



# Will Iran's Regime Survive Coronavirus?

March 12, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman** *National Review*

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Soaring inflation. Deepening domestic discontent. An expanding environmental crisis. Even before the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in recent weeks, the Iranian regime was struggling under the weight of domestic problems that increasingly threatened to undermine the integrity of the Islamic Republic. With the advent of COVID-19, however, matters have become much, much worse for the Iranian regime -- so much so that it isn't unreasonable to think that the Iranian regime could buckle under the weight of its own internal contradictions. That's because, for Iran's ayatollahs, coronavirus represents a true "black swan" event.

The term, popularized by the scholar Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his 2008 book of the same name, refers to an improbable occurrence that cannot be reasonably predicted, but which has profound -- and potentially catastrophic -- consequences. This is what COVID-19 is for Iran.

The problems start with the failing health of Iran's ruling class. The upper echelons of the Iranian leadership are overwhelmingly aging and infirm, and coronavirus is exacting a deadly toll on this cohort. As of March 4th, the Washington Post had documented that the disease had afflicted "about two dozen members of parliament and at least 15 other current or former top figures." That figure has expanded significantly since, as has the number of high-profile casualties within the Islamic Republic. To date, the virus is known to have claimed the lives of Mohammad Mirmohammadi, an advisor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, former deputy foreign minister Hossein Sheikholeslam, parliamentarians Mohammad Ali Ramezani Dastak and Fatimeh Rehber, and at least three other officials. More can certainly be expected in coming days.

But coronavirus has exacted an even higher political toll on the regime, because it has exposed the country's ruling clerical elite as incompetent and out-of-touch. The country is now in the throes of a profound political and health crisis. It has been brought about not only by the Iranian government's inability to contain the spread of the virus properly, but also by its complicity in covering up and minimizing its true scope.

According to Johns Hopkins University, Iran ranks third in the world -- behind only China, the origination point of the disease, and Italy -- in the number of coronavirus infections. But the number of currently reported Iranian cases of the disease (which stands at over 10,000 as of this writing) is likely a gross underestimate. Given the available data about documented cases -- including high-profile incidents of Iranian politicians being infected -- outside observers say that the real number of coronavirus cases in Iran might actually be orders of magnitude higher.

Iran's regime, of course, has done its utmost to minimize the true extent of the crisis now ravaging the country. But viral videos and social media posts of coronavirus sufferers collapsing in the streets throughout the country, and of Iranian health-care workers pleading for international assistance, have painted a very different picture to the world. Coming on the heels of the regime's last unforced political error -- the accidental January 8th downing of a Ukrainian civilian airliner in Tehran -- the Iranian government's botched response to coronavirus reinforces the point that its leaders are out-of-touch, disconnected, and simply incompetent.

But coronavirus isn't just a political challenge for Iran's ayatollahs. It's also a major blow to their ideological legitimacy. Religious centers in the country (such as the holy city of Qom) have become epicenters of infection. And the regime's exceedingly slow response to the spread of the disease in those places has further highlighted the disconnect between the country's religious establishment and the rest of its population. That's because, as Mehdi Khalaji of the Washington Institute notes, in recent years Iranian religious officials have been "uncompromisingly rejecting modern medicine and promoting 'Islamic medicine' as the true science inspired by divine knowledge." Today, that policy is having disastrous consequences on the country's overall health.

Will Iran's regime survive the current crisis intact? It might. But it is not beyond the realm of possibility to think that, before it runs its course, the coronavirus might end up accomplishing what years of Western actions could not: the collapse of the clerical regime in Tehran. It has, after all, already succeeded in demolishing the last vestiges of the regime's legitimacy.

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