



Iran's Illness Comes From Asia

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Why, exactly, has Iran been particularly hard hit by the coronavirus?

While it is far from the epicenter of the outbreak in China's Wuhan province, and even though it lacks the open borders that have aided transmission throughout Europe, Iran has nonetheless emerged as one of the countries most severely impacted by the emerging pandemic. As of March 12th, The Johns Hopkins University – which operates one of the most comprehensive online coronavirus resources publicly available – ranked Iran third in the world in the number of reported coronavirus infections. There are now estimated to be over 10,000 reported cases within the Islamic Republic, but observers – taking into account the prevalence of high-profile cases there and how many senior Iranian leaders have fallen ill – suspect there could actually be many, many more.

The causes for the internal spread of the disease are numerous, and include a slow, disorganized governmental response and deep disdain for modern medicine among the country's clerical elites. But one of the most significant causes for the current crisis stems from the regime's choice of strategic allies.

Over the last year-and-a-half, intensifying pressure from the United States has begun to seriously squeeze the Iranian economy, limiting Tehran's choice of international partners and forcing the Islamic Republic to rely more and more on its longtime geopolitical patrons, China chief among them.

Beijing, for its part, is seizing the moment. Last September, a state visit to the PRC by Iranian president Hassan Rouhani resulted in an upgrade to the 2016 strategic partnership between the two countries, and a Chinese pledge of some \$400 billion in new investment to develop Iran's energy, manufacturing and transportation sectors. And although U.S. pressure has led Beijing to curtail some of its trade with Tehran – which dropped by one-third last year, to just under \$10 billion annually – Chinese officials have made clear that they remain committed to a long term Sino-Iranian partnership.

The practical consequences of this involvement, however, have been to expose Iran – and Iranians – to significant risk. "China Railway Engineering Corp. is building a \$2.7 billion high-speed rail line through Qom. Chinese technicians have been helping refurbish a nuclear-power plant nearby. There are also Chinese religious students studying at Qom's seminaries," the *Wall Street Journal* has noted. These contacts have had concrete effects. "Iranian health officials have said the source of the outbreak is likely either Chinese workers in Qom or an Iranian businessman from Qom who travelled to China."

Iran's extensive military links with China provided another possible pathway for the pathogen as well. That's because a general ban on air travel to China issued by Iranian authorities on February 1st included a notable exception: Mahan Air, the dedicated airline of Iran's Revolutionary Guards, which was allowed to continue flying to China for nearly two weeks longer. Between February 1st and 9th, Mahan reportedly flew a total of eight additional passenger flights between the two countries, and in the month after flew a dozen cargo shipments between Iran and China. All of these potential points of contact could have served as vectors for the disease to enter the Islamic Republic.

The responsibility for the widening health crisis taking place within Iran lies squarely on the shoulders of the country's ayatollahs, who have horribly mismanaged the official response to the coronavirus to date. But the country's initial contact with the disease, as it turns out, was very likely a product of its partnership with China. It is ironic, then, that Iran's ayatollahs have tended to view that relationship as a source of strength in their policy of "heroic resistance" to the West. Because, as they are now finding out, it is a bond that has turned out to be hazardous to their health.