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Responding to the Coronavirus Crisis in Iran: The Regime and the Public

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The coronavirus outbreak in Iran has exposed a series of weaknesses and failures in the regime's management of emergency situations. The regime, which was slow to handle the crisis and has tried to hide its scope, has once again been exposed as helpless in the face of structural challenges such as internal power struggles, institutional redundancy, ideology prioritized over pragmatic considerations, and economic constraints. For its part, the government has tried to provide stopgap measures and immediate solutions, and to date there is no evidence of a loss of control or an inability to ensure the provision of essential goods and services. In the public arena, the crisis reflects the growing alienation of Iran's citizens from regime institutions, although this is accompanied by a high degree of social solidarity. Both the regime and the public in Iran have in the past proven their ability to overcome serious crises. However, their ability to deal with the current crisis over an extended period of time depends on how long it takes to bring the outbreak under control and the extent of its economic impact.

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The coronavirus crisis hit Iran while it was experiencing one of the most difficult periods in its history. The maximum pressure policy and the reinstatement of economic sanctions by the United States have exacerbated the hardships faced by the state, which fueled waves of protests over the past two years that shook the institutions of power. In view of the growing challenges, the Iranian regime has worked in recent years to stabilize the socio-economic arena and strengthen the hardliners' grip on power.

Even after authorities were forced to admit the outbreak of the pandemic and began publishing data on the extent of the casualties, official reports were met with disbelief. Confusion and panic among the public increased when foreign media, social networks, and even politicians claimed that the numbers of infections and deaths were several times higher than those published by the government. A World Health Organization senior official said in mid-March that the number of coronavirus-related deaths in Iran could be as much as five times higher than official figures, as coronavirus tests were only carried out on people who developed serious symptoms.

In the public arena, the failure of the regime to provide solutions to the plight of the civilian population and the sense that the authorities are incapable of solving the fundamental problems in the Islamic Republic have intensified public despair. The intervals between outbreaks of protest have shortened, and protests are more widespread and radical than in the past, both in their violence and the rhetoric against the very existence of the regime. These developments have emerged against the backdrop of the far-reaching demographic, social, and cultural transformations that Iranian society has undergone since the Islamic Revolution, including the widening of the gap between the public and the institutions of power and clerical institutions, as well as processes

of secularization and the adoption of Western approaches. These changes pose complex challenges to the Islamic Republic.

Against the background of these trends, the outbreak of the coronavirus, which has so far taken the lives of thousands of people in Iran, allows us to examine the response of the regime in the face of national crises. The authorities' response to the ongoing crisis opens a window into how the regime's institutions operate and into the decision making processes of the Iranian leadership in times of emergency. Furthermore, the current crisis enables an examination of the relations between the Iranian public and state institutions, as well as the effect of profound processes underway in Iranian society on its response to crisis conditions.

The Iranian Authorities and the Coronavirus Outbreak

The response by the Iranian regime in February 2020 to the pandemic revealed a number of shortcomings, especially in the early stages of the outbreak, and even after the first two deaths were reported on February 19. For example, [Mahan Air, owned by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, continued to operate flights to and from China](#), presumably to preserve the vital economic ties between the two countries. In addition, for weeks, the authorities refrained from taking preventive measures that might have prevented the spread of the disease, such as imposing a lockdown, closing down educational, cultural, and sports institutions, and restricting mass gatherings, especially in the Shiite city of Qom, the epicenter of the outbreak.

The regime, with its hesitant initial response, tried early on to hide the dimensions of the outbreak from the public. The attempt to conceal the situation attests to both a desire to cover up the authorities' failures and the fear of generating public panic, as well as political considerations, most notably [concern that the February 21 parliamentary elections would not proceed as planned](#). The head of the epidemiological committee at the

National Coronavirus Combat Taskforce, Ali-Akbar Haqdoust, confirmed that [the virus first appeared in a number of cities in Iran as early as the end of January](#), but was only identified by the Health Ministry a few weeks later. The Iranian regime has likewise attempted in recent months to cover up the involvement of the IRGC in the January 2020 downing of a Ukrainian plane, as well as the number of fatalities in gasoline protests, which broke out across Iran in November 2019. Not only did these attempts fail, but they also led to increased public criticism, which in several incidents was silenced by the authorities and regime media. For example, [Iranian state television cut short a live broadcast of a program](#) aired on March 16 when during an interview, the actor Amir-Hossein Rostami criticized authorities for allowing continued flights to China and not imposing a lockdown on Qom.

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The difficulty faced by the government in meeting the heavy economic cost, the concern for the livelihoods of millions of workers, and the need to ensure regular provision of essential goods and services have resulted in a significant delay in enforcing closures and restrictions on movement across the country. For several weeks, the President refused to impose a full lockdown despite the recommendations of leading health officials, although he called on

citizens not working in essential services to remain at home and announced the closure of some commercial centers, leisure and cultural centers, some government offices, and schools and universities. The Iranian sociologist, journalist, and regime critic Abbas Abdi [said the decision to refrain from imposing a full lockdown was due to the weakness of regime institutions](#). He contended that imposing a lockdown requires decision making capabilities, operational capabilities, and the capability to ensure the necessary measures during the lockdown period and enforce the lockdown on civilians. These conditions, he said, do not exist in Iran. It was only in late March, after all attempts to curb the spread of the pandemic failed, [that the government decided to impose more serious restrictions on the movement of vehicles and civilians between cities](#).

As soon as restrictions were imposed on economic activity, the authorities were quick to provide immediate solutions for the public, out of concern over the possible reaction. President Hassan Rouhani reassured the public that there was no fear of a shortage of goods and medicines, and the government [authorized an aid package](#) for three million citizens without a permanent income and provided interest-free loans to four million workers who lost their livelihoods as a result of the crisis. Furthermore, the government plans to raise salaries for state employees by 50 percent and postponed tax payments and loan repayments to May.

Divisions among the Iranian Leadership amidst the Crisis

The outbreak of the coronavirus has shone a spotlight on familiar divisions within the top echelons of the regime that caused further delays in responding to the virus. President Rouhani's political rivals have taken advantage of the crisis to criticize his response, claiming that even after the outbreak of the pandemic [he did not assume direct responsibility for management of the crisis](#) and left the campaign in the hands of the Health Minister, whose

powers are limited. The head of Iran's judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, who is considered the President's political rival, [claimed that the President should hold staff meetings on fighting the coronavirus every day, not just once a week.](#)

It was only on March 10 [that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei instructed the President](#) to head the national coronavirus taskforce. However, a few days later [the Supreme Leader placed Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces](#) Mohammad Bagheri in charge of the health taskforce aimed at coordinating the effort to defeat the virus. The step reflects familiar conduct by the Supreme Leader, who tends to opt for institutional redundancy and even encourages competition between various centers of power with parallel authority. His aim is to prevent over-concentration of power in their hands, and especially in the hands of the President, who is often used by the Supreme Leader as a scapegoat, in order to deflect public criticism of the regime's failures. Differences of opinion surfaced quickly between the President and the chief of staff. In the first meeting of the health taskforce [Bagheri announced](#) that the authorities would clear the streets of people within 24 hours, but shortly afterward [the President declared](#) that rumors of towns being placed under lockdown were untrue and citizens could carry on with their business.

Similar to past emergencies such as [natural disasters](#), the current crisis is also characterized by a growing role of the Revolutionary Guards in managing the crisis, containing infection, and assisting victims—for example, disinfecting streets, [setting up hospitals, carrying out virus testing, supplying medical equipment, and assuring logistics and personnel.](#) The growing involvement of the Revolutionary Guards, made possible by the ample resources at their disposal, is important not only to protect the organization's economic interests, but also to keep their political strength in the internal balance of power within Iran, especially against the President, and to improve their public image and deepen their penetration of society. This

serves security interests pertaining to the stability of the regime.

The Regime and the Coronavirus: Between Ideology and Pragmatism

Although the regime does not readily veer from its revolutionary outlook, Iran's policy from the first days of the revolution indicates much pragmatism. In certain conditions the Iranian leadership prioritizes national interests over revolutionary and Islamic ideologies, out of a belief that temporary flexibility does not compromise long-term ideological strategic goals.

The combination of ideology and pragmatic considerations based on essential interests is also evident in the regime's conduct in the current crisis. There is no doubt, for example, that religious considerations influenced the decision not to shut down religious centers in the early stages of the outbreak. Mohammad Sa'idi, Supreme Leader Khamenei's representative in Qom, argued even after the outbreak of the pandemic in the city that there was no need to shut down the Fatemeh Masumeh mosque, [claiming that it safeguards the health of the citizens.](#) However, once it became clear to the regime that the virus continued to spread, it was forced to show flexibility on issues it had considered taboo. For example, [the authorities canceled Friday prayers](#) throughout Iran [for the first time since the revolution](#), eased regulations on Islamic burial ceremonies, and shut down Shiite holy places in Qom and Mashhad. In a highly unusual move, they even [allowed the reopening of a factory that manufactures alcohol](#) for disinfectants, which was closed after the revolution due to the religious prohibition on the consumption of alcohol—this after several hundred people died from methanol poisoning after trying to cure themselves from the coronavirus by drinking the poisonous material. The decision to close religious centers was taken even at the expense of clashing with hardliners. Following the closure of religious centers in Mashhad and Qom, there was an

attempt by several dozen believers to storm into closed mosques, and they clashed with security forces. Several times the authorities also operated against expressions of Islamic radicalism and superstitions. Thus, for example, the authorities arrested two worshippers who were documented on social media licking the Fatemeh Masoumeh grave to prove that the holy sites of Islam are immune from the virus. In another incident, the authorities called in for questioning a cleric who went around a hospital without protective equipment and promised patients they would be cured from the virus through prayers and miracles.

At the same time, the adherence of senior regime officials to revolutionary ideologies is reflected in their reluctance to accept assistance from the United States in the effort to curb the spread of the virus. Commander of the Revolutionary Guards Hossein Salami claimed that the American aid proposal was no more than lies and demagoguery, and even went as far as declaring mockingly that Iran was prepared to render assistance to the United States if it needed it, but that Iran did not need American aid. Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani expressed the Iranian position succinctly, tweeting that prior to the Islamic Revolution Iran was completely dependent on the services of foreign doctors, but thanks to the revolution it can handle the pandemic by itself. Iran even deported a team from the humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders who had arrived in the country to assist in halting the pandemic, on the grounds that it does not require foreign aid. The rejection of aid from the organization resulted from pressure from radical circles in Iran, which apparently feared exposing the real dimensions of the pandemic to foreign entities.

Moreover, rejecting aid offers, senior regime officials also disseminated conspiracy theories claiming that the source of the pandemic was American biological weaponry. In his address for the Iranian New Year (Nowruz), Supreme Leader Khamenei claimed there may be some

truth to the theory that the United States was responsible for developing the virus, and even hinted that the virus was specifically engineered for Iran through the use of genetic information on the Iranian people that the United States obtained in various ways. The refusal to accept assistance from the West, while presenting it as being culpable for the spread of the virus and even for creating it, serves not only revolutionary ideology but also the needs of the regime, which requires an external enemy to ensure its survival, in order to maintain the image of the West and in particular the United States as an enemy to be confronted, ascribing blame and responsibility for the crisis to foreigners.

The mismanagement by the authorities and their attempts to hide information from the public have dealt a further blow to public trust, which in any case has eroded over the years. This gap was on full display in protests that erupted in Iran following the downing of a Ukrainian plane in January 2020, and in the low turnout in the recent parliamentary elections.

Nevertheless, for the first time since the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian authorities had to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and request a \$5 billion loan from the Rapid Disbursing Emergency Financing Facilities established to help countries deal with the coronavirus crisis. The government's request sparked opposition from hardliners, who have been reluctant to turn to the IMF, and claimed that doing so requires parliamentary approval.

Iranian Society and the Coronavirus Crisis

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the low turnout in the recent parliamentary elections. The disregard displayed by many citizens for the recommendations to avoid large gatherings and non-essential travel reflected the undermining of public confidence, alongside complacency and essential economic needs. With the start of the Iranian New Year holiday on March 20, the Iranian authorities reported that some three million people went out of their home provinces. The political analyst and pro-reform critic Sadeq Zibakalam blamed the public's disregard for government guidelines on the distrust between the public and the authorities that has led to citizens not taking government recommendations with the requisite seriousness.

Nonetheless, there is currently no evidence of a loss of control on the part of the Iranian authorities, a systemic collapse of the economy, or the inability to ensure regular provision of essential goods and services. Furthermore, the Iranian regime has shown in the past that it has the ability to overcome serious crises, in particular after years of significant economic sanctions.

The outbreak and the spread of the coronavirus have eroded not only the public's trust in the authorities, but also the standing of religious clerics who have ruled the country since the revolution. In recent decades, Iranian society has undergone a process of secularization and growing alienation between the public and the religious establishment. The uncompromising positions of the conservative clerics, who for weeks refused to shut down religious centers in order to curb the spread of the virus, threaten to alienate them even further from the Iranian people who claim that the clergy's uncompromising positions are a threat to public security. Manifestations of religious radicalism on the part of believers and the clergy provoked outrage and ridicule on social networks.

Contrary to the growing alienation between the public and authorities, the pandemic has encouraged solidarity and social cohesion. Since the 1990s there has been an evident process of individualization in Iranian society, especially among the revolution's second generation. At the same time, Iranian society continues to a great extent to be characterized by collectivism, reflected in the commitment to family and to joint national and cultural identity, and displays of solidarity, especially vis-à-vis external enemies and at times of crisis such as natural disasters. Displays of solidarity during the pandemic have included civilian mobilization to assist in providing food and essential supplies to the needy; the mobilization of businessmen and trade bureaus to help civilians who have been financially affected by the crisis and raise funds to set up medical centers and supply medical equipment; civilian volunteer efforts to help in hospitals or to remove the bodies of those who died from the disease; and rent relief for tenants by mall and shop owners. On the other hand, the crisis has also revealed the weakness of civil society, whose institutions, including women's and student groups, have been systematically oppressed over the past decades by the regime, which strives to retain exclusive control.

Conclusion

The coronavirus has exposed fundamental weaknesses and failures in how the Iranian authorities respond in emergency situations. The regime, which was slow to address the crisis and tried to hide its extent, has once again been exposed as helpless in the face of structural failings such as internal power struggles, serious economic constraints, and controversial priorities, for example, the continued funding of military investments outside of Iran, which exact a heavy economic cost at the expense of dealing with the hardships of the Iranian people. These constraints limit the ability of the regime to prepare for emergency scenarios and to ensure a satisfactory response to the

hardships faced by the Iranian people in routine times and in an emergency.

Nonetheless, there is currently no evidence of a loss of control on the part of the Iranian authorities, a systemic collapse of the economy, or the inability to ensure regular provision of essential goods and services. Furthermore, the Iranian regime has shown in the past that it has the ability to overcome serious crises, in particular after years of significant economic sanctions. Sanctions have required Iran to adapt to conditions of uncertainty and economic crisis, improved the ability of the economy to adapt to external constraints, and strengthened the standing of the Revolutionary Guards, whose involvement in the internal affairs of the state has increased in crisis situations.

The erosion of public trust and the growing alienation between religious and state institutions and the Iranian people impair the regime's ability to recruit public support at a time of crisis. On the other hand, the crisis has the potential to strengthen social solidarity,

which could be reflected in the future in the way the country deals with an external enemy, and not just a pandemic or natural disaster. Like the regime, the Iranian public is characterized by a high degree of adaptability. Years of internal repression and economic sanctions have made Iranian citizens accustomed to economic hardships and severe limitations, both domestic and foreign. Thus, the ability of the regime and the Iranian public to deal with the coronavirus crisis over an extended period of time depends to a great degree on how long it takes to bring the virus under control and the extent of its economic impact.

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