



Iran's Coronavirus Coverup

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Just how sick is Iran, really? As the coronavirus swept across the world throughout the month of March, the Islamic Republic quickly emerged as one of the key global hotspots for the disease. A month into the worldwide pandemic, however, the actual depths of the Iranian regime's coronavirus crisis remain the subject of heated debate.

To hear regime officials tell it, the country now has weathered the worst of the illness and is on track for a slow recovery. According to official statistics issued by the Iranian Health Ministry, the number of those infected with the coronavirus in the country is roughly 63,000, while the official death toll from the disease stands at more than 3,800.

On the backs of those figures, Iranian authorities have made plans to begin to reopen the national economy. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has said that "low-risk" economic activities (which the government has not yet defined) will be authorized throughout the country starting on April 11th, and in the Iranian capital of Tehran beginning a week later. Higher-risk undertakings, like the convening of classes at schools and universities as well as the staging of sporting events, could start up again as soon as April 18th.

The news, coming amid mass closures and "stay at home" orders throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas, is striking. It reflects the country's economic dire straits after nearly two years of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" strategy, which has severely impacted the Islamic Republic's financial fortunes and forced authorities to resume "business as usual" sooner than would otherwise be prudent. But it also rests, at least in part, on the official narrative being promulgated by Iranian officials regarding the coronavirus: that the disease has been limited in its impact on the Islamic Republic, and that its spread has now been contained by a coordinated, resolute regime response.

?Other figures, however, suggest that the true state of affairs is very different.

In recent days, at least one Iranian official has come forward to disclose publicly just how inaccurate the Islamic Republic's statistics truly are. In a recent interview with the official IRNA news agency, Hamid Souri, a member of Iran's official National Coronavirus Combat Taskforce, laid out that the latest estimates suggest some 500,000 Iranians may actually be suffering from the disease, and that new outbreaks are expected in hotspot regions like Tehran, Khorasan Razavi, West Azarbaijan, Bushehr, Khuzestan, Kermanshah, and Semnan. "The coronavirus curve has not flattened in any of the country's 31 provinces," Souri concluded.

The human toll from the disease also appears to be far higher than is being advertised by authorities. The controversial opposition group Mujahideen e-Khalq has begun to maintain a running tally of coronavirus casualty figures inside the country, documenting a steady surge of deaths as the disease has taken hold throughout Iran. As of April 6th, the group was estimating that the virus had claimed nearly 20,000 Iranians in 242 cities across the Islamic Republic.

If those two sets of numbers are even close to being accurate, it would mean that, contrary to popular perceptions, it is Iran that actually has the highest per capita number of coronavirus cases in the world. It would also indicate that, notwithstanding the rhetoric of regime officials and policymakers, the Islamic Republic is not actually persevering in its battle with the disease. To the contrary, the statistics suggest that the country is slowly succumbing to it, even as authorities hide the true extent of the health crisis from both the international community and their own captive population.

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