

## Coronavirus Update: Economic Pressures Force Government to Relax Stay-At-Home Restrictions (free article)

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The Syrian minister of health has acknowledged the minuscule number of daily Covid-19 tests being carried out, while the economic consequences of the crisis appear to be increasingly serious.

Less than two months after the [first announcement](#) of a positive Covid-19 case in Syria, the [Ministry of Health](#) said on April 14 that the number of Syrians who tested positive had reached 29, up from 19 a week earlier, while the number of deaths was still two and the number of people who recovered had increased to five. All positive cases reported so far are within government-controlled areas.

A major reason for the very small number of positive cases is that the number of daily tests conducted by the ministry is itself very small. On April 06, Minister of Health Nizar Yazigi said that the ministry was conducting around 100 tests per day and was aiming to increase that to 200 and then 300.

A doctor based in Damascus confirmed yesterday to *The Syria Report* that the ministry was unable to conduct more than 200 daily tests with the equipment it currently has.

In neighbouring Lebanon and Jordan, two much smaller countries, the number of daily tests is significantly higher. According to statements from their respective ministries of health, Lebanon is currently conducting 527 tests in laboratories every day in addition to 2,213 tests it conducted at its airport, while Jordan was conducting 1,000 tests per day at the beginning of the month.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) said on April 14 that it had supplied Syria with five polymerase chain reaction (PCR) machines, which are used to detect the Covid-19 Coronavirus, and multiple shipments of testing kits.

Meanwhile, Mr Yazigi said that there were 25,000 beds available in hospitals and clinics but that there was a shortage of ventilators, which he attributed to western sanctions.

Also, the Syrian-Chinese Business Council on its website quoted Bassem Mansour, general manager of the [Syrian Civil Aviation Authority](#) (SCAA), as saying that a Chinese plane loaded with medical equipment will land in Damascus today, April 15.

In areas outside government control, the northeast region seems particularly at risk.

Ilham Ahmad, co-head of the Executive Council of the Syrian Democratic Council, the civilian arm of the Syrian Democratic Forces, which manages the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), said that should the virus spread to the northeast region, it is the Syrian government that should bear the responsibility.

She also claimed the WHO had not delivered the PCR devices it promised while providing support to the Syrian government and the Turkish-backed Interim Government. She added that, despite formal cooperation with the government, Damascus had not sent back the result of the tests conducted in the northeast, while flights through the Qamishli airport were continuing in the absence of basic health security measures. The airport is under the control of government forces.

### Movement restrictions

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Most restrictions on travel and stay-at-home measures have remained in place, including travel between provinces and between city centres and their suburbs. On April 11, the cabinet extended the closure of schools and universities to May 02, while several government departments extended their closure to that same date.

The government did not quarantine any new areas last week and the only two in that situation are the Damascus suburbs of Mnin and Sayyida Zeinab. However, opposition media have reported that there were regular breaches of the quarantine in Sayyida Zeinab by Iranian militias.

*RT*, a Russian outlet, reported on April 14 that religious tourism between Syria and Iran will restart soon. The information was relayed by Iranian media, who also quoted Ali Reza Rashidian, head of the Iranian Hajj and Visitation Organization, as saying that Iran was planning to resume visits to the Shia holy shrines in Iraq and Syria.

However, Minister of Tourism Rami Martini said that resuming visits from Iran was not an option considering the current health crisis.

There are growing concerns about the impact of these restrictions on business activity, and there has been increasing pressure from the business community to allow businesses to reopen and function normally again. Already, barely one month after [it started imposing these restrictions](#), the government appears to be giving in to this pressure.

The cabinet this week allowed a whole range of businesses to reopen under the condition that they avoid crowding and use the minimum number of workers required. Also, they must respect the terms of the curfew, which is in place every weekday from 6:00 pm to 6:00 am and from 12 pm on Fridays and Saturdays. The sectors where businesses can reopen include car mechanics, the maintenance and sale of agricultural machinery, blacksmiths, carpenters, mobile phone shops and taxis, among others.

The decision followed many appeals from influential businessmen such as Samer Al-Dibs, chairman of the [Damascus Chamber of Industry](#), who held several meetings over the past week with the minister of industry, the Damascus governor and other officials to discuss reopening some businesses. In Aleppo, Fares Shehabi, chairman of the [Aleppo Chamber of Industry](#) and the [Federation of Syrian Chambers of Industry](#), used social media to warn of the potential economic damage the closures could generate. On April 11, for instance, he posted on his Facebook account: "Let's hope that the closures and movement restrictions do not force the poor to choose between dying from the Coronavirus or from famine; the situation would then spiral out of control." Mr Shehabi is also calling on the government to allow the reopening of clothing and leather shops - two major sectors in his city.

Meanwhile, Kifah Qaddour, the secretary general of the [Tartous Chamber of Commerce and Industry](#), said that if restrictions continue, many companies will go bankrupt.

## **Economic measures**

Besides relaxing movement and closure restrictions on some business sectors, several other decisions were taken over the past week to help mitigate the economic impact of the crisis.

The [Ministry of Finance](#), for instance, suspended collecting taxes from restaurants and hotels; the tourism sector is among those most affected by the crisis.

The government also told state employees that the payment of their salaries would not be affected by the crisis and will continue to be paid. Contractors, including teachers, with the [Ministry of Education](#), will also see their payments continue. This category represents a significant share of the state's workforce.

Meanwhile, the [Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs](#) launched what it called the National Strategy for Social Emergency Response, which involves the launch of an online platform to record the applications for help by the elderly, disabled, people working on daily contracts, freelancers and

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seasonal workers. The website is already online, and its objective is to provide in-kind help, such as food and clothes, to these categories of people. The items are to come from in-kind and financial donations from the population—the government does not plan to spend money on the programme. According to social media reports, the platform has already faced numerous technical problems, although tens of thousands have reportedly already applied for help.

Some measures adopted by the government are facing resistance, including from state institutions. Hence, after the [Central Bank of Syria](#) (CBS) asked local banks to [freeze outstanding payments on loans for three months](#), two state banks which cater to the poorest segments of the population and state employees, the [Savings Bank](#) and the [Popular Credit Bank](#), refused to implement the decision, which forced CBS on April 07 to issue a statement saying that its measure applied to all segments of the population. As of today, the banks have reportedly not yet started to implement the measure.

To reduce overcrowding at ATMs, the CBS also instructed that salaries of state employees and of pensioners be paid through the desks of the [General Postal Establishment](#).

Besides the postponement of the payment of taxes and bank loans, the Syrian government has still not offered a clear or comprehensive economic plan to support Syrian businesses. Many of these have already closed, while others are expected to follow in the weeks and months to come. The impact on their employees—few of whom are registered with social security and can therefore claim any form of benefits—is worrying, as the government has also not announced any form of compensation for the resulting job losses.

In Syria's economy, much of the workforce works in manual jobs or at least in positions that require a physical presence; working online and from a distance is limited. In other words, stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions lead to the loss of jobs by an overwhelming segment of the population without any compensation.

Meanwhile, the value of the national currency relative to the dollar, an indicator of demand for dollars and of business sentiment, fell further this week and crossed the 1,300 mark again on April 14. Today it was traded at around 1,310 pounds per dollar.

Abroad, the U.S. Treasury sought to counter criticism on its sanctions policy. In a statement on April 09 it said that its "sanctions programs allow humanitarian aid," and that it maintains "broad exemptions and authorizations, across its sanctions programs...to ensure that U.S. sanctions do not hamper the transfer and delivery of humanitarian aid." It added that it was "prepared to issue additional guidance related to humanitarian exemptions."