



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Iran's Shiite Crescent and the Coronavirus

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Shiite communities are regarded by the Islamic Republic as key tools with which to penetrate and ultimately conquer the Arab world, and pilgrimages back and forth to Shiite holy centers in Iran and Iraq are central to the regime's ideological identity. But the holiest city in Iran, Qom, is now an epicenter for the spread of the coronavirus. The Shiite crescent is thus functioning as a boomerang to spread the epidemic both out of and back into Iran.**

Iran's Shiite crescent, which until recently reflected its imperial reach into the Arab world, has now become pathological with the spread of Covid-19 (the official name of the coronavirus pathogen).

A study released on February 24 by the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota inadvertently revealed how salient Iran's religious ties to Shiite communities in Arab states have been and continue to be in the spread of the epidemic.

The five Middle Eastern countries that first reported Covid-19 cases—Afghanistan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Oman—all have substantial Shiite populations, and all the cases cited are clearly linked to Iran. The first confirmed case in Afghanistan was flagged in Herat province, which is in the country's west on the Iranian border. Another sufferer had recently returned from the city of Qom, Iran's Shiite religious center and, tellingly, the epicenter of the disease in Iran. The first Bahraini to be confirmed as having succumbed to Covid-19 had also just been in Iran, as had all three cases first reported in Kuwait, Iraq, and Oman.

The link between Shiite pilgrimage and the spread of the virus is to be found at its source in the region: Iran, specifically the religious city of Qom.

As the University of Minnesota report notes, eight of 18 new cases in Iran were in Qom compared to three in the metropolis of Tehran, which has a population seven times greater. Qom has been the site of 40% of the cases identified so far in Iran though it comprises less than 3% of the population.

Iraq and other Arab states with substantial Shiite populations have grown understandably apprehensive about pilgrimage to Qom. Flights between Qom and Najaf, the holy city in Iraq, which neighbors a third holy city, Karbalah, usually outnumber flights between the capital cities of Tehran and Baghdad, indicating that most movement between the countries has to do with religious observance and pilgrimage rather than business and commerce. But the Iraqi authorities have banned entry into the country by Iranian nationals and prohibited travel by Iraqi nationals to Iran, and have ceased flights between Tehran's Khomeini airport (which services Qom, a three-hour drive away) and Najaf.

Such moves might be too late. The day after the halt on Iraqi-Iranian travel, Iraq announced its first case of Covid-19.

Data for China indicate that one of around 30 cases of the virus results in death (2,873 deaths out of 79,968 cases as of March 1). The percentage outside China is slightly lower because most of the states in which there have been confirmed cases are more advanced and have benefited from the opportunity to learn from the steps China has taken to control the spread of the virus.

Iran recently announced 43 deaths out of 593 confirmed cases compared with 29 fatalities out of just over 1,128 cases in Italy—the most afflicted European state so far. The ratio in Italy—one death per 39 cases—roughly conforms to the ratio of fatalities to confirmed cases in China and elsewhere. In the case of Iran, however, the ratio is strikingly worse: it appears to be one death per 14 people infected.

This is a deeply worrying statistic, particularly as there are concerns that Iran is failing to identify many Covid-19 cases. If true, this means some infected sufferers are not being put into quarantine, which increases the likelihood that the virus will spread.

There is a strong suspicion based on the quality of the data provided by Iran's ministry of health that the Covid-19 epidemic inside the country might be far more widespread than the regime says it is, and doubts about Iran's reporting and ability to act efficiently to contain the virus are swirling both within and without the country. A recent report filed by the London *Times* correspondent from Tehran quotes Iranians as saying they believe the real number of fatalities is four times the figure being given by regime authorities.

The ramifications of Iran's becoming a source of disease are more than medical. The Islamic Republic has seen wide-scale protests in Iraq and Lebanon against regimes it warmly supports. In Iraq in particular, Iranian consulates have become targets of protester anger.

Iran's failure to control its Covid-19 problem will hardly endear it to protesters in Iraq and Lebanon, many of whom feel their states are being damaged by Iran's involvement in their domestic affairs.

The recent failure of the newly designated Iraqi PM Tawfiq Allawi to set up a government is the most recent indication of Iran's declining stature in the region. Allawi's appointment, which was presumably intended to mollify the mostly Shiite protestors in the streets of Baghdad, Najaf, and Basra, was strongly backed by the two most powerful pro-Iranian political forces in Iraq: the Fath coalition, which is basically the pro-Iranian militias' political wing; and the Sairoon coalition headed by Muqtada Sadr. It was Sadr's al-Mahdi army that fought US forces in the early years of the post-Saddam era.

Despite that support, Allawi failed, because Sunni and Kurdish political opposition figures within the Iraqi parliament and protestors outside it vehemently opposed him.

No doubt, most of Iran's declining fortunes in Iraq can be attributed to the targeting of Qassem Soleimani. Iran's Covid-19 problem is having a reinforcing effect.

For years, the (Arab) Shiite majority in Iraq and Bahrain and the significant Shiite minorities in the neighboring Arab states were regarded as the pillars of Iran's imperial designs over those states.

The Shiite protests in Iraq and Lebanon against Iranian involvement suggest that this may no longer be true.

That imperialism comes at a price could have been predicted. Not so Covid-19 and its ramifications, and least of all its effect on the Iranian Shiite crescent—a crescent that, true to form, is fast turning into a boomerang headed back into the heart of the Islamic Republic.

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