

The Influence of Coronavirus on Diplomatic Relations: Iran, China, Gulf Arabs, and India

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Brief Analysis

During the pandemic, Iran's first reported cases on [February 19](#) (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/feb-2020-news-updates-covid19/>) in the [Qom province](#) (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/24/how-iran-botched-coronavirus-pandemic-response/>)—the eventual epicentre for Iran—have demonstrated that [Iran is not as isolated as it is often believed to be](#) (<https://epochtimes.today/countries-with-major-coronavirus-outbreak-clusters-delayed-response-due-to-strategic-ties-with-china-experts/>). Iran's health minister reported that the novel virus was brought there by an [Iranian merchant](#) (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-s-health-minister-says-virus-came-from-china-travel/30449759.html>) who had recently traveled to Wuhan. While Iran was hit early, it is now second in the region to Turkey in terms of total infections—though Iran's reported death toll still remains the highest in the region. The virus—and Iran and other regional leaders' responses to it—has also laid bare some interesting features of Iran's precarious yet notable place in international politics. As the spread of the virus highlighted the interconnectivity of today's world, the ways in which regional and international actors have responded to Iran's crisis says much about where Iran stands in the eyes of the international community.

The effect of the virus among Iran's upper echelons has been particularly notable, suggesting a terrible miscalculation within decision-making in Tehran; it seems that there continues to be information about the crisis hidden from the public eye—as well as the international community. In any case, it is clear that Iran's upper echelons were deeply impacted; [8 percent](#) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/world/middleeast/coronavirus-iran.html>) of Iran's Members of Parliament, including Deputy Minister of Health Dr. Irar Harirchi, tested positive for the virus. About a dozen of the country's eminent office-bearers and ministers have succumbed to the pandemic—including Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's Chief Advisor, [Seyyed Mohammad Mirmohammadi](#) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/03/world/middleeast/coronavirus-iran.html>).

Iran's unwillingness to accept the presence of the virus in its first days partially reflects the importance of its relationship with China. Given its current dearth of trade and economic partnerships, relations with the Chinese are particularly dear to the Iranian state. High-level clandestine meetings and a continued strategic partnership with China, along with continued flights to China despite warnings, characterized Iranian officials' early responses. The controversial [Mahan Air](#) (<https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-features-51729682>), for example, kept flying to China until early March. In addition, a lack of transparency, insufficient testing capacity, a [refusal to cordon off cities and](#)

shrines until *Nowroz* (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51651454>) in late March, and propaganda blaming Arab neighbors for creating panic also helped spread the virus within the Persian state.

Iran's position in the region has also shaped how the virus has spread; the state's regional ambitions, along with its function as a religious hub, turned Iran into a regional "super spreader." Travel from Iran helped spread cases among many friendly countries

(https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_infected_the_impact_of_the_coronavirus_on_the_middle_east_and_no)

in the Levant—namely Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, along with Yemen and Qatar—through continued travel to these nations. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, and the UAE

(https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_infected_the_impact_of_the_coronavirus_on_the_middle_east_and_no) have also traced their infections from Iran.

A Global Shrug to Iran's Crisis Response

In spite of Iran's dire situation but in keeping with their diplomatic challenges, there has been a relatively limited response from the international community to Iran's calls for assistance. Britain, France, and Germany sent some modest aid to Iran. Similarly, Russia, China, Japan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan

(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/us/politics/coronavirus-diplomacy-iran-korea.html>) also sent assistance.

In contrast, U.S. sanctions (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-steps-up-iran-sanctions-amid-coronavirus-as-tehran-charges-cruelty-11584647223>) continued, and though U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in March (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran-usa/u-s-might-rethink-iran-sanctions-in-light-of-coronavirus-outbreak-pompeo-idUSKBN21I33F>) that the U.S. administration was considering some relaxation of sanctions in light of the viral crisis, no subsequent moves have been made on this front.

Moreover, the U.S. government has rejected Iran's allegations that it does not have access to the international market for medical or humanitarian requirements because of sanctions, as stated in a mid-March letter from Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran/us-sanctions-severely-hamper-iran-coronavirus-fight-rouhani-idUSKBN2110HL>) to world leaders. The United States countered that sanctions do not include the import of medicines and medical facilities to Iran—Washington instead suggested that Iran should use its "billions in hedge funds" (<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/us-tells-khamenei-to-use-billions-in-hedge-fund-to-combat-coronavirus/30519691.html>) to combat the virus. Soon afterward, on April 6, Iran announced that it would in fact use 1 billion euros from its sovereign wealth fund (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran-fund/iran-supreme-leader approves-tapping-sovereign-wealth-fund-to-fight-coronavirus-idUSKBN21023U>) to fight the pandemic. The money has since been allocated to the country's economic challenges (<https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/447982/Over-300m-earmarked-for-jobless-benefits-amid-pandemic>).

International agencies also provided a tepid response to Iran's plight, but also refrained from targeting Iran's ongoing military interventionism. United Nation Secretary General Antonio Guterres's call for a "global ceasefire" (<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/03/1059972>) on March 23 made no specific reference to Iran, despite its military involvement throughout the region. And while lower-level international public servants have called for a suspension of sanctions to help fight the pandemic, these responses have so far been largely limited to the realm of rhetoric.

Need as a Window for Diplomatic Opportunity

The contrast of the overall international response and that of the rest of the Gulf to Iran's crisis is notable. On the one hand, Saudi Arabia has not provided any aid, yet its willingness to negotiate on the war in Yemen has suggested that its interest in regional conflict has been dampened, especially during the pandemic. More directly, several Arab countries such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE have sent aid packages to Iran (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/coronavirus-spur-humanitarian-outreach-iran.html>). In a particularly warm gesture, the UAE sent flights carrying WHO experts to the Persian country (<https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2020/3/16/16-03-2020-uae-iran>). The aid from Qatar and Kuwait

is unsurprising—both maintain warm relations with their neighbor as a standard feature of their foreign policy, especially given their close proximity to Iran. However, the aid from the UAE appears to represent a shift. Iran has noticed the gestures—in the weeks after the initial UAE aid in March, a spokesperson for Iran’s foreign ministry suggested that the disease had brought “more reason and logic” to bilateral relations (<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-04-06/iran-says-virus-coordination-has-improved-its-ties-with-u-a-e>).

The reasons behind this outreach appear to be threefold. The simple explanation is that it is a humanitarian outreach (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/coronavirus-spur-humanitarian-outreach-iran.html>); but aid to Iran may help these Gulf states—often in a state of uneasy truce with Iran over the shared Strait of Hormuz—to soften any planned Iranian antagonism towards their neighbors, and secure some credit for their “acts of kindness” at global forums. Though less likely, the aid could also be a ploy to embarrass the regime in Tehran. Time and again (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html>), Iranians have taken to the streets to protest against their hardliner regime, and by providing medical help now, Gulf states may be trying to expose its incapacity to take care of its own citizens.

Though Iran may ultimately choose to ignore an opportunity to deescalate Gulf tensions, the internal crisis may also leave Iran more open towards softening tensions in order to manage its own domestic challenges. The broader international implications of such a thaw are particularly interesting from the perspective of a country that would stand to benefit from such an arrangement. For India, a situation of thawed relations between the Gulf States, uncertain though they may be, would be a very welcome way to simultaneously improve its important bilateral ties with Persians and Arabs.

Though India is not often considered part of Middle Eastern dynamics, India and the Gulf are bound by both diplomatic and cultural considerations. From the Iran angle, though India’s large Muslim population is majority Sunni, India is also home to 45 million Shia, making it the second largest Shia population in the world (<http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/ahmadinejad-on-way-nsa-says-india-to-be-impacted-if-iran-wronged-by-others/299498>) after Iran. Moreover, New Delhi has a non-interventionist and non-prescriptive policy (<https://www.claws.in/after-soleimani-us-iran-tensions-in-the-middle-east-where-is-it-heading-to/>) towards its Middle Eastern neighbors and chooses not to play one against the other. Smoothed relations between those neighbors would certainly help India’s concerns in sustaining its quest for energy security.

As of April 16, around 308 Indians (<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-3336-indians-infected-by-coronavirus-in-53-countries-say-govt-sources/article31357569.ece>) still in Iran were infected by the novel virus, mainly residing in the city of Qom, the epicenter, and Tehran, the capital. In April, Iran’s Ambassador to India, Ali Chegeni, stressed that India and Iran share a close bond, and the latter expects the international community, including India, to assist Iran against “unjust” U.S. sanctions. Additionally, he reiterated that both the countries can “cooperate on the development of medicines and vaccines as we do share great scientific and technological capacities together.” (<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/iran-expects-india-world-community-to-stand-against-us-sanctions-iranian-envoy/story-TkkjKZ6H8806sVh52HPLzI.html>)

Yet India has also demonstrated the limits of this relationship during a time when most countries are experiencing major crises. It is noteworthy that while India sent its military aircraft C-17 Globemaster (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-to-send-c-17-globemaster-to-airlift-indians-from-iran/articleshow/74555316.cms>) to airlift 890 of its stranded citizens (<https://www.deccanherald.com/national/north-and-central/coronavirus-india-sends-military-aircraft-to-iran-to-evacuate-its-nationals-812235.html>) from Iran on March 10, India has not sent any aid despite Rouhani’s direct request for assistance from India on March 15 (<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/iran-president-writes-to-pm-modi-for-assistance-to-fight-covid-19-1655680-2020-03-15>).

This decision can also be traced to both domestic and foreign policy concerns. Given its population density and size, along with the many complexities of public health in India, catering the domestic response to coronavirus is the overwhelming priority, as it probably should be. The situation is so dire that New Delhi requested foreign assistance and has said that it is ready to “accept” such aid— (<https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-india-decides-to-accept-foreign-aid-to-deal-with-pandemic-crisis-11585748039556.html>) a surprising and drastic shift from India’s general stance of not accepting foreign aid during calamities. On an international level, New Delhi is wary of flouting U.S. sanctions on Iran, or of jeopardizing India’s economically vital relations with the Gulf Arab states.

For India, rapprochement between the Arabs and Persians in the region would provide a better balance back home, possibly softening the sectarian angle, even in places like the Northern Indian Union Territories of Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh.

In many cases, diplomatic shifts can ripple outwards. If Gulf tensions are softened by coronavirus’s regional impact, as well as provide Iran with a greater flexibility to focus on its own domestic challenges, Gulf Arab leaders will be less invested in pressuring Iran. Therefore, a shift in the Gulf might provide an opening to renegotiate with Iran. ❖

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