



The Cambridge Security Initiative

COVID-19 RAVAGING IRAN AMIDST GROWING LEGITIMACY CRISIS

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Richard C. Baffa

Two days prior to February's parliamentary elections, Iran announced its first two cases of the COVID-19 virus. As the number of cases began to rise, it became clear the regime had covered up the outbreak to get the vote out. The effort failed. [Turnout](#) was the lowest since the 1979 revolution: about 42 per cent nationwide but only 25 per cent in Tehran. Elections in Iran are a barometer of public support and the historically low turnout in February underscores the regime's loss of legitimacy among a majority of Iranians suffering under the weight of sanctions, economic mismanagement, and violent crackdowns.

The COVID-19 outbreak started in Qom, a city of 1.2 million where hundreds of Chinese clerics study at seminaries, but quickly spread to all 31 provinces. As of 14 March, [12,729](#) Iranians have been infected with 611 deaths, according to the Ministry of Health, but the actual number of cases and the death toll is probably much [higher](#). Tehran ignored the outbreak at first, then denied the magnitude of the crisis, mismanaged the [response](#), and typically blamed the U.S., exacerbating the epidemic. Dozens of [senior officials](#) have been diagnosed with the virus, and several have died, including a senior advisor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, two former diplomats, and two Members of Parliament. The infection rate among senior officials is highly unusual and may be due to frequent contact with Chinese nationals and/or trips to Qom.

It wasn't until early March that the regime began to acknowledge the situation. The government established an inter-agency committee under President Rouhani to coordinate measures to stem the spread of the disease, including mass sanitization of cities, closure of schools, universities, government offices, and transportation networks, suspension of parliament, and nationwide screening. The regime also mobilized the [armed forces](#) and [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps](#) to assist in containment efforts. In an unprecedented move, Tehran cancelled [Friday prayers](#) for three straight weeks and closed 60,000 mosques. Nevertheless, the main shrine in Qom remains open and the city is still not quarantined.

Regionally, Iran has emerged as the epicenter of the outbreak; cases in at least [23 countries](#) can be traced back to Iran, including most in Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Oman. All neighboring states have closed their borders, and many have stopped flights into and out of the country, essentially shutting down the export of non-oil goods. For the [first time](#) since the 1960s, Iran has asked the International Monetary Fund for an emergency \$5 billion loan to battle the epidemic. The World Health Organization,

the UAE, and several European states are providing support, but Iran has refused assistance from the U.S.

OUTLOOK

Assuming a six-month disruption period, the virus is forecast to cost the Iranian economy nearly \$11 billion, a 2.5 per cent decline in GDP. This comes on the heels of a nearly 10 per cent decline in 2019. The virus will impact key non-oil sectors, which have become the mainstay of the economy under sanctions. New bouts of unrest, however, are unlikely in the near to mid-term as Iranians avoid public places and attempt to cope with life under the restrictions in place to combat the outbreak.

The COVID-19 pandemic will eventually subside, but the damage to the Iranian regime almost certainly will be long lasting. The outbreak follows a series of missteps that have badly undermined the regime's credibility and legitimacy. Tehran's inept response to the virus reveals a regime characterized by gross mismanagement, endemic corruption, and sclerotic rule, that is ill-equipped to handle the crisis and continues to pose a public health threat domestically and to the region.