

Opinion – Iran's End Game Beyond Coronavirus

Written by Ramesh Sepehrrad

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RAMESH SEPEHRRAD, APR 7 2020

As the global community is occupied with the coronavirus pandemic and saving lives, the regime in Tehran is focused on using the crisis for its own survival. Some argue the Iranian regime may not survive the coronavirus crisis. Others are warning that the regime is taking the people of Iran hostage to this pandemic crisis. I argue that the regime's deception and disinformation campaigns during this pandemic cannot be analyzed in a vacuum or divorced from its other repressive measures at home, hegemonic goals for the region, including the export of terrorism and nuclear expansion. For several weeks, the Islamic Republic of Iran denied the initial outbreak of the virus and sealed the news in order to move forward with the regime's anniversary celebration and parliamentary elections in February. By March 1st, the death toll published by Iran's main opposition group, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), was 10 times higher than the official figures inside Iran. On March 3rd, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, made his first official remarks about the virus, calling it a "blessing" and urged people to pray. Employing the typical tactics of denial, concealment coupled with arrests of whistleblowers and multifront disinformation campaigns, the entire regime rallied behind Khamenei's narrative to downplay the virus and declare it "not a big deal."

Peddling the false narrative about the coronavirus pandemic has given Iran's regime an opportunity to reshuffle and strategize its domestic and foreign policy priorities. The embattled Khamenei has faced significant setbacks in the last 12 months. Many of the regimes' own officials forecast the end of the Islamic Republic and toxic factional infighting has reached an all-time high. Some have even called for the removal of Khamenei. On the international front, the US continues to double down its sanctions as part of its maximum pressure policy since pulling out of the nuclear deal in May 2018. Moreover, the continuous breaches of the nuclear deal by the Islamic Republic have forced the Europeans to trigger the Dispute Resolution Mechanism. Their move was in response to Iran's announcement that it will no longer be bound by the restrictions of the deal. As of February 21st, 2020, Iran is also blacklisted by the Paris-based Financial Action Taskforce (FATF) because it failed to comply with international anti-terrorism financing norms. This move came after months of political infighting, in which both Khamenei and Hassan Rouhani, the president, failed to resolve their differences and avoid further isolation from global financial markets.

On the home front, nationwide protests and two waves of back to back massive uprisings shook the foundation of the regime. Popular uprisings in late 2019 featured slogans "Down with Khamenei", "Down with Rouhani", "Our enemy is here, they lie and say it's the US." While the protests were sparked over Rouhani's decision on fuel price hikes, within hours there was a nationwide uprising. Khamenei called on the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) with the warning that the "Islamic Republic is in danger. Do whatever it takes to end it. You have my order." The massive uprisings in 200 cities across Iran were met with bloody arrests and the massacre of 1500 people in the streets.

On January 3rd, Iran lost its second most powerful figure, Qassim Soleimani. He was a strategic actor in Khamenei's imperial quest for regional hegemony. Soleimani, astonishingly branded as the "revered Iranian general" by the New York Times, enabled Khamenei's survival with oppression at home and the manipulation of international politics through proxy war, sectarian conflicts and terrorism abroad. To recover from the setback, Khamenei invested in a highly staged funeral for Soleimani to showcase his regime's popular support. His efforts quickly fizzled away with the IRGC's downing of Ukrainian passenger flight three days later which sparked another massive public outrage and university uprisings across 19 provinces. Soleimani's banners were set on fire across Iran. Popular slogans

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during the January protests were “Soleimani is a killer and so is his leader”, “No to the oppressor, be it the Shah, or the supreme leader”, “No crown, no turban, Khamenei your days are finished.”

As exposed by the NCRI, the first official document capturing the outbreak of COVID19 issues by the National Emergency Organization dates to February 3, 2020. The document reveals, in addition to the city of Qom, a “significant number of patients had been hospitalized in Tehran.” Moreover, the French daily newspaper, Le Monde, quoted a physician in Tehran saying two COVID19 patients died during the last days of January. Nonetheless, the regime continued with its concealment plan in favor of the staged rally marking the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution on February 11th. The entire regime experienced a colossal failure in assembling the public despite the mandatory closure of shops and forced participation of all government employees, schools and university students. According to eyewitnesses, some of the Iranian officials who took part in the rally on that day wore masks (given their insider knowledge of the COVID19 outbreak).

The parliamentary elections were held on February 21st, and two days after Rouhani, admitted the regime knew about the spread of COVID19. “We learned on February 19 that the corona[virus] had come”, said Rouhani. However, both Khamenei and Rouhani still urged voters to go to the polls. “Participation in the election is a stamp of support for the ways of the regime and will thus lead to security,” the Supreme Leader announced. “I beg you not to be passive,” Rouhani said. Iranian people heeded to the call of the opposition and boycotted the elections. Again, the Islamic Republic failed to garnish any legitimacy through its sham elections even with its intentional coverup of the COVID 19 outbreak. Two days after the election, Rouhani’s Interior Minister, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli, said: “Some had recommended delaying the elections, and insisted on delaying elections in Qom. But I, as the official for the elections, refused to approve these recommendations.” Soon thereafter, a parliamentarian deputy, Abdolkarim Hosseinzadeh, admitted, “The pile of dead bodies in Qom and the helplessness of the people of Rasht are evidence of failures in notifying and alerting the people about the virus outbreak in a timely manner.”

Occasionally, a glimpse of truth trickles through the ongoing factional fights within the regime when it serves their interest. To date, several of the regime’s officials, including a close advisor to Khamenei, have died of COVID19. The new parliament has not been able to convene, and the meetings of the outgoing parliament are taking place online with little or no progress. With back to back widespread rejection by the public, tightening of the international sanctions, and the growing recognition and impact of the coalition movement of the NCRI, the Islamic Republic has lost all grounds of legitimacy and hope for the future. According to the US State Department Fact Sheet, “Instead of halting flights to China when the risk of contagion was clear, the regime threatened and imprisoned dozens of Iranians who told the truth about the outbreak. The regime encouraged large public gatherings to try to bolster its legitimacy, with no regard for the health risk to Iranian citizens.” By mid-March, the rapid outbreak of COVID19 became a new crisis for the regime. Even worse, the regime’s ideological hub, the city of Qom was declared as the epicenter of the outbreak, casting a further negative image of the regime among Iranian society.

On March 11, the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a global pandemic. While the real fatality and infection rate is much higher than the slow trickling of numbers by the regime, the real question is what is Iran’s end game? Many observers and subject matter experts have outlined how the regime is failing to support the global campaign in defeating coronavirus. Struan Stevenson, a former member of the European Parliament, says, “The truth is that the IRGC is channeling most available medical resources, including protective masks and clothing, to the regime’s officials and to its own military personnel. Even doctors and nurses who are at the forefront of fighting the disease have no medical facilities and protective clothing.” Dr. Virginia Pishbeen, a Microbiologist from Italy, the COVID19 outbreak in Iran “has become a national disaster due to a number of factors, including keeping people uninformed, the criminal cover-up of the situation to bring people to the fake elections, lack of supplies and medical gear, and the monopoly of the IRGC on Iran’s healthcare apparatus. These factors have contributed to worsening the situation and killing more people.”

Since the outbreak of COVID19, Iran’s regime has denied the Iranian people and the global community access to vital information and instead has launched a massive disinformation machine, especially in the Western mainstream media against the US maximum pressure policy. Heshmat Alavi, an Iranian political analyst, the regime’s focus is “bipolar” because while it is downplaying the outbreak and keeps “a lid on the true number of COVID-19 victims in

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Iran to prevent another nationwide uprising”, it is blaming “U.S. sanctions and claiming these measures hinder Tehran’s access to medical supplies and equipment.” Following China’s playbook, Khamenei calls the virus a “biological war” launched by the United States. Rouhani and his administration who ridiculed the idea of quarantining transferred the control of coronavirus situation to IRGC.

Alavi, who diligently monitors the pro-Tehran bias in mainstream media, says, “the Iranian regime has jumped on the opportunity to launch a new campaign against U.S. sanctions. The Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, leads the campaign and provides necessary talking points through his tweets. There have been various examples written by the editorial boards of The New York Times and The Washington Post, and even USA TODAY providing a platform for Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations to further push Tehran’s narrative in the U.S.”

The reality is the entire regime has rallied behind Khamenei and embraced the “blessing” of coronavirus. Today, the virus has become a tool in the regime’s toolbox on two different fronts, one led by the Rouhani-Zarif team and the other is led by the IRGC. First, the Rouhani-Zarif camp, with the help of China and Russia, has launched an information operation to undermine the US maximum pressure campaign using coronavirus as a subject of negotiation. Tehran is hoping to isolate the Trump administration, get some badly needed cash to fund its regional proxies, force the United States to succumb to easing or suspending the sanctions, or all the above. Javad Zarif has branded his efforts as combating the US “medical terrorism” against Iran. Strange bedfellows, even in the US Congress, have rallied behind Tehran on this campaign. Second, the IRGC camp has tested the escalation of tensions in Iraq through attacks on US bases and interests. In their calculation, it could increase the likelihood of a direct war to spoil the election year for Donald Trump. On March 31st, the IRGC issued a statement warning “even one little mistake taken by the evil and adventurous enemies at any point against the Islamic Republic of Iran will be their last mistake.” The next day, the US President tweeted saying, “Iran or its proxies are planning a sneak attack on U.S. troops and/or assets in Iraq. If this happens, Iran will pay a very heavy price...” Within a day, a top IRGC commander backpaddled and rejected any claim of attacks against the US. For now, IRGC’s escalation seems to be on a pause.

When it comes to Iran’s realpolitik, there is one clarifying compass: the voice of the Iranian people. Iranians are not fooled by the “sanctions are hurting us” mantra. The regime’s own Health Minister says Iran has no problem accessing medicine. Rouhani brags “Iran’s health infrastructure is strong and ready to cope with a possible escalation in coronavirus cases.” Clearly, the regime’s approach and disinformation on the pandemic crisis domestically contradict with its foreign policy ambitions.

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the inherent dictatorial nature of the Islamic Republic in an unprecedented way. Khamenei and his entire regime are displaying an utter sense of paranoia because their power is rooted in oppression and terrorism. Based on interview data from inside Iran and narrative analysis of messages on social media platforms, the public is rejecting any easing of US sanctions. Another fascinating data point in rejection of the regime is the wave of prison rebellions and escapes in more than 10 cities where prisoners are taking matters in their own hands. The sign of a crumbling regime is becoming more evident. To settle the political noise generated by the regime, one must return to the basic questions that the Iranian people are no doubt asking Khamenei, Rouhani, Zarif and the IRGC:

- Who is responsible for keeping Covid-19’s first entry into Iran secret?
- Who called the pandemic “not a big deal”?
- Who authorized the IRGC’s Mahan Airline to continue its flights to China?
- Who stole over \$1 billion in humanitarian funds meant to help fight coronavirus?
- Who ridiculed the concept of quarantining for the public but not for themselves?
- Who refused the aid by the US and expelled the Doctors without Borders?
- Who has the most financial resources at their disposal to address the crisis?

The answers to these questions point towards the Iranian state and not towards US sanctions. As of the writing of this article more than 18,600 people have died of coronavirus in Iran and the regime continues to be an utter failure. It is time to listen to the people of Iran as the final countdown to end this regime may have already begun.

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About the author:

Dr. Ramesh Sepehrrad is Adjunct Faculty at George Mason University, teaching courses on Global Conflict Analysis and Gender; and a scholar practitioner from School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (SCAR) – also at George Mason University. She has served as conference director, moderator and panelist at various academic institutions, congressional seminars. Her work has been published in The Brown Journal World Affairs, The Washington Post, The National Interest, The Washington Times, Women e-news, United Press International, Feminist Voice, and others.