



IRAN DEMOCRACY MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Radicalism and Reform in Islamic Republic of Iran

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Islamic Extremism; Global Health; Afghanistan; Iran

IRANIAN COVID DATA LEAKED

The Iranian regime's efforts to cover up the true gravity and extent of the coronavirus crisis within the Islamic Republic have begun to unravel. The most recent revelations come from an anonymous source, who provided the BBC with information in early August corroborating the international community's suspicions that Iran is deliberately suppressing COVID-19 data. The data in question shows triple the deaths and double the infections reported publicly by the regime between January and July, with figures standing at 42,000 and 451,024 respectively. In conjunction with data suppression, the regime has sought to disseminate disinformation about the pandemic, and has regularly used security forces and state media outlets to threaten and marginalize whistleblowers on the subject. (BBC, August 3, 2020)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Though far higher than official tallies, the leaked data provided to the BBC is still likely a gross undercount of the extent of Iran's present health crisis. In mid-July, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani gave a public address in which he disclosed that, according to internal Iranian government tallies, as many as 25 million people – or close to one-third of the nation's population of nearly 85 million – had by then been infected with COVID-19, and some 70,000 had died as a result.]

IRAN EYES AMERICA'S ELECTIONS...

President Trump has waxed optimistic in recent days that his administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran will inevitably force the country's rulers back to the international negotiating table. Iranian leaders, however, have rejected the idea, citing distinctly political reasons. In a televised address on August 1st, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei vowed to continue forging ahead with the country's nuclear program, and ruled out the possibility of compromise with Washington – at least in the near term. "He [Trump] is going to benefit from negotiations," Khamenei explained in his televised remarks. The concern, Khamenei made clear, was that any new talks with Iran would be used by the administration "as propaganda" to bolster its international standing – much the same way that President Trump's previous summit diplomacy with North Korean Kim Jong-un had done. (*New York Times*, August 1, 2020)

...AND WORKS AGAINST "MAXIMUM PRESSURE"

A new assessment released in early August by the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, which is tasked with monitoring election security in the run-up to November's polls, notes that Iran is working actively to prevent a second term for President Trump – and thereby avoid a continuation of "maximum pressure." "We assess that Iran seeks to undermine U.S. democratic institutions, President Trump, and to divide the country in advance of the 2020 elections," the statement issued by NCSC director William Evanina reads. "Iran's efforts along these lines probably will focus on on-line influence, such as spreading disinformation on social media and recirculating anti-U.S. content. Tehran's motivation to conduct such activities is, in part, driven by a perception that President Trump's reelection would result in a continuation of U.S. pressure on Iran in an effort to foment regime change." (*CNN*, August 7, 2020)

MORE IRANIAN CYBER-MISCHIEF

An Iranian hacker crew has been found surveilling the online activity and social media profiles of American officials, IBM researchers say. Among the officials targeted by the group, which has been dubbed "Charming Kitten," were policymakers in the U.S. Navy and the State Department. Analysts expressed concern at the speed with which these hackers were able to "siphon data" – something they say indicates that "Charming Kitten" was likely "a large, well-resourced unit of the Iranian government." According to Google's security team, "Charming Kitten" has also attempted to break into the Gmail accounts of President Trump's campaign staff in the past. (*Forbes*, July 16, 2020)

TEHRAN TARGETS AMERICAN TROOPS

U.S. intelligence agencies have assessed that the Iranian regime is responsible for paying bounties to insurgent fighters in Afghanistan to target U.S. and allied troops there. In the past year, such payments have been linked with at least six attacks against coalition forces - including a major suicide bombing at Baghram air base in December. The bounties are said to have been paid to the Haqqani Network, a Sunni militant outfit closely linked to the Taliban, the Pentagon has disclosed. The revelation potentially complicates the Trump administration's ongoing dialogue with the Taliban, with whom the White House signed a truce back in February as part of plans to draw down U.S. forces in the country. (*CNN*, August 17, 2020)