



Iran's coronavirus response highlights authoritarianism's dangers

March 27, 2020 **Lawrence J. Haas** *The Hill*

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With the coronavirus forcing Iran to dig mass graves for its victims, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei rejected U.S. aid offers of recent days and suggested that America “specifically built” the virus “for Iran using the genetic data of Iranians which they have obtained through different means.”

“You cannot be trusted,” Khamenei told the United States in a televised address. “If you send some doctor or healer, he might want to come here to check on the efforts of the poison you created.”

Khamenei's sentiments, which other high-ranking Iranian officials also have expressed, illustrate the danger that authoritarian regimes in general, and Tehran's mullahcracy in particular, pose to their own people and the world.

Tehran's responses to the virus — rejecting U.S. aid to help the Iranian people, siphoning off aid from other sources, spreading propaganda about what caused the virus, jailing or threatening truth-tellers, and choosing other priorities over an effective response — offer everything we need to know about the regime.

At more than 2,000 reported deaths, Iran has the fourth-highest death toll of any country from the virus, trailing only Italy, China, and Spain — though experts inside and outside Iran believe that the real total far exceeds the official figure. Earlier this month, workers were seen digging mass graves in the city of Qom. Meanwhile, researchers at Tehran's Sharif University of Technology believe that, with the outbreak expected to peak in late May, the death toll eventually could reach 3.5 million.

Nevertheless, Iran's autocratic regime has treated the outbreak as a political opportunity as much as a health crisis.

For Tehran, it's a welcome one indeed. For months, the regime was on its heels, facing an increasingly angry public that largely blamed Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) for killing some 1,500 people during protests in November and downing a Ukrainian passenger plane in January (the latter of which it admitted only after several days of pretending otherwise). Protesters have begun comparing the IRGC — an ideological army that the regime created immediately after the 1979 revolution and that reports to the Supreme Leader — to the Islamic State.

To help nourish more support from the public, the IRGC described the virus as a U.S. or Israeli plot, positioned itself as Iran's defenders, and categorized death from the virus as a form of religious martyrdom.

Beyond the rhetoric, the IRGC continues to take steps that are exacerbating the public health crisis rather than addressing it. As the virus spread from its origins in China, the IRGC-run airline, Mahan Air, kept flying to and from that nation — 55 times in February alone, the State Department reports. The IRGC also warned doctors against revealing the true size of the outbreak and eschewed social distancing efforts by sending 300,000 of its members door-to-door to promote its role.

Khamenei reinforced IRGC efforts by giving martyr status to doctors and nurses who die from the virus, naming the corps' chief of staff as head of its “medical base” to fight the virus, and labeling the unit a “biological defense exercise.”

Regime efforts to hide the magnitude of the virus's impact on Iranian society have forced truth tellers to take cover.

“Our medical staff are dying on a daily basis,” a hospital doctor in Iran's Gilan province, told the BCC, which changed his name to protect him. “I do not know how many people died but the government is trying to cover up the true scale of the crisis.”

Another hospital doctor from Golestan province estimated that perhaps 60 to 70 percent of the 300 patients who arrive each day have the virus, that only those who are critically ill are admitted due to scarce resources and that only the admitted are included in the official numbers.

Meanwhile, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has disclosed that Iranian officials stole more than \$1 billion in European aid for Iran's people affected by the crisis, using the money instead to protect themselves.

Tehran's response to the virus puts the lie to its calls for Washington to lift sanctions — sanctions that are tied to Iran's nuclear pursuits and terror-sponsoring activities — so it can get the resources to address the virus. The issue isn't sanctions. The issue is a regime with higher priorities than protecting its own people.

Like Beijing at an earlier stage of the crisis, Tehran endangered not only its own people but those outside its borders by downplaying the coronavirus outbreak, oppressing its truth-tellers, and working to buff its image. For a regime that remains unaccountable to its restive population, that's par for the course.

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