prices on which the Iraqi state heavily depends to pay government's spending and public sector salaries. Some rumors indicate that the government intends to cut the salaries of public sector employees, as a solution to the crisis, which will have major repercussions that may cause the collapse of the whole system, especially that a hot summer is looming on the horizon which may push people to take back to the streets.

All economic sectors were put on hold and several non-governmental employees lost their jobs after the coronavirus spread. Measures taken by the government didn't meet people's expectations and didn't take the pandemic scale into consideration. It concentrated on imposing a curfew, without taking into consideration or providing food and other vital needs of the citizens, which exacerbated their suffering because the majority of them don't have enough money to buy their needs. Thus, they are at the verge of hunger. If the situation remains unchanged, the poor segment and the unemployment rate will increase amid sharp decrease of economic growth and a governmental failure to address challenges sweeping across the country.

The coronavirus imposes a new reality that requires joining forces and dismantling obstacles. In fact, individuals and institutions are responsible for preventing and solving this crisis by proposing and implementing solutions to get out of the crisis and to return life to normal.



## Northern and Eastern Syria during COVID-19: a Living Crisis and Blockade of Crossings

### How Are Daily-income Workers Living during Quarantine? How Did Local Authorities Act?

“We only have this mattock and fork... how are we supposed to live?” by these words, “Myar”, a citizen of ar-Raqqa in northern and eastern Syria, described his situation, while being confused between abiding by the confinement due to the coronavirus and trying to make ends meet.

Myar, a 30-year-old married man, is the family's breadwinner. He works in excavation and fracturing and sometimes as a porter to earn his daily living. Myar narrates the suffering of daily-income workers, wondering- since he has stopped working due to the coronavirus lockdown- “how can we, day laborers, survive amid this crisis and confinement measures?”

Day laborers, including Myar, consider themselves the most affected by this pandemic. He says, “Rich people and traders won't be as affected as us.”

Like the rest of the world, The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria/Rojava (a Kurdish-controlled region) implemented measures to fight the pandemic. The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria-as a local authority- sought to contain the pandemic by complying with preventive and confinement measures. However, the region is damaged by 10 years of war and lacks sufficient potentials and support due to a political will imposed on the Security Council to close “al-Waleed” crossing, a border crossing with Iraq. Thus, the region can no longer benefit from international support except for the work of some local and international organizations.

### “The Trader Is Alive but the Worker Is Dead”

Myar's situation is similar to that of thousands of ar-Raqqa citizens who abided by confinement measures due to COVID-19. This situation stems from the suspension of the work of many people amid the lockdown imposed on the region and the world.

Many local and international organizations, that receive the support of the international community, work in northern and eastern Syria. Nonetheless, according to a representative of a local civil institution concerned with issues of women, family and children, the region hadn't received sufficient help because of war, blockade and political circumstances. Many organizations tried to collect aid. Some organizations even launched a call for international stakeholders to help the region, yet, to no avail.

“Hanan Hassan”, a communication specialist in an organization concerned with development and civil society issues describes preventive measures in northern and eastern Syria as “good”. However, she thinks that these measures negatively affected the living conditions of a large segment of people, especially day laborers and small business owners, whose savings are enough for days only.



She mentions the low potentials of local civil institutions, which are caused, according to her, by the lack of assistance to the region as well as the low and limited potentials of local organizations.

Civil organizations launched awareness campaigns, distributed baskets containing cleaning supplies and disinfected some public establishments and camps. Nevertheless, they couldn't help people affected by confinement measures, which caused a surge in the complaints of citizens that they aren't receiving enough assistance. Myar says, "The affected are low-income people. The trader is alive but the worker is dead."

Despite the lack of potentials mentioned by civil society organizations and authorities, citizens think that they should receive help and support since they are abiding by confinement measures. Myar says that some citizens sold their furniture and home appliances to bring food to the table. He adds, "We won't be able to stay at home any longer, whether we provide for our children, whether we die from hunger." In this regard, Hanan Hassan says that people who rely on daily income abided by confinement measures at first, and they used to go out to buy their essential goods only. However, when these measures were extended, they felt the need to work. Thus, they no longer complied with these measures and they went out to seek their livelihoods.

### **The Effect of Confinement Measures on Citizens**

Although the compliance with confinement and prevention measures is the best way to protect people, the situation of low-income people in northern and eastern Syria, like in the whole world, needs help and assistance.

"Rahma", a 23-year-old mother of two, from Kamishli in northern and eastern Syria, awaits the birth of her third child as the 2020 Eid- el Fitir approaches. She says, "My husband used to depend on daily income before imposing confinement measures. However, he has been at home for two months. We no longer have money. Thus, we are now heavily indebted. We are asked to pay our rent while we don't have enough money for my delivery."

### **How Did The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria Deal with the Coronavirus?**

With the worldwide spread of COVID-19, The Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria decided to abide by preventive and confinement measures. Therefore, it issued an order on March 23 imposing a 15-day curfew on the region. This order included banning the movement between cities, closing all border crossings leading to the region, halting all activities and gatherings, suspending the work of restaurants, cafés, wedding halls, tents of condolences and weddings where people gather and closing markets. However, to ensure the continuity of vital life services, there were some exceptions: people were allowed to buy their needs without gathering. Pharmacies, hospitals, bakeries, and milk and food markets were allowed to open. Humanitarian and aid relief agencies, cleaners and fuel trucks were also allowed to work.

The Autonomous Administration confirmed that citizens should abide by these measures, or they would be fined. Through "The Committee of Health", the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria formed a crisis unit to fight and contain the coronavirus. This unit issued an order to establish special quarantine units, in case of any confirmed case, and it equipped a COVID-19 hospital in al-Hasakah city.



“Birifan Khaled”, a co-president in the executive council of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, says that confinement measures in the region had some positive consequences, like controlling and preventing the virus spread and taking serious measures to contain the virus. She states, “We should take into consideration the lack of support, equipment, assistance and medical supplies given to the region.”

Birifan raises the issue of some challenges causing the low potentials of the region like the years-long crisis, and the war against ISIS, which damaged the infrastructure and the economy, as well the closure of borders by neighboring countries.

15 days into the first confinement order, the Autonomous Administration decided to renew it for another 15 days excluding agricultural and veterinary pharmacies, shops for buying and selling agricultural gears, such as tractors, machines and combine harvesters. In addition, it facilitated the movement of farmers and agricultural workers during the lockdown, provided that they comply with social distancing measures. These exceptions were taken since farming, wheat and barley seasons, on which the citizens of the region depend, are approaching.

## **The Coronavirus in Syria**

As the coronavirus spreads in the world and as ensuing figures and statistics are published, Syria has not yet reported any cases. Until March 16, the Syrian government had announced that no case was reported. On March 23, however, it reported the first coronavirus case. In some government-controlled areas in al-Hasakah province, like small areas in al-Hasakah and Kamishli cities, cases have been reported while the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria has not reported any.

The first confirmed coronavirus case in Syria was for a 50-year-old woman living in al-Hasakah. On April 28, 2020, against the backdrop of this case, the Autonomous Administration decided to extend the curfew for 10 additional days, without changing any of the exceptions, provided that the curfew starts at 7 pm and ends at 6 am.

### **“My Only Livelihood Has Stopped”**

“Um Mouhamad”, a sewer from ar-Raqqa, says, “Our savings are enough for buying bread only.” She adds, complaining about the lack of resources two months after the lockdown, “My husband died years ago. I have a rented sewing shop which is my only livelihood. Thanks to it, we were able, in normal days, to provide for ourselves but work has stopped. I no longer have the sewing material like haberdasheries, embroideries, threads and others because shops selling them are closed. This affected us. We only eat bread now.”

Um Mouhamad, like the rest of citizens, complains about the lack of help for needy households. She says, “We haven’t receive any help from anyone. This is why we wish we can return to our work.”

In his turn, “Hafal” from Kamishli, fears the virus spread. Thus, he is staying at home with his family. He also fears that the lockdown duration prolongs because he will no longer be able to provide for his family. He says, “I have 4 children that should be taken care of. I avoided all gatherings to protect my children. However, staying at home is becoming unbearable. During the whole lockdown duration, I have suspended my work as a taxi driver, which is my only source of



income. Therefore, I was compelled to borrow money from my relatives and acquaintances and I don't know how I will pay it back without working.”

The curfew was extended by successive orders by the Autonomous Administration as the exceptions included more and more sections. In May, it allowed construction and building sectors, shops that buy building material, and industrial shops to open. In addition, people were allowed to enter the region through border crossings (the region shares borders with Iraqi Kurdistan and government-controlled provinces like Aleppo from which it is separated by land crossings) provided that all arrivals should be quarantined in special units for 14 days. Bodies of people who are originally from northern and eastern Syria, who died abroad can enter the region, provided that they are buried in special tombs near the crossings to prevent the virus spread. Their remains will be later moved to their right grave.

The Autonomous Administration exempted subscribers from paying the bills of water, electricity and sanitation for May and June.

It also promised to distribute, in all the cities and villages of the region food baskets to poor and needy households who rely on daily income. This promise was made less than one week after the first confinement decision. However, according to many citizens, the promise was unfulfilled. They haven't received any help during the lockdown neither from the Autonomous Administration nor from international organizations, which has been negatively reflected on people's lives.

In respect of this issue, Birifan Khaled, a co-president, comments, “it is true that we had some delays in distribution but assistance hasn't stopped. We distributed the first and second batches of assistance to poor and affected households in al-Jazeera province. We then distributed assistance in al-Tabqah and Manbej.”

According to Birifan, the distribution will include all the citizens of the region, especially the affected households without specifying their identities.

“Ziad”, who repairs electronics in Manbej, says that the economic situation forced citizens to think about their livelihoods, confirming that they haven't received any assistance from the Autonomous Administration. He adds, “Due to the economic pressure, I have been selling vegetables since the beginning of the confinement to provide for my family.”

“Maher”, a cloth shop owner in Amuda city, says, “At first, things were easy but as the confinement duration was extended, we started to feel some economic difficulties because we have no savings. In addition, the high dollar exchange rate poured salt into the wound.” “Mouhammad”, a perfume shop owner in Amuda, agrees with Maher insisting that authorities should distribute assistance to citizens so they can make ends meet.

“Majed”, a 22-year-old inhabitant of al-Hasakah, says that the lockdown duration was very challenging and difficult. “After my father died, I became the responsible for my 5-member family. I struggled to provide for them. We reached a point where my mom started asking our neighbors for help and buying groceries on tick,” he says.

## **Solutions**

Many small business owners in the Autonomous Administration were compelled to work certain



jobs that are allowed during the lockdown, like selling fruit and vegetables or working in bakeries and restaurants.

Officials in the Autonomous Administration consider the implementation of confinement measures as the most important decision to prevent the virus spread. According to them, low potentials are the reason behind the lack of assistance. The Autonomous Administration puts the ball in the court of the International Community that deals with the region through political resolutions only. It accuses the International Community of closing borders and abstaining from providing assistance. According to it, the victims are the citizens, especially day laborers who have suspended their work and have no means to provide for themselves.

It is true that the region was able to protect itself from the virus spread but it should find solutions for the livelihoods of its citizens, especially that the majority of them depend on daily work.

Among solutions, proposed by experts and observers to whom we talked, are: conducting a quick survey of the living conditions, through municipalities and statistics and data-collecting committees, by the Autonomous Administration and working civil organizations, providing food assistance, which includes basic needs like provisions and vegetables, to needy and affected households, and distributing the needs of infants and children like milk, diapers and others.

On the other hand, people are required to take care of their health, abide by preventive measures and undergo tests, provided that the Autonomous Administration provides free health services and required medicines for citizens which will ease the burden on them.

Poor households think that the best solution is to give “an amount of money” according to the number of members so they buy their basic needs.

