



## Opportunity Out of Crisis: The Case of Iran

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Coronavirus has killed thousands in Iran and sickened more than 60,000. If the virus is not contained, hundreds of thousands more Iranians risk infection and death. If skillfully handled, this crisis might present the Trump administration with a unique opportunity to reduce the Iranian nuclear threat.

It's too early to say that the coronavirus pandemic is out of control, but several countries critically hit by the virus are desperately calling for help. While in the US and Europe full transparency is an indispensable tool in combatting the disease, countries in the Middle East are sticking to their traditionally opaque approach to crises in an effort to downplay the full scale of the emergency.

Iran is the outstanding example of this syndrome. A steady stream of news from that country, consisting primarily of leaks from unofficial sources, suggests that the disease is rampant. The death and sickness toll in Iran is already terrible and if the virus is not contained, it will threaten the lives of hundreds of thousands more Iranians. The country may well be approaching the point of no return.

The severity of the situation is an indictment of the ruling regime's incompetence. It critically failed to ready the country for a crisis of this kind, leaving medical personnel scrambling to cope with extreme shortages of even the most basic supplies necessary to fight the virus and protect themselves. The state-run daily *Ressalat*, reflecting the regime's orchestrated cover-up policy, wrote in early March that "the statistics [of medical personnel infected] are completely security-related and cannot be revealed."

This policy of obfuscation is not only a danger to Iranian medical professionals. As *The New York Times* wrote, "the [Iranian] authorities seem as

worried about controlling information as they are about controlling the virus,” and *The Washington Post* cautioned that “Iran’s reaction to coronavirus has become a danger for the world.”

Unofficial reports from Iran suggest that the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence have been tasked to threaten families of victims into keeping silent in an effort to cover up the true number of fatalities. IRGC command has ordered its provincial divisions to be present at hospitals and medical centers to control reporting on the numbers of patients infected or killed by the virus. Families of coronavirus victims are pressured not to disclose the real cause of death, and an almost hermetic censorship has been imposed on social networks and online media.

Looking backward, it is now clear that the coronavirus outbreak in Iran started in the holy city of Qom in February 2020. Calls to quarantine the city were strongly opposed by the mullahs and by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who not only would not allow the city’s holy shrine to be closed but urged pilgrims to continue to visit it. One of Khamenei’s aides was quoted on February 22nd as saying, “The enemy intends to show that Qom is insecure and take revenge, but it will never succeed”. Another cleric said four days later, “We consider the holy shrine a ‘house of cure’ and it must remain open and people must resolutely visit the shrine.”

On March 29, a group of 100 Iranian academics and political and social activists published a letter holding Khamenei chiefly responsible for the epidemic’s becoming a national disaster. They claim that Khamenei is preventing citizens from receiving American or other humanitarian aid while ensuring that he and other regime officials have access to medical treatment.

The clerics in Iran are holding fast to their policy of denial or at least minimization of the coronavirus catastrophe while encouraging the IRGC to proceed with its regional activities in support of Iran’s aspirations in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. On April 1, President Trump warned Iran against using its proxy forces to attack American troops in Iraq and hinted that the US military is considering a direct strike on Iranian forces. He said his administration has “very good information” that Iran-backed militias are planning more assaults. In parallel, it appears that the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen has augmented its ballistic missile launches against Saudi strategic assets as well as Yemen’s governmental targets during the crisis. The latest attack, which was directed at the Yemenite district of Saada, occurred on April 5.

An additional worrisome dimension has to do with Iran’s activities in the nuclear domain. Unofficial Israeli sources have expressed concern that Iran is taking advantage of the coronavirus crisis to accelerate uranium enrichment

under the radar. This is entirely possible, as IAEA inspectors are refraining from visiting Iranian nuclear sites and several have fled Iran entirely due to the high risk of contamination. Iran's continued violations of its commitments according to the JCPOA have potentially dangerous ramifications, as the US is of course fully aware.

Iran poses a triple threat that must be acknowledged and assessed by the international community: a catastrophic and possibly out-of-control outbreak of coronavirus, ongoing aggressive efforts led by IRGC-related proxies to interfere in and disrupt the region, and a prohibited acceleration of the national nuclear program.

The world is thus faced with a dilemma: a moral obligation to take a humanitarian approach to Iran versus a policy of squeezing the Iranian regime economically and psychologically to achieve strategic gains. Does the extremity of the crisis faced by Tehran present an opportunity for Washington?

On April 12, 1959, John F. Kennedy said, "The Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger—but recognize the opportunity." A similar saying attributed to the Italian Renaissance writer Niccolò Machiavelli recommends that we "never waste the opportunity offered by a good crisis."

Crisis and opportunity are two sides of a single coin. Should we focus on the crisis or look for the opportunity? Considering how long-lasting and potentially explosive the Iranian nuclear issue is, it seems sensible to consider the strategic dimension under the current extraordinary circumstances.

Provided that it is handled skillfully by the Trump administration, the coronavirus crisis could present a unique opportunity to reduce the Iranian nuclear threat. The plan should be twofold: an international campaign led by the US to offer Iran the maximum humanitarian and medical assistance to contain the epidemic, and the acquiring of Iran's commitment to a new nuclear agreement that fills the gaps left by the JCPOA.

Though the US is itself in the midst of fighting the virus, it can handle such an initiative, as it holds the winning cards. The outcome of such a far-reaching approach to Iran could be worthwhile in both the short and the long terms.

Timing is the name of the game, considering the scale of the catastrophe in Iran as well as the simmering domestic rage against the clerical regime. The walls are closing in on Khamenei and his entourage.

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