

# Khamenei Rejects Offer of American Help with Coronavirus (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Iran refuses to accept the offer of American medical and humanitarian aid. Ayatollah Khomeini finds such an offer “strange.” Perhaps the Americans want to poison the Iranians. Or make it impossible for them to shake off the effects of the coronavirus. They must be up to something. Such kindness from the Great Satan makes no sense.

Iran is trying to exploit the coronavirus outbreak to persuade the Americans to remove the sanctions. It behaves as if it has no other way of raising money to fight the virus, no expenses it could cut down on. But the Trump Administration knows how much Iran has been spending on its foreign adventurism and its

nuclear program, and is not about to fall for Tehran's poor-mouthing.

*China, a party to Iran's nuclear deal, has urged the United States to lift sanctions on Iran immediately amid Tehran's response to the coronavirus outbreak.*

China was a good customer for Iran, and still buys what Iranian oil it can, but the Americans have placed sanctions on several Chinese firms that have been buying Iranian petrochemicals, and the Chinese would much prefer for America to lift its sanctions on Iran so that they need not worry any more about Washington's reaction to such purchases.

*But the United States sent Iran a blunt message this week: the spread of the virus will not save it from US sanctions that are choking off its oil revenues and isolating its economy.*

The sanctions are designed to pressure Iran to do two things. First, they are intended to pressure Iran to end the military and financial support it gives to proxies and allies abroad in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Second, the sanctions are meant to persuade Iran to halt its nuclear program. It's up to Iran to decide: does it want to continue spending billions on its foreign adventurism and its nuclear program, or does it want to spend those billions instead on medical care, which is what a reordering of Iran's priorities, leading to a lifting of sanctions, would immediately make possible?

*Khamenei, who canceled his annual speech for the Persian new year from the holy Shi'ite Muslim city of Mashhad on March 20 because of the outbreak, said Iran would triumph over the virus.*

*"The Islamic Republic has the capability to overcome any kind of crisis and challenges, including the coronavirus*

*outbreak,” said Khamenei, who called on people to stay at home.*

An extraordinarily foolish and dangerous remark. Such bluster – that the “Islamic Republic has the capability to overcome any kind of crisis” – does not convey the sense of alarm that is merited, especially since Iranians have until now been far too blasé. They have been ignoring the need to maintain social distances. They still can be seen walking together on the streets, celebrating the Nowruz holiday in large groups, and continuing to flock to mosques. Khamenei should have spoken in a much more somber tone, even berated the Iranian public for having defied warnings by officials, as they continue to congregate, take non-essential trips, and refuse to observe the six-foot rule for social distancing.

*While many Iranians avoided traveling during the Persian new year holiday, police said millions have defied warnings issued by officials to avoid unnecessary trips aimed at curbing the spread of the virus.*

*The office of Tehran’s governor said all shopping centers will be closed in the capital from Sunday.*

*“Only pharmacies and shops that provide essential goods will remain open in Tehran,” Iranian state TV reported.*

The Americans should leave that “strange” offer for medical and humanitarian aid on the table, to be accepted whenever – and if ever – the Iranian rulers come to their senses. Washington might also direct a message over the heads of their rulers to the Iranian people:

“We stand ready to help you today, and tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow. That does not depend on any change in your government’s behavior. But you can also put yourselves in a much better position to combat the coronavirus. As soon as

your government stops sending vast amounts of weapons and money to Houthis in Yemen, to militias in Iraq, to Hezbollah in Lebanon, to Assad's army in Syria, and calls a halt to its nuclear program, all our sanctions will be lifted. Your oil sales will return to the level they were at in 2015. And vaster still will be the sums that your government will have saved, by no longer supporting military adventures abroad, but instead applying those sums at home to treat those already infected with, and to prevent the spread still further of, the coronavirus. It's the greatest world-wide health crisis since the flu pandemic of 1918. It knows no borders. It plays no favorites. We are truly in this together."

First published in