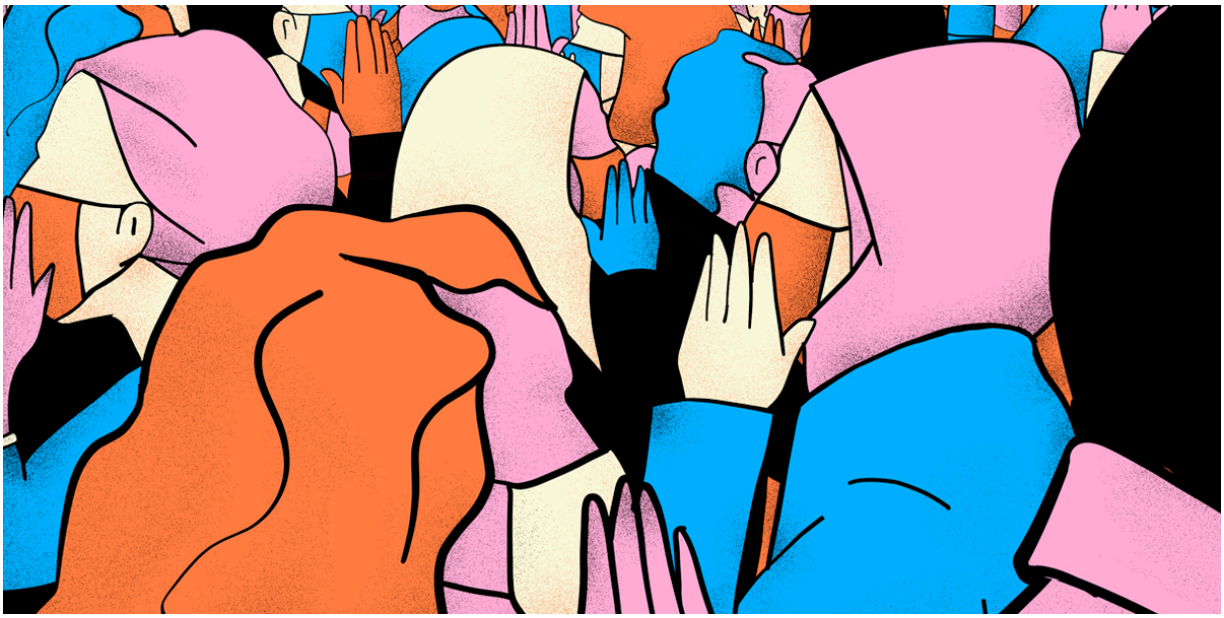
02-04-2020

Notes from Damascus’ Coronavirus lockdown

Notes from Damascus’ Coronavirus lockdown

Karam Mansour
ترجمة: Moayad Hokan



Damascus resident Karam Mansour writes a first-hand account of life in the now-empty Syrian capital, where militiamen patrol the streets, shops do business in secret, and the homeless have abruptly disappeared.

The time is 10pm. Darkness enshrouds me as I write these

words, after the last candle ran out half an hour ago. Electricity outages mean a lack of Internet, the information artery connecting me to the virtual world outside. I'm cut off from my physical surroundings, forbidden to leave my house by the curfew imposed after 6pm each day; a curfew that came after persistent official denials of any Coronavirus cases in the country. A mere three days after the last denial, the ministries of education and religious endowments suspended all schools and began closing down mosques immediately after prayer, even as the authorities continued to say there was no Covid-19 in Syria.

For days afterward, these denials continued, despite the issuance of further decisions suspending public life and attempting to ban gatherings. All restaurants and cafes in the capital were ordered to close, and many government institutions ceased operating. These measures had the effect of halting life in Damascus, which I had never before seen without its cacophony and crowds. Gradually, the decisions began slowing the pulse of the city, until another decree imposed a nightly curfew and suspended all activity except that pertaining to food and drink. The capital drowned in a silence and wariness the likes of which I had never witnessed.

Now, this silence alone roams Damascus' streets and alleys, interrupted only by the sounds of marching soldiers, armed to the teeth as though for a firefight with the virus. The curfew was imposed a few days ago, with police patrols accompanied by "National Defense" militiamen hunting down any violators. We no longer hear any noise except the conversations of these soldiers, and the barking of stray dogs that now enjoy more freedom than humans in the capital's streets.

On Facebook, people suggest ways to alleviate the boredom of being housebound. Some recommend video games, others list films and TV series and where they can be found online. All this strikes me as gratuitous luxury. The arrival of electricity ought to be put to more serious use, like following the latest decrees controlling our movement both within the home and outside it. From the room next door, my sister shouts, “Starting Sunday, people from the countryside are forbidden to enter cities!” This means that most residents of working class neighborhoods, including those from East and West Ghouta, will be unable to enter Damascus until further notice. Despite the justification given for this, on grounds of enforcing “social distancing,” I can’t help being reminded of the notion of the urban-rural binary, and the degrading treatment of people from rural areas whenever they pass through the cities.

When the electricity finally reaches our house, in a neighborhood on the fringes of Damascus, we dive into the blue ocean of Facebook to get the latest news. “1,000 dead from Coronavirus in Italy today.” My mother turns to the heavens with arms wide open: “Dear Lord, if this many are dying in developed Europe, how many will it kill when it reaches us? Dear Lord…” My mother treats the virus as though it were a hurricane, with fear and prayer her only means of confronting it.

During these nine years of slaughter in Syria, we’ve paid little attention to the numbers of victims outside our borders. Death in our country, immense and ever-present, has been our sole concern, distracting us from events and victims elsewhere. Today, though, we’ve become more connected to the outside world; the virus has made victims of us all, regardless of the country we happen to be in. The

death toll in Italy and China, and the speed of the virus' spread across Europe, only further fueled our anxieties about a possible outbreak here. We began keeping track of the numbers of cases around the world, feeling sympathy and concern for them despite our geographical separation. We received the news of the virus' spread as we used to the news of pro-regime shabbiha entering this or that Syrian town, awaiting word of the body count. Now the victims are in new locations, and the shabbiha have become a virus ravaging the entire planet, as we watch with fear and suspicion: have the Covid brigades invaded our country yet?

The curfew has given a certain sense of poetic justice to those on the run from military conscription, or hiding from the authorities for dissident political activity. Now, millions of others are undergoing the same quarantine they had already imposed upon themselves for fear of arrest.

One man I know is wanted by the military security branch, and lives in hiding and constant fear of arrest. He tells me he feels a sort of justice when he sees everyone locked away in their homes, adding he long ago grew accustomed to the boredom that others are only now feeling. As we discussed the fear of arrest, images of detainees flashed across my mind. What if the Coronavirus found its way into their cells?

Fear of the pandemic prompted Bashar al-Assad to issue a general amnesty for crimes committed before 22 March of this year, but this amnesty did not cover political detainees held in security branches, whom the regime does not recognize at all. Soon afterwards, another decree dismissed numerous senior officers and warrant officers who had been

kept on after their compulsory military service; something they had demanded for years to no avail. These measures only further fanned anxieties and questions about the extent of the virus' spread and the likelihood of a mass outbreak.

*

The authorities are hiding things. A ring of worry and suspicion encircles us like a halo. We hear contradictory reports. "Three cases discovered in al-Mujtahid Hospital!" says someone. People circulate voice notes on WhatsApp of nurses revealing the number of deaths in al-Mouwasat Hospital. Later, an official medical source denies these claims, attributing the deaths to pneumonia. The official measures; the conflicting accounts; the total lack of trust in the credibility of the regime's numbers even among loyalists; all these exacerbate our fears day by day.

Inside hospitals, it wasn't long before a circular was issued prohibiting the spread of medical information outside health centers; the taking of photos with phones; and even befriending companions of the sick, according to numerous people working in them. Regardless, fifth- and sixth-year medical students are obliged to attend their shifts at hospitals, despite the suspension of public transportation.

Many of these students arrive early in the morning, having ridden in on vegetable trucks; the only vehicles allowed into Damascus from the surrounding countryside. Some, especially those living in nearby suburbs, ride bicycles to work. Taxis now demand four times their usual fare, which

is untenable for low-income daily commuters. Cosmetic and hair removal clinics have stayed open, on condition that they be converted into health centers offering medical services. A few such centers in Damascus have done this, while those outside the capital have opted to shut their doors.

*

The quarantine imposed on us by official decrees, and the increased electricity rationing, have given us a different sense of time. The official end of the day is six o'clock in the evening, when the nightly curfew is enforced. The reduction of each day to the twelve hours in which leaving the house is possible has shifted our concept of time. The twelve hours are divided into four groups of three hours, alternating between electricity outages. Some of us leave the house daily to fetch household needs, while the rest stay at home to take advantage of the electricity, especially given the severe fuel shortages.

Our day now begins as early as the farmer's, in other words. We wake up at 6am, and schedule our itinerary according to the electricity outages. After leaving the house, I'm cautious as I walk not to touch any walls or surfaces. After years of living carefree, considering it inevitable that I'd come into contact with things throughout the day, my body has a newfound sense of centrality. I'm more aware of its boundaries, and take care not to touch anything outside them. Before, I used to fear different things: a dilapidated balcony being hit by a mortar shell and collapsing on me; a suspicious parked car detonating as I walked past; or a police patrol lurking in this or that neighborhood. Now, these fears have dwindled or been

dwarfed by the fear of Coronavirus.

The homeless are no longer seen in the streets of the capital. In the past, they flooded the city, as a result of the dire economy. They would sleep in public parks or on street corners, under filthy blankets in the best-case scenario. Once the curfew was declared, however, they vanished without a trace. The governorate of Damascus forced most of them to move to other nearby towns, while the few that remain are being cared for by charitable organizations, through the ministry of social affairs and labor.

After the closure of all shops in regime-controlled areas, except for food stores, this paralysis has reshaped many of the economic relations between buyers and sellers. Walking through al-Bahsa electronics market, or Rami Street, where they also sell electrical appliances, all the shop doors are closed. A dead quiet reigns, broken only by a few young men who look at you as though they recognize you, in order for you to start asking what you need. They conceal their identities as shop owners or employees, waiting for you to begin asking the questions. “How long will this lockdown go on? Where can I buy such-and-such?” Without fail, the answer is, “It’s available, you can have it in five minutes”—at double the price, of course.

All forms of purchase and sale are now reminiscent of the black market, or the shadow economy, where things are procured with the secrecy of hashish or narcotics. The seller has total control over the price and quality of their goods, and you as a buyer cannot protest, bargain, or even seek alternative options, with supply as limited as it is. This form of trade perfectly encapsulates the reality of Syria, where laws exist on paper but the black market is the core engine

of the economy.

My local barber has managed to get around the quarantine with a ploy he thinks is clever. He takes his appointments early in the morning, and customers pour one-by-one into his old house adjacent to his barbershop, entering through the kitchen and then into the barbershop via the rear door. Passing police patrols are led to believe the shop is closed, while in fact customers are gathered inside, drinking maté tea, smoking shisha, and getting their hair cut. Naturally, the barber doesn't fail to remind them to keep this secret to themselves.

Car mechanics have also shuttered their garages, replacing them with a bag, rather like a paramedic's. They repair vehicles inside narrow alleyways out of the police's sight. Life goes on as it did before, only now it's concealed from the authorities and two or three times more expensive.

*

I take the bus home to my suburb. We jostle when the bus arrives, as if the virus ceases to exist when one needs a seat. Those who manage to win seats grin triumphantly. The radio broadcasts threats from the government against anyone violating the curfew; meanwhile we're busy gathering the fares from all the passengers. The radio host is talking to the supreme sharia judge, Mahmoud al-Maarawi, who says that violating the government's directives is a violation of God's own law, since disobedience of a guardian is a sin. The official discourse hasn't changed one iota in fifty years, always maintaining this condescending, custodial tone. The government alone knows what's in our best interest; we the people are too

ignorant to decide for ourselves.

We pull up to a checkpoint, and the driver turns down the radio. A long queue of cars extends like a march of ants, each one passing through at a pace determined by the soldier's wave of the hand. Sometimes this hand is preoccupied with a phone call, or lighting a cigarette. At other times, the soldier inspects the IDs of drivers with license plates from Idlib or Deir al-Zor, or wastes more time crudely admiring a female bus passenger. Every one of us is hostage to this soldier's hand, the hand that decides whether or not we're allowed to move to the next area.

From the moment the campaign against Coronavirus began, the appearance of these checkpoints changed. The soldiers still don their khaki uniforms and brandish their rifles, only now they also wear masks and gloves. According to one soldier, this new medical attire is to be treated as part of the uniform, with no heed paid to the purpose it's supposed to serve: it's permissible for the mask to be worn around the neck, rather than the face, but under no circumstances may a soldier violate the decree by removing it altogether.

The soldier opens our bus door, and cracks what he imagines to be a joke: "Anyone here got Corona?" Most passengers respond with identical obliging smiles. It reminds me of the question they used to ask at checkpoints in the early days of the revolution: "Do you have Facebook?"

The bus door stays open as the soldier reaches in his pocket for a cigarette, a task made more difficult by the mandatory gloves. He lights his cigarette and blows smoke

in our faces, looks at the driver, and says, “On you go.” These words give us great comfort, as they mean no inspection or IDs, and allow us more time to get home before the curfew begins at six.

*

Speaking of Facebook, there’s much talk on it of global solidarity, tolerance, and unity, along with invitations to enjoy our time alone and the isolation imposed by the pandemic. None of this is of any comfort to Syrians, who are denied the serenity of introspection during their solitude. All the new situation has done is increase our fear and panic, not only of the virus itself, but of its calamitous effects on our daily lives and welfare. Syrians are exhausted, and the lockdown has emptied our pockets of what little we had left, leaving us facing the possibility of starvation.

Directives, videos, and official statements continue to pour in, warning against contact with other people and ordering everything to be disinfected. These are generally observed, until they reach the gates of the government-run “consumer establishment” store or a bakery. There, all quarantine standards cease to exist. Empty stomachs are deaf to medical advice, and seek only their daily sustenance before the curfew, the end of the day. Many people spend the early morning hours lined up at the consumer establishment, trying to buy products at subsidized prices and escape the inflation of private merchants. Though the establishment only provides second- or even third-rate goods, questions of quality have become a luxury to those with empty pockets, in a manner reminiscent of the 1980s, when bananas and tissue boxes

were considered opulent in Syria.

The world may be terrified of this pandemic, but people here in Syria are still more concerned about their daily livelihood. There is now real fear of destitution and hunger, given the great anxieties about the regime's ability to take the economic measures required to provide for people's daily needs, especially in light of the severe fuel shortages and collapsed local currency. The poverty of Syrians today is different from any other time in the past. Large numbers of people are entirely dependent on cash transfers and remittances from relatives abroad. Yet the whole world has now entered its own economic recession, and transferring money to Syria has become far more difficult since transfer shops closed down in response to the outbreak, depriving many of the only income source that enabled them to get by. Add to this the lack of medical equipment at public hospitals; the high cost of medical services at private ones; and the constant overcrowdedness and shortages of medicine that afflict them all. Silent fear reigns supreme in Damascus today, as the specter of death from either illness or starvation looms large.

[Editor's note: This article was originally published in Arabic on 2 April, 2020]