

# Popular Distrust of the Government In Iran Just Keeps Growing (Part 1)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Iran's government has made a series of errors recently that have decreased further still the already waning trust of its own people. First, when Qassem Soleimani was killed by the Americans, Iran immediately promised that the U.S. would pay; the retaliation would be a "harsh revenge" against the "criminals" responsible for Soleimani's death. But there was no "harsh revenge"; two bases inside Iraq where Americans were stationed were hit by a dozen ballistic missiles (four others misfired). Iran's government claimed it had killed "80 American terrorists." In fact, no Americans were killed, though more than a hundred soldiers suffered TBIs, or traumatic brain injuries. Iran continues nonetheless to claim that "80 American terrorists" had been killed, and its refusal to tell the truth dismayed many in Iran who, on the Internet, easily uncovered the lie.

The next incident that showed the Iranian government's confusion and incompetence was the shooting down of the Ukrainian passenger plane. For three days, Iran's military lied to the public, denying that the airplane had been hit by a missile, and claimed that a technical error was responsible. Then, on January 11, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps admitted that they had shot down the aircraft after mistaking it for a cruise missile.

Thus the Iranian government, and its military, were shown to be variously incompetent. First, the government itself appeared to believe, and passed on, the initial lie by its military about an unspecified "technical error." Or perhaps it knew the truth, but went along with the military's version – it's hard to say which was worse. Second, Iran's military had been unable to distinguish a passenger plane from a cruise missile, demonstrating another kind of incompetence. Third, it was folly for Iran not to have closed its airspace after having launched its missiles at American bases in Iraq. For it no doubt expected another retaliatory strike by the Americans, and the military would have been on the alert to shoot down anything suspicious flying over Tehran which, as we now know, is exactly what it did.

It was because of this possibility of hitting a passenger jet that General Amir Ali Hajizadeh said a request had been made for a no-fly zone before the incident, but this request was rejected. Later, the New York Times reported that Iranian officials had feared that shutting down the airport would create mass panic among Iranians, who might fear that war with the United States was imminent, and they also hoped that the presence of passenger jets could act as a deterrent against an American attack on the airport or a nearby military base, effectively turning planeloads of unsuspecting travelers into human shields.

The public expressed its fury in demonstrations against both the military and the civilian government. Crowds around Iran

protested, focusing on the country's leadership, with signs saying "Death to the dictator" (meaning Ayatollah Khamenei). Video posted to social media showed people chanting, "They are lying that our enemy is America – our enemy is right here."

The third example of the Iranian government's nonsense and lies can be seen in its handling of the coronavirus at a time when Iran had the second highest number of cases, after China, in the world. Yet the Iranian government did not immediately close schools and universities, did not end Friday Prayers, did not impose a travel ban into or out of Iran, did not distribute diagnostic test kits or face masks – in short, did none of the things that China had done to limit the spread of the virus. The government even rejected mandatory quarantine for those affected. This policy of no-quarantine was put in place by Iraj Harirchi, the Deputy Health Minister, who himself came down – poetic justice – with the coronavirus.

Long after it was known that more than a thousand Iranians had been infected, the government continued to claim that there were only 246 infected, and 26 dead. That makes no sense, for it suggests that one in ten cases is fatal. Yet everywhere outside Iran, the ratio of cases to fatalities is one in 50. Even if we were to accept the Iranian figure for fatalities, that would mean there are 1300 cases so far. The government continues to refuse to recognize the real number, which is by now more than 97,424 infected, and 6,203 dead. This is [nearly double](#) what the Iranian government has reported. But the Iranian people, having lost all confidence in their government, don't believe anything they are now told officially about the coronavirus; they are going to the Internet to uncover the truth.

Another sign of the government's incompetence is the fact that seven senior members of Iran's government, including those assigned to curbing the spread of the corona virus, have themselves come down with it; they may even have infected President Rouhani.

An early story of Iran's failure to deal with the crisis is [here](#).

*A senior figure in Iran's government, who sits just a few seats away from President Hassan Rouhani at cabinet meetings, has fallen ill with coronavirus, making her Iran's seventh official to test positive, including one prominent cleric who has died.*

*Vice President Masoumeh Ebtekar, Mr. Rouhani's deputy for women's affairs and the highest-ranking woman in the government, has a confirmed coronavirus infection and is quarantined at home, her deputy said Thursday.*

*The disclosure came a day after a cabinet meeting in which she was in close contact with other government leaders, including Mr. Rouhani. A photo posted by a BBC Persia reporter on Twitter showed she had been sitting a few yards from the president.*

*Ms. Ebtekar, one of four vice presidents, was known to Americans as "Mary" during the Tehran hostage crisis four decades ago, when, as a young revolutionary, she was a spokeswoman for the captors of the 52 Americans held at the United States Embassy.*

In fact, even at that time, the BBC Persian Service, which is highly regarded for the proven reliability of its sources inside Iran, said that there had been not 26, but at least 210 deaths in Iran. That would mean there were 10,500 cases of coronavirus in Iran even then. Other sources inside Iran suggested the figure might be much higher, especially in rural areas where there were only government officials, determined to downplay the crisis, to rely on.

*Besides Ms. Ebtekar, the other Iranian officials infected include: Mojtaba Zolnour, a member of Parliament from Qom and head of Parliament's national security and foreign policy*

*committee; Mahmoud Sadeghi, an outspoken member of Parliament from Tehran; Iraj Harirchi, the deputy health minister who had been leading the effort to contain the coronavirus; Morteza Rahmanzadeh, the mayor of a Tehran district; Dr. Mohamad Reza Ghadir, head of coronavirus management in Qom and director of the city's state medical university, and Hadi Khosroshahi, a prominent cleric and former ambassador to the Vatican.*

*Mr. Khosroshahi, 81, died, Iran's official media reported. Elham Sheikhi, a professional athlete and member of the women's national soccer team in her early 20s, also died after contracting the illness.*

Most dramatic was the appearance of Deputy Minister Iraj Harichi on a televised broadcast, meant to reassure the Iranian people that the government was in charge and knew what needed to be done. Instead, viewers saw Mr. Harichi, repeatedly mopping the sweat off his face, caused by the corona virus, which the government later confirmed. Thus did Iranians understandably panic at the sight of the person in charge of containing the coronavirus having caught it himself.

*Despite earlier claims by the Iranian authorities that the coronavirus risk is under control and that its extent has been exaggerated by enemy propaganda to sow panic, they finally canceled Friday Prayers in Tehran and 22 other cities, and ordered schools and universities closed until the end of the Iranian year on March 21. All cultural and sports events will remain shut down for another week, the Ministry of Culture said.*

Too little, too late, the Iranians are surely thinking. Why didn't the government shut down schools and universities, Friday Prayers, and cultural and sports events, as soon as the cases reached the double digits? The government has not explained its reasoning. And how could it predict whether or

not the number of new cases will remain about the same, or skyrocket (as now seems likely), or drop off to nothing? It has not given the public any reason to trust it. As for the claim that the extent of the coronavirus has been exaggerated "by enemy propaganda," it is not "enemies" (America, Israel, the Infidel West) but Iranian doctors who have been providing the real figures that Iran's officials refuse to supply. Even now, with each new government announcement of an increase cases of the virus – announcements that are consistently far behind the real figures – the government keeps referring to "enemy propaganda," a charge that no Iranian of sense believes and that brings the Iranian regime into ever greater disrepute.

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