

Rouhani Blames U.S. Sanctions For Iran's Coronavirus Woes

by Hugh Fitzgerald



After China and Italy, Iran is the country hardest hit by the coronavirus. It has reported, as of mid-March, over 12,600 cases and 620 deaths; many in Iran believe the official figures grossly understate the real numbers, and they note that the government has built gigantic pits large enough to bury many thousands. Unsurprisingly, the failures of Iran's government to adequately deal with its own outbreak has been blamed on the Great Satan, the United States.

The story is [here](#).

President Hassan Rouhani has written to other world leaders, claiming that Iran's campaign against the coronavirus was being "severely hampered" by US sanctions

State media said Rouhani wrote to a number of world leaders, without naming them.

In (a) letter to counterparts @HassanRouhani informs how efforts to fight #COVID19 pandemic in Iran have been severely hampered by US sanctions, urging them to cease observing them," Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Twitter.

"It is IMMORAL to let a bully kill innocents," Zarif said.

The American sanctions on Iran would halt overnight if Iran simply stopped its aggressive behavior in the region. The most recent set of sanctions were imposed because of the continued support by the government for the IRGC, which had been formally declared by the U.S. to be a "terrorist organization." Other actions that prompted sanctions were Iran's attack on Saudi oil installations, and before that, attacks by Iran's navy on two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman. Iranian support for the Houthi rebels in Yemen, for Shi'a militias in Iraq, for Syria's Assad, and for Hezbollah, have together prompted the re-imposition of sanctions, that had been removed under Obama, by the Trump Administration. It is Iran that has prompted the American sanctions of which it now so bitterly complains, and which it could have quickly removed if it were to stop its insensate aggressions in the Middle East.

Contrary to Foreign Minister Zarif, the American government is not "killing innocents." The innocents who have been dying in Iran owe that outcome to the colossal mismanagement of the coronavirus outbreak by the government. It was the Iranian government that belittled the seriousness of the outbreak, that failed to reveal the real figures, as to both cases and resulting deaths, in the belief, apparently, that it did not want to unduly alarm the Iranian public or to make it think it, the government, was incompetent. But as the real figures

came out, having been obtained by nonofficial sources directly from Iranian hospitals, and these figures were much higher than those the government had released, the Iranian public became panicky, realizing that their own government was not to be trusted. The Islamic regime could have prevented that panic, born of mistrust, had it been truthful all along with its statistics.

Another source of Iran's mishandling of its coronavirus epidemic were the remarks from its leaders that were meant to comfort people, by dismissing the seriousness of the contagion. Several Iranian leaders insisted that the virus would not appear in Iran at all, but remain in China. When it did appear, and even after 77 deaths had officially been announced, **Ayatollah Khomeini announced on March 3 that the coronavirus was "not that big of a deal" and that there had been worse outbreaks – though he did not specify them – in the past.** Such an irresponsible dismissal by Iran's Supreme Leader prevented the government from instituting the draconian shutdowns that China, and now Italy, France, and Spain, have engaged in. That would mean placing all entering travelers in 14-day quarantines, closing schools, as well as all non-essential workplaces, and all public gatherings, including sports events and concerts, where more than 250 (and in some cases 150) people would likely congregate. All stores and restaurants would have to be closed (as in Italy and France) closed, except for pharmacies and some grocery stores. None of these measures has yet been adopted in Iran, though it should be obvious by now that these are indispensable to slowing down the spread of the virus, in the hope that it will not overwhelm the health system, for as of now the number of ICU and regular beds available, as well as the number of test kits and respirators, and the medical personnel trained to treat such patients, are all completely insufficient to deal with an unprecedented pandemic such as we have at present with the coronavirus.

France and Spain joined Italy in imposing lockdowns on tens of millions of people, Australia ordered self-isolation of arriving foreigners...

Iran, the worst-affected country in the Middle East, said on Thursday it had asked the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for \$5 billion in emergency funding to combat the coronavirus outbreak.

Iran doesn't need more money from the IMF; it can find the money it needs to combat the coronavirus outbreak in its own coffers, if it ceases to pay for building military bases in Syria, stops subsidizing the Houthi rebels in Yemen and the Shi'a militias in Iraq, and ends its payments to Hezbollah in Lebanon. It's Iran's choice.

The escalating outbreak has damaged Iranian businesses and is bound to hit its non-oil exports after many neighboring countries and trade partners shut their borders.

A Health Ministry official, cited by TV on Saturday, put the total number of infections in the country at 12,729.

Tehran governor general Anoushirvan Mohseni-Bandpey denied that officials were planning a lockdown in the capital, state TV reported, after people posted messages on social media saying that residents would not be allowed to leave their homes from Sunday.

Tehran's governor-general rejected any rumor about a lockdown in Tehran as a 'big lie,'" state television said in a news flash.

Working hours in government offices would not be changed in the next few days and large supermarkets would extend their business hours, Mohseni-Bandpey was quoted as saying by the TV.

So unlike China, Italy, and France, as of now there will be no total lockdown in Tehran or anywhere else in Iran. Even though all health authorities agree that such draconian measures are the only way to halt the spread of the coronavirus, the Iranians refuse to close things down. It is particularly important that lockdowns be imposed in countries with the largest number of cases and deaths. Iran has the third largest number of cases, and of deaths, after China and Italy.

Health Minister Saeed Namaki earlier said that officials had approved plans to set up screening stations outside a number of cities.

Officials have expressed concern about the possibility of infections spreading during Nowruz, the Iranian new year starting on March 20, which is usually a period when families travel to vacation spots around the country.

On Friday, state media said security forces would empty the streets of cities across Iran within a day in a drive to fight the spread of the virus, after officials repeatedly complained that many Iranians have ignored calls to stay home and avoid travel.

Iran's economy was already battered by US sanctions that curb oil and gas exports crucial for government revenues. A slowdown in economic activity caused by the virus outbreak and a sustained closure of its borders are expected to lead to a contraction this year, analysts have said.

US President Donald Trump reimposed sanctions on vital Iranian sectors including oil after withdrawing the United States from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal with six world powers.

Trump has said he hopes the sanctions will limit Tehran's ballistic missile program and imperialism across the Middle East. Tehran says its nuclear program is peaceful and its missiles are for deterrence and defensive purposes.

It is only now, nearly a month after it should have taken the step, that Iran's security services will "empty the streets of cities" throughout the country; it's still unclear if that means all the cities, or only those that have reported a certain number of coronavirus cases. It does not appear to be a total lockdown, on the model of Italy, with everything shut down – churches, sports events, concerts, all gatherings of more than 150 people, all stores with the exception of pharmacies and grocery stores. Iranian officials have canceled large-scale Friday prayers in more than 20 cities, but that leaves many other cities and rural areas unaffected. And while those officials have closed the mosques for Friday Prayers, when the crowds are at their largest, the mosques are allowed to remain open at other times.

The failure of Iran to come to grips with its coronavirus outbreak –that President Rouhani blames on American sanctions –is purely the result of Iranian choices and miscalculations. The Iranians have chosen to continue their foreign aggressions – their financial and military support for the Shi'a Houthis in Yemen, for Syria's Assad, for Shi'a militias in Iraq, for Hezbollah in Lebanon. This widespread aggression, and Iran's continuing nuclear project, and its attacks on both oil tankers and Saudi oil installations, would need to stop before this Administration would lift all the sanctions. It's Iran's choice. So far it seems determined to stick with the wrong one.

The most important indicator that Iran is not going to deal as seriously as the occasion warrants is how the government has handled Qom. Qom is a holy city for the Shi'a; it is full of seminaries where Shi'a come from all over Iran, and all over the world, to study; the foreign students return home, bringing the coronavirus with them. So far cases of the coronavirus in Yemen, Bahrain, Azerbaijan, Syria, Iraq, the UAE, Kuwait, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have been tracked back to Qom. Forty percent of the cases in Iran itself have

originated in Qom. Surely the Iranian government ought to have promptly instituted a quarantine in Qom back in mid-February, when there was still time to halt its spread.. It could have been predicted then that theology students in Qom would be returning home, many carrying the virus, that had already appeared in many cases in the city, back home with them. And there is no known cure for coronavirus.

That quarantine would have meant that no one would be either let in or out, and movements within the city would be strictly limited. But nothing like this has yet been done. For the Shia, Qom is a holy city, and to interfere with its role as the place where Shiite clerics are trained is unthinkable. There are even those clerics in Qom who have vowed to ignore government regulations if they get in the way of religious training and of worshipping in large groups. They needn't worry. Iran's Supreme National Security Council has rejected, as of March 11, the request by some health officials for a total lockdown both in the northern province of Gilan and in the city of Qom. If the Teheran government finally does put Qom in lockdown, that will be a sign, not a moment too soon, that the health officials will have prevailed, in this extraordinary emergency, over the religious establishment.

If President Rouhani wants to point the finger of blame somewhere it ought to be at Iran's leadership, beginning with himself. **It was he who in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak, in mid-February, dismissed the gravity of the situation, insisting that Iran would soon defeat the virus and that "everyone will have to resume work and production as of next week" because "life will be back to normal."** Since that pollyannish prediction, the numbers of the afflicted, and the dead, have skyrocketed. Life has not been "back to normal." And Rouhani has not apologized for leading the nation astray. Instead he has done what comes naturally to Iranian officials: he's blamed the United States. **Ayatollah Khamenei, similarly, on March 3 assured the country – as noted earlier –that the**

coronavirus was “not that big of a deal.” These remarks coming from the top had a disastrous effect; they prevented Iran’s health officials from taking the appropriate draconian measures that would have greatly lessened the spread of the virus. Even today, Iran still has not taken the measures that China, Italy, Spain, and France have done.

If the epicenter of the disease in the Middle East is Iran, the epicenter in Iran is Qom. The test of Iran’s resolution, and of its willingness to take the severest measures to slow down the spread of the disease, will be in Qom. Who will prevail? Will it be those Shi’a clerics opposed to a quarantine in Qom, who offer only their fanatical faith, or those in Iran’s medical establishment who offer their training and common sense?

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