



Ideology Is Making Iran Even Sicker

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A year into the coronavirus, the progression of the disease in the Middle East is decidedly mixed. Some countries, such the nations of the GCC, have weathered the pandemic comparatively well as a result of what scholars have termed "authoritarian management." Other nations, however, have been profoundly ravaged by the illness.

Of those, Iran has been the most deeply affected. According to official statistics, more than 1.2 million of its roughly 85 million citizens have fallen ill from the disease, and some 56,000 have died from it. Unofficially, however, the situation appears to be much, much worse – with multiple millions infected and perhaps as many as 209,000 casualties, equivalent to 0.25% of the country's population.

The causes of the Islamic Republic's illness are numerous. They range from a disdain for modern medicine among the country's clerical elite to the Iranian regime's extensive cooperation with China, the original source of global infection. Yet, instead of pursuing all possible remedies, Iranian officials are sticking to their ideological guns – even if it helps make their country sicker.

Thus, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei recently declared that Iran would not accept imported COVID vaccines from either the United States or the United Kingdom. "Imports of U.S. and British vaccines into the country are forbidden... They're completely untrustworthy," Khamenei said in a televised statement in early January. "It's not unlikely they would want to contaminate other nations."

Instead of relying on Western remedies, the Iranian regime is increasingly turning to its strategic partners for help in fighting the virus.

One of them is Cuba. Tehran and Havana recently signed an agreement under which Cuba pledged to transfer its most advanced COVID vaccine technology to Iran. As part of the arrangement, Iran gave permission for Cuba to conduct late-stage clinical trials of its most promising vaccine, known as Soberna 2, within the Islamic Republic.

Iran has also approved the use of Russia's controversial COVID-19 vaccine, Sputnik V, and intends to both import and produce it in coming months. "The Sputnik V vaccine was yesterday also registered and approved by our health authorities," Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif confirmed in late January. "In the near future, we hope to be able to purchase it, as well as start joint production."

That, however, isn't likely to significantly change the state of the health crisis within Iran. Although Sputnik V was rushed to market, the Kremlin has made it a central prong of its diplomacy during the pandemic, with significant success. Numerous nations around the world have decided to adopt the treatment – so many, in fact, that in order to make good on its commitments, Russia has been forced to produce a diluted variant of its vaccine for international export. The result, dubbed "Sputnik Light," will be administered in a single dose and offer only temporary immunity for those who receive it.

To their credit, Iran's more technocratically-minded officials grasp that reliance on these subpar remedies falls far short of a serious solution to their problem. That's why Iran's top epidemiologist has confirmed plans to import COVID-19 vaccines from pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca, which he and others describe as a "Swedish company" (and therefore not subject to Khamenei's ideological restrictions). But Iranian health officials, desperately trying to reverse the tide of infection within the Islamic Republic, are undeniably still hampered by clerical mandate from receiving the most effective treatments by which to combat the pandemic.

Years from now, when historians carry out a full accounting of the pandemic, a great deal of blame will be assigned to China for its far-reaching campaign of disinformation surrounding the origins and spread of the virus. Nations (like Russia) who have attempted to steal vaccine data and otherwise compromise the race for treatments will likewise be found to have been culpable, too.

In the case of Iran, however, its already clear that the principal culprit for the country's misery isn't an external force. Rather, the regime's official ideology and anti-Western orientation are primarily responsible for just how deeply the country is being ravaged by the pandemic, and why proper answers to it remain so elusive.