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Related Categories: Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Islamic Extremism; Global Health; Iran

FEAR AND LOATHING (OF WESTERN VACCINES) IN IRAN

Even though Iran has emerged as the Middle Eastern nation hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic, its leaders are loath to avail themselves of Western remedies. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has declared that Iran would not accept imported COVID vaccines from either the U.S. or the UK. "Imports of U.S. and British vaccines into the country are forbidden... They're completely untrustworthy," Khamenei said in a recent televised statement. "It's not unlikely they [the U.S. and UK] would want to contaminate other nations." (*Guardian*, January 8, 2021)

IRAN AS LABORATORY

Instead of relying on Western remedies, Tehran is increasingly turning to anti-COVID measures being proffered by its strategic partners. Cuba, for instance, has signed an agreement pledging to transfer COVID vaccine technology to Iran and conduct clinical trials of its own vaccine inside the Islamic Republic. Havana's comparatively easy brush with the pandemic stands in stark contrast with Tehran's experience, and has created a marriage of convenience by which Cuba has found a receptive audience on which to test its most promising developmental vaccine, known as Soberna 2. The resulting deal between the two countries marks one of the most significant agreements on vaccine collaboration for either nation. (Reuters, January 9, 2021; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 10, 2021)

IRAN CAPITALIZES ON U.S. POLITICAL UNREST

The unrest that buffeted the United States in early January was watched closely by foreign governments, in particular those hostile to America and its political system. Iran was among them, and its leaders wasted no time in trying to use the events of January 6th - in which supporters of President Trump breached the U.S. Capitol building in what was widely seen as an act of insurrection - to try and discredit American ideas and ideals. The rioting "shows above all how fragile and vulnerable Western democracy is," Iranian President Hassan Rouhani argued in a speech that was broadcast by state television. "We saw that unfortunately the ground is fertile for populism, despite the advances in science and industry."

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was even more explicit. Commenting on social media platform Twitter - which, ironically, is blocked within Iran itself - Khamenei noted that "U.S. and American 'values' are ridiculed even by their friends," and termed the unrest to be "God's revenge" on the United States for its meddling in the Middle East. (*France24*, January 7, 2021; *Daily Mail*, January 8, 2021)

DESTITUTE IN TEHRAN

Despite the brave face that its leaders have presented to the world, economic conditions within the Islamic Republic have deteriorated precipitously over the past year, thanks to U.S. pressure as well as domestic mismanagement. Over the past three years, the number of Iranians in extreme poverty has increased five-fold, observers say, with millions more joining their ranks in 2020. The trend has been exacerbated by runaway inflation and the rising cost of staple goods and foodstuffs, which have soared beyond the ability of ordinary Iranians to pay for them, with ruinous consequences.

"More than 60 percent of Iranian society live [sic] in relative poverty because the workers' wages are enough for about a third of their costs of living," Faramarz Tofighi, head of the wages committee of the Islamic Labour Council, tells the *Financial Times*. "Half of those who live below the poverty line struggle with extreme poverty." The problem is an acute one for the Iranian regime - and holds potentially far-reaching consequences for domestic stability. "After the pandemic, if the Islamic Republic cannot curb poverty, it could face political and social instability," explains Iranian economist Saeed Laylaz. (*Financial Times*, January 25, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The grim situation detailed above is a major contributing factor to the Iranian regime's eagerness for renewed dialogue and negotiations with the Biden administration. The original 2015 agreement concluded between Iran and the P5+1 powers (the U.S., UK, Russia, China, France and Germany) included a significant relaxation of international sanctions, as well as massive direct infusions of cash that helped to stabilize the Islamic Republic's economy - a state of affairs that Iran's leaders doubtless hope to replicate.]

