



How a Coronavirus Outbreak Could Add to Iran's Many Troubles

Frida Ghitis | Thursday, Feb. 27, 2020

Iran has suddenly emerged as the principal focus of global infection for coronavirus outside of China. Just in the past few days, it has reported more deaths, 26, than any country after China, where 2,744 people have died from the highly infectious disease. More worryingly, Iran has only reported 245 cases (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/world/coronavirus-news.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>) of coronavirus as of Feb. 27—far fewer than Japan or South Korea, and even Italy—but those official numbers defy belief. They would put the mortality rate in Iran at more than 10 percent, significantly higher than the rest of the world. In the central Chinese province of Hubei, for example, the epicenter of this epidemic, the reported mortality rate is estimated at 2 percent. Either Iran has a much more deadly strain, or it is lying about the numbers of infected.

Observers in and out of Iran are convinced the government is lying

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/24/world/middleeast/coronavirus-iran.html>), at great risk of a pandemic. Cases of coronavirus traced back to Iran have been identified over a wide span of the globe, from Afghanistan to Canada.

The outbreak in Iran, at the heart of the world's most unstable region, has thrown a new and potentially explosive element of uncertainty into the Middle East. Iran was already facing steep challenges at home and abroad, from domestic dissent to a regional backlash against its influence to pressure from the United States. But the regime's reaction to this public health crisis is likely to weaken its hand on all those fronts.

Iran's response to the coronavirus so far has mostly been obfuscation. The regime delayed reporting its first cases and has persisted in downplaying the extent of the virus' spread. After Iranian officials reported only a handful of cases, a member of parliament shot back that in his constituency alone, in the holy city of Qom (<https://apnews.com/32540d09ec101aac057660ef1b0aa970>), 50 people had already died. Rather than spring into action, Iran's Health Ministry rejected those figures, and Ali Shamkhani, the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, tasked the prosecutor general with investigating the lawmaker's claim. "Spreading untrue reports and hiding the truth both disrupt national security and undermine the social capital," Shamkhani declared (<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/02/25/2210897/iran-prosecutor-general-investigating-mp-s-claim-on-coronavirus-death-toll>).



People wear masks to help guard against the Coronavirus in downtown Tehran, Iran, Feb. 23, 2020 (AP photo by Ebrahim Noroozi).

Then there was the case of the deputy health minister, Iraj Harirchi, who has repeatedly minimized the crisis. He was seen coughing and sweating profusely (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51628484>) during a news conference that aired on national television. The next day, he was diagnosed with COVID-19. The video has gone, well, viral.

Harirchi, who is also deputy chief of Iran's coronavirus response operation, had given a live interview on state TV the day before his diagnosis, wiping his nose with his hand and coughing without covering his mouth—a troubling indication that, in addition to covering up the truth, the people in charge in Iran (<https://www.mediaite.com/tv/watch-iranian-deputy-health-minister-with-coronavirus-has-coughing-fit-on-live-tv/>) are not as versed in virus control as one would hope.

The sense that Iran is not telling the truth comes in the wake of massive anti-regime protests, most recently following another regime deception (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/iranians-protest-for-third-day-over-downed-airliner/2020/01/13/5b303ea6-35fa-11ea-a1ff-c48c1d59a4a1_story.html). In January, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps shot down a Ukrainian passenger plane over Tehran, shortly after an Iranian missile strike on military bases in Iraq housing U.S. troops, in retaliation for the U.S. assassination of Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani. But it took several days before the authorities admitted responsibility for downing the jet.

Disputing the regime's coronavirus figures, researchers at the University of Toronto calculate that 18,000 people in Iran could be infected (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/canadian-researchers-say-18-000-people-might-be-infected-with-coronavirus-in-iran-/30455564.html>) based on the number of people traveling out of Iran and the number of infections traced to them in other countries. Travelers from Iran have been diagnosed in Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Oman, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates and Canada.

Inside Iran, mistrust over the handling of the outbreak is pushing people to speak out and even mock the regime, including ridiculing the public health response (https://twitter.com/Mansour__Soufi/status/1232249399738339329) on social media. The medical news agency has publicly rejected government figures. Meanwhile, President Hassan Rouhani deflects (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/coronavirus-reaches-the-political-elite-in-iran-and-rouhani-talks-about-enemy-plots/30453730.html>), speaking ominously of “enemy plots” designed to sow fear and shut down the country.

The coronavirus has likely worsened conditions at home for the population and the regime, while making it harder for Tehran to flex its muscles abroad.

While other countries stopped flights to China, Iran continued them. Even now, Mahan Air (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/sanctioned-iranian-airline-continues-flights-to-china-despite-coronavirus-ban/30450163.html>), which is linked to the Revolutionary Guards, is still flying to China. In contrast, Iran's neighbors are quickly shutting down their borders with the Islamic Republic; Iraq, Turkey and Pakistan have all sealed them.

That adds to calamity for an economy that was starting to stabilize after a sharp contraction last year as a result of U.S. sanctions. After the Trump administration pulled the U.S. out of the international deal curbing Iran's nuclear program and reimposed sanctions in 2018, Iran's economy tumbled. GDP fell almost 10 percent in 2019. The

International Monetary Fund projects zero growth in 2020 (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48119109>), an improvement given the circumstances that might back up Rouhani's recent claims that Iran has ridden out "the storm." But even that is in jeopardy now, along with the income Iran derives from millions of pilgrims visiting holy sites, notably Qom, which according to the government's own figures has been the epicenter of the outbreak in Iran, magnifying its impact. Most pilgrims will now presumably stay away.

Iranian businessmen will find it much more difficult to travel to business centers such as Dubai and Abu Dhabi, and hundreds of thousands of Iranians working in the Gulf will not be visiting home for now. In addition, new jobs will be harder to come by for Iranian migrants seeking work abroad, which had helped relieve pressure on the regime over high unemployment while boosting the economy through remittances. It's no wonder the Iranian currency is plummeting.

Then there's Iran's regional influence, now facing new headwinds.

In Iraq, where massive anti-corruption protests (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28530/in-iraq-protests-pose-an-existential-challenge-to-the-political-elite>) have decried Iranian influence, the prospects of new instability stemming from Iran will do nothing to ease resentment. Some of Iraq's most powerful figures, like Moqtada al-Sadr, have close ties to Iran. Sadr, who spends much of his time in Qom, recently returned to Iraq to try and shut down the protests he had initially supported.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah fighters returning from pilgrimages to Iran are now reportedly refusing to follow quarantine instructions, claiming it's all part of an anti-Iran conspiracy (<https://twitter.com/monaalam/status/1232680977157251072>). If the virus causes more severe hardships in Lebanon, and for that matter in Iraq or elsewhere in the region, Iran could see its regional influence and credibility sharply eroded.

It's unclear what will happen to Iranian militias, Revolutionary Guards and Iran-linked soldiers of fortune traveling to armed conflicts across the wider region, from Syria to Yemen and even Afghanistan. These are all countries in various states of devastation, where the coronavirus' arrival could take a much greater human toll than in places with well-functioning health care infrastructure. As with everything related to the coronavirus, the magnitude of the impact will depend on the duration and intensity of the epidemic, which remain unknown.

When an authoritarian regime comes under pressure, it tends to tighten the screws. Reformers were already losing ground in Iran (<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/28525/ahead-of-iran-elections-reformists-are-dispirited-and-hard-liners-resurgent>) before the virus appeared. But discontent was also growing, as was the boldness of those opposing the regime. The coronavirus has put authorities in an even more negative light, likely worsening conditions at home for the population and the regime, while making it harder for Tehran to flex its muscles abroad.

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