



Iran Democracy Monitor No. 220

October 4, 2021 Ilan I. Berman, Cody Retherford, Tania Del Moral

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IRAN'S REGIME CONTINUES TO STRUGGLE WITH COVID...

The coronavirus crisis in Iran continues to worsen, exacerbated by leadership failures and disastrous political choices on the part of the Iranian regime. Last year, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, banned the import of U.S. or British vaccines - forcing the country's health professionals to rely on Russian and Chinese remedies of dubious efficacy as part of their national response to the pandemic. Vaccination has also lagged within the Islamic Republic, and as of August just five million out of Iran's population of nearly 85 million had received both doses of some type of vaccine. Mortality rates relating to the pandemic, meanwhile, remain high - but accurate tallies are difficult, because Iranian authorities have obscured statistics by only recording COVID-19 deaths when there has been a positive PCR test. In addition, human rights lawyers and activists have been persecuted for criticizing the shortage of medicine and hospital beds.

Regime officials have blamed the country's pandemic woes on the West, but the claim does not stand up to scrutiny. Although Iran continues to face an array of financial sanctions, the U.S. has issued exemptions for the purchase of vaccines, tests, ventilators, oxygen tanks, and other humanitarian supplies. Iran's regime, however, has lagged in doing so. The Islamic Republic's current plan is to release its own vaccine – called COVIran Barekat – and produce 50 million doses of the treatment by this Fall. However, there is reason to believe that this timeline will slip, perhaps substantially so. (Human Rights Watch, August 19, 2021)

...AND BACKTRACKS ON WESTERN VACCINE BAN

Facing the specter of a fifth COVID wave, the Islamic Republic is rolling back clerical restrictions on the acquisition of Western vaccines. Some eight months after Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ruled out the use of Western jabs to treat the pandemic for Iranian citizens, the newly-inaugurated government of President Ebrahim Raisi is quietly moving to do just that. In mid-September, the head of Iran's Food and Drug Administration, Mohammad Reza Shanehsaz, announced publicly that the one-dose vaccine developed by New Jersey-based multinational Johnson & Johnson had been approved for use within Iran. (Reuters, September 16, 2021)

IRANIAN-SAUDI RECONCILIATION INCHES FORWARD... OR DOES IT?

Despite a history of geopolitical tensions, officials in Tehran are waxing optimistic about the prospects for reconciliation between their country and regional rival Saudi Arabia. Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh has claimed that the two countries have made "remarkable progress" on issues relating to Gulf security since talks began earlier this year. Meanwhile, last month's UN General Assembly gathering in New York provided a venue for those talks to progress further - as well as to expand to involve other regional players. Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian is said to have met on the sidelines of UNGA with the "foreign ministers and senior representatives" of Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and France, as well as the European Union, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Officials in Riyadh, however, are singing a decidedly more subdued tune about the prospects for a lessening of tensions with Tehran. Talks between the Kingdom and the Islamic Republic to date have been strictly "exploratory" in nature, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud has told reporters. (Reuters, September 22, 2021; Al-Monitor, September 23, 2021; Bloomberg, October 3, 2021)

A WARNING OVER IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRESS

The IAEA's latest verification and monitoring report regarding Iran's nuclear program has yielded some alarming developments regarding the Islamic Republic's nuclear maturity, a leading nonproliferation think tank has assessed. According to the Institute for Science & International Security (ISIS), the IAEA report notes the UN agency's declining confidence in its ability to monitor Iran's nuclear progress as a result of consistent obfuscation and denial of access on the part of the Iranian regime. Nevertheless, the assessment notes, the IAEA has managed to put together a sobering picture of an Iranian nuclear program of significant maturity. Among its other findings, the agency has concluded that Iran now "has enough enriched uranium hexafluoride... to produce weapon-grade uranium (WGU) for over two nuclear weapons," and that "[a] worst-case breakout estimate, which is defined as the time required to produce enough WGU for one nuclear weapon, is [now] as short as one month." (Institute for Science & International Security, September 13, 2021)

