

Popular Distrust of the Government In Iran Just Keeps Growing (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



While the numbers of coronavirus cases in Iran steadily increases, the government's response has been grossly inadequate for the task at hand. And the public knows it, because it can find out online what China has done, what Italy has done, what South Korea has done.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman, Seyed Abbas Mousavi, said Iran would receive 20,000 coronavirus test kits from China on Friday (February 28), transported via Mahan Air, an Iranian carrier that is still flying between China and Iran.

If Iran already has more than 10,000 cases of coronavirus, how far did they think 20,000 test kits would go to diagnose and protect a population of 80 million people? And why were those test kits being supplied to Iran so long after the crisis began? What took Tehran so long to order them?

In a further sign that the authorities are taking the contagion threat more seriously, Iranian state media reported that Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had met with top medical officials on Thursday, wished them success in this "difficult and momentous task," and expressed hope that "the malicious virus will be uprooted as soon as possible."

So the man at the top, Ayatollah Khamenei, the man most responsible for the government's late and woefully inadequate

response to the health crisis, wished “success” to his medical officials. That must have made 80 million Iranians feel better already.

Ali Ebrazeh, a deputy health official in Qom, said the city was prepared to create a field hospital and that the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and army would erect hospitals there if the number of patients increases.

“If health precautions are not followed in Qom, we will end up needing 2-3,000 more hospital beds,” Mr. Ebrazeh was quoted by BBC Persia as saying.

The coronavirus hit Iran as the country of 80 million is suffering its most serious economic problems in many years, at least partly attributable to American sanctions that have choked Iran’s ability to sell oil and conduct international banking.

The mixed messaging from the Iranian government on the coronavirus could further worsen its credibility problems inside the country, where anger has simmered over a deadly crackdown on economic protests in November and an attempt to cover up the accidental downing of a Ukrainian jetliner in Teheran this January.

“The government appears unable to grasp the scope or severity of the coronavirus outbreak,” the Eurasia Group, a political risk consultancy, said in an emailed advisory to clients this week.

The advisory, written by Henry Rome, the group’s Iran specialist, and Scott Rosenstein, its global health adviser, said Mr. Khamenei and his subordinates “are probably unwilling to take decisive steps that could unsettle a population already under extreme pressure from U.S. sanctions.”

It would certainly help raise, ever so slightly, from rock bottom the public's confidence in the Iranian government if it were to do the simple obvious things that should have already been done. The city of Qom, for example, ought weeks ago to have been placed under quarantine, just as the Chinese did so quickly with all of Wuhan Province. That has still not been done, even though Shia from all over the world have been studying in seminaries in Qom and been returning home. It has been confirmed that the virus has been transmitted from Iran to Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Azerbaijan. And yet Qom remains wide open, apparently because to close it down, in the government's view, would "cause the public to panic." Doesn't it realize the Iranian public has gone through quite enough to make it panic? What panicked the whole country was the sight, on television, of the Deputy Health Minister, who has been in charge of dealing with the coronavirus, sweating and repeatedly wiping his brow, revealing that he was himself a victim. What panicked the country was the continued refusal to admit to the real numbers of infected and dead. What panicked the country was the conviction that the government was – once again – hopelessly incompetent.

The Iranian government lied to the public about the devastation it supposedly wrought on the Americans as a response to the killing of Qassem Soleimani, claiming "80 American terrorists" had been killed long after the world knew there had been not a single American death. Iran's military first lied about why the Ukrainian passenger jet went down, and then displayed its own incompetence in having mistaken the jet for a cruise missile, and finally, the public heaped scorn on Iran's government for its disastrous decision not to declare a "no-fly zone" over Tehran which would have prevented the flight, and the downing, of the Ukrainian plane. Finally, the government's repeated lying about the number of coronavirus victims, its failure to take adequate measures to contain it, and its continued insistence that "enemies" including Donald Trump, have been responsible for the outbreak

in Iran, have left many despairing Iranians hopeful about only one thing: that because of its mishandling of the corona virus epidemic, their government is hammering the last nails into its own coffin.

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