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**Syria: A War in the Times of Corona**

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**The coronavirus pandemic has the potential to affect various aspects of the Syrian theater. If the pace of contagion among Iranian elements in Syria and Iran increases, Iran will be hard-put to progress with its Syrian entrenchment program. Damascus's military gains will slow down, given the situation and the potential damage to the regime's main sources of support: Iran, Hezbollah, and possibly even Russia. The spread of the virus in Syria and among its neighbors will likely heighten the humanitarian catastrophe afflicting Syria's population for years, mainly in densely populated areas such as the Idlib governorate. Finally, the status and questionable legitimacy that Bashar al-Assad has been garnering may be eroded further as a result of potential public pressure. Israel, which in any case is preoccupied with the coronavirus crisis, should avoid increasing attacks in Syria and allow for the weakening of the Iranian axis to run its independent course.**

The coronavirus has not spared the Syrian theater. As health and human rights officials in Syria have reported, so far there are at least 2,500 coronavirus patients in approximately five of the country's provinces: Damascus, Tartus, Latakia, Homs, and Deir ez-Zor. The Damascus regime, like regimes in other Middle East theaters that are mired in protracted civil wars, chief among them Libya and Yemen, has fervently denied the epidemic and concealed the situational picture as well as its own helplessness in dealing with the crisis from the population. On March 22, 2020, the Syrian Health Ministry disclosed the first case of coronavirus in Syria, in a woman who had returned to Syria from abroad; since then only a few additional cases have been reported.

For all the denials, Bashar al-Assad's regime has taken a series of preventive steps: closing schools and universities at least until April 2; canceling Friday prayers in mosques until April 4; postponing the parliamentary election from April 13 to May 20; cutting work hours in state institutions; halting military drafts; canceling sports and cultural events as well as various public gatherings, including a ban on pilgrimages to holy sites; and closing ports and border crossings. Moreover, despite its denial, the regime demanded that the United States remove the sanctions it has imposed on Syria immediately, declaring that Washington would be responsible for any victim of the coronavirus in Syrian territory.

President Assad has several reasons to conceal the outbreak of the epidemic in his country. The first is the absence of a functioning health care system after nine years of fighting and the severe shortage of medical resources and equipment, including coronavirus testing kits. The second is that acknowledging the outbreak of the virus would be liable to generate public and political pressure against the regime, among both supporters and whatever opposition remains. The third is that the regime still relies on Iranian support and thus is eager to hide the fact that the infections and morbidity began among Iranian proxies in Syria. Finally, Assad has tried to exploit the fact that the world is preoccupied with the pandemic to speed up the military drive to retake territory, mainly in the Idlib governorate in northwest Syria.

The Idlib governorate, the core rebel stronghold, with a population of 3.5 million, suffers from a dearth of reasonable medical facilities and from health care systems and attendant medical equipment that are only partly functional. Representatives of humanitarian physicians groups that are active in Syria have warned of a potentially sweeping catastrophe in the country should the coronavirus spread to makeshift camps for displaced persons in Idlib and its environs. Such a scenario could unleash another wave of refugees, infected or not, who will end up knocking at Turkey's doors.

While opposition groups in Syria, helped by the World Health Organization and other humanitarian groups, are preparing to receive preventive medical equipment and set up an isolated medical center in Idlib, while drilling for emergency situations and transferring medical equipment from Turkey, the regime has not shown any signs of preparation to cope with an unprecedented crisis in the province, should the epidemic indeed spread there. In fact, it might even see such an event as an opportunity to be rid of a disloyal population. Consequently, the WHO announced on March 16 that within the ensuing days it intended for Western doctors to test for coronavirus carriers in areas under rebel control in northwest Syria.

Assad still encounters challenges relating to governance, including in southern Syria, and is still battling rebel forces in battles that claim the lives of fighters from among regime ranks. In parallel, a public protest against the regime continues throughout Daraa, the city where the civil war began in 2011 in the form of a protest. Exposure of coronavirus cases and/or of an accelerated spread of the epidemic, which will inflict further victims, may constitute a significant trigger for denying regime legitimacy in the eyes of the Syrian public.

### **Between the Coronavirus and the Iranian Entrenchment**

Iran is the site of the most severe outbreak of the coronavirus outbreak in the Middle East, and apparently is the source for its spread along the Shiite axis — to Iraq, Syria, and

Lebanon; Syria is among the only countries that have yet to cancel flights to Iran. Furthermore, the borders between Syria and Iraq have reportedly remained open for the passage of pro-Iranian militia fighters, without those entering Syria being screened. Should this continue, it is certain to accelerate the rate of contagion in the country significantly. Indeed, most of the virus carriers are not of Syrian origin, but mainly Iranian, Pakistani, and Iraqi, and some are operatives in Shiite militias active in Syria under Iran's patronage. It was also reported that a senior Iranian commander, a central figure alongside Qasem Soleimani, responsible for enlisting and dispatching pro-Iran Afghan fighters to fight in Syria within the ranks of the Fatimion militia, died of the coronavirus. Nonetheless, the Syrian regime is reportedly making do with instructing its soldiers to avoid contact with Iranian troops and entry to their bases, among them the Imam Ali base, which belongs to the Quds Force in Syria.

Hezbollah personnel in Syria, and not just Iranian elements, have been hit by the coronavirus epidemic, and according to reports from Lebanon, dozens of Hezbollah operatives have been infected in Syria and Lebanon and covertly evacuated to quarantine camps Hezbollah controls in Beirut and within Syrian territory.

Beyond the potential of infection among Syria's citizens, the situation spells a gradual reduction in the fighting capacity of the Iranians and their proxies, as well as in the scale of Iranian representatives (religious and educational figures, engineers, advisers, and so on) enlisted to deepen the civilian entrenchment in Syria. It is likely to slow the transfer of weapons shipments, and accordingly, to reduce Iranian operational activity in Syria. On March 16, the IDF Spokesperson made known that Israel sees a slowdown in Iranian activity against Israel, apparently due to the need to contend with the coronavirus outbreak, and this trend will presumably continue.

Yet despite the challenges, it is hard to envisage Iran completely abandoning its vision of entrenchment in Syria, and it will certainly find alternative means to realize this. Thus, for example, the enlistment of 9,000 Syrian Shiites in southern Syria and in the northeast of the country to its ranks during March was part of the Iranian plan to establish a local proxy force. Another example is in the stepped-up drive to convert Syrian Sunnis and Druze in exchange for far-ranging economic and social benefits. This development, against a backdrop of challenges stemming from the coronavirus epidemic, may attest to a strategic vector — similar to the Hezbollah model in Lebanon — that is meant to substitute, or at the very least, compensate for the reduction of the Iranian contingent that is directly active in Syria.

**Conclusions and Ramifications for Israel**

The coronavirus has the potential to impact upon what happens in the Syrian theater in various respects. Of these, the Iranian presence in Syria is foremost. If the pace of infection among Iranian elements, both in Syria and Iran, increases, Iran will be hard-put to continue its project of entrenchment in Syria at the planned pace. Second, a scenario in which the virus spreads in Syria and among its neighbors is liable to cause a humanitarian catastrophe if the epidemic spreads to displaced persons camps – in Idlib, for example – or the refugee camps in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan that are currently home to millions of Syrian refugees.

The regime's military gains will likely decline due to the situation, and mainly as a result of a possible blow to the continuity of Iranian support. Russia, which, in addition to the routine challenges it faces, has in recent weeks been waging an oil war against Saudi Arabia over the drop in prices resulting from the coronavirus crisis. These developments are liable to divert Tehran's and Moscow's attention – and later on, resources as well – away from the Syrian theater.

In parallel to a potential weakening of the regime's main sources of support – Russia and Iran – the already shaky status and legitimacy of President Bashar al-Assad could be further undermined by a spread of the epidemic and the helplessness on the part of authorities. Over the war years, Assad has consistently demonstrated that his personal, political, and military interests come before consideration of the peace and wellbeing of the country's citizens. An outbreak of the epidemic may increase the public pressure, but it is reasonable to assume that here too the regime would suppress it through violence.

Israel, like the rest of the world's nations, is busy dealing with its own corona burden, and thus this is not the time to pursue the campaign between wars against Iranian entrenchment in Syria. Furthermore, processes whereby the Iranian axis is weakened should be allowed to run their course without intervening and drawing attention back to it. It is therefore advisable to act on the cognitive level, by relaying messages to the populations in the Shiite axis countries – and mainly Syria – that Iran is responsible for spreading the epidemic and endangering the people, and that Assad's policy of concealment proves again that the stability of the regime is more important to him than the lives of the citizens. In the future, Israel will have to study the changes that the coronavirus crisis set into motion in the Syrian theater, and craft an up-to-date plan for a protracted campaign against the Iranian entrenchment there.