

Pandemic Could Change Iran's Model of Supreme Leadership Forever

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Apr 17, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alwba-qd-yghywr-alnmwdhj-alqaym-ly-almrshd-alaly-fy-ayran-aly-alabd\)](/ar/policy-analysis/alwba-qd-yghywr-alnmwdhj-alqaym-ly-almrshd-alaly-fy-ayran-aly-alabd) /

[Farsi \(/fa/policy-analysis/hmhgyry-krwna-mytwand-mdl-rhbry-ra-dr-ayran-bray-hmyshh-tghyyr-dhd\)](/fa/policy-analysis/hmhgyry-krwna-mytwand-mdl-rhbry-ra-dr-ayran-bray-hmyshh-tghyyr-dhd)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

With the IRGC spearheading the containment effort, the clergy shooting itself in the foot, and the regime widening its cyber-repression, Iran is ripe for an evolution in which Khamenei or his successor give way to de facto military rule.

Coronavirus came to Iran at a time when the Islamic Republic is at one of its lowest points since its inception four decades ago. The regime has suffered critical blows to its ideological legitimacy, revolutionary popularity, practical efficiency, economic structure, pan-Islamist foreign policy, and aspirations for regional hegemony. Yet despite all these challenges and the overwhelming effects of COVID-19, the Islamic Republic could readily endure for many more years—though perhaps not without substantially shifting its nature.

THE STRENGTH OF A WEAK STATE

The existential nature of the current global crisis has had the paradoxical effect of empowering troubled regimes like Iran's. The greater the damage caused by the pandemic and the greater the people's panic, the more they tend to perceive the government as society's exclusive hope for survival. The disease is therefore an exceptionally potent agent in reducing people's political demands for freedom and human rights to very basic needs such as biosecurity. In addition, rising public expectations about the government's responsibilities create fertile ground for a dramatic expansion of state authority.

The Iranian regime is also empowered by the fact that, contrary to democratic societies, it has **left little room for nongovernmental entities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-2-regime-culpability-and-resiliency>)** to get involved in containing the pandemic. Thus, dissidents and rival

centers of influence have few means of exploiting the regime's loss of legitimacy and other ailments in order to demonstrate their own suitability as alternative leaders.

For instance, after being accused of **impeding the state's precautionary initiatives** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-1-clerical-factors>) in the breakout's initial phase, the clergy tried to restore its image by organizing "volunteer" groups to help fight the disease. Yet clerical leaders soon gave up any illusion of distinguishing their campaign from the regime's wider containment effort. Ali Reza Arafai, director of the Center for Management of Seminaries, recently admitted that the clergy is simply supporting the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in the COVID-19 fight, noting that clerics are praying for the IRGC's "greatness and glory."

The pandemic is also helping to normalize the regime's despotic role in the cyber realm, since the same weapons it has long used to control Internet service, monitor online activity, and censor dissent can now be recast as essential tools to track the disease and safeguard public health. In recent years, the development of new surveillance and digital warfare capabilities has become one of the Islamic Republic's highest priorities. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei defines cyberspace as a crucial battlefield and vigorously directs the regime's policymaking and operations in that sector. The coronavirus emergency will only expand and strengthen those activities, with Khamenei's declared "cyber jihad" likely becoming even more central to the regime's policies in the aftermath of the crisis.

Likewise, the regime seems to believe that manipulating public opinion through the media is now even more vital to its survival, especially as the economy slides further toward collapse. Coverage on television and radio, which are entirely state-controlled, has become even more openly propagandistic of late, shamelessly glorifying the IRGC for **its pivotal role in "biological warfare."** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/by-mobilizing-to-fight-coronavirus-the-irgc-is-marginalizing-the-government>)

THE IRGC'S STEADY ASCENT

The pandemic has empowered the IRGC more than any other institution, especially now that the regime has suspended national law and declared an indefinite state of emergency. The Guards were given unprecedented control over the country after the government decided to get stricter about enforcing quarantines, social distancing, and like measures. Built during the Iran-Iraq War and ceaselessly developed since then, the health system and medical infrastructure run by the IRGC and its affiliates have grown to incredible dimensions and now operate more or less independently from the national healthcare system.

Unfortunately, granting the IRGC a greater role in the crisis is not necessarily wise from a medical point of view. On April 3, Health Minister Saeed Namaki sent a letter to President Hassan Rouhani warning about the disastrous consequences of this approach. Using one of Khamenei's epithets for IRGC and Basij militia forces that are preauthorized to intervene in unexpected domestic crises, Namaki wrote, "Any unapproved decision by 'fire at will' forces...will jeopardize the health system and ultimately the country's economy."

Yet cabinet ministers like Namaki and the elected government in general have been pushed further into secondary status during the pandemic. Rouhani has little if any role under the state of emergency, and the IRGC's extrajudicial biosecurity measures will likely persist well after it is lifted. The state's portrayal of the pandemic as a foreign attack helps justify this fuller securitization, with the IRGC expanding the scope of its mission to new battlefields—namely, the people's bodies. For their part, many citizens may begin to normalize such violations due to their fears of disease, their lack of alternative authorities, and the rising cost of maintaining an independent public sphere amid escalating regime crackdowns.

Regarding the military implications of these trends, the IRGC will likely continue planning potential attacks against

American troops in the region, whether directly or through militia proxies in Iraq

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/qaanis-surprise-visit-to-baghdad-and-the-future-of-the-pmf>) and other locales. Such operations could help counteract the domestic reputational damage the Guards have suffered due to multiple recent scandals. Yet the cost-effectiveness of any such attacks will greatly depend on whether the pandemic discourages the United States from major retaliation.

WHAT WOULD ACCELERATE TRANSITION IN IRAN?

In light of all these factors, the pandemic has already started to transform the nature of Iran’s political system. The clergy’s apparent resistance to the state’s virus control mandates will likely be marked as a point of no return for public mistrust of clerics and suspicion about their ability to serve as rational authorities in the political or social sphere. Their spectacular failure in complying with common sense and good conscience has created the conditions to potentially secularize the country’s future leadership. The widening abyss between Shia authorities on the one hand, and Iran’s highly modernized middle class and educated young population on the other, will make power players less interested in seeking ideological or political support from the clergy post-Khamenei. And as the clergy’s role diminishes, civil society is in no position to step forward.

As a result, Iran may be in the throes of an evolutionary change. The longstanding model has been an Islamist revolutionary regime subsumed under the principle of “guardianship of the jurist,” but that could give way to a military-security system largely controlled by a coalition of key IRGC factions and newly defined allies, beneficiaries, and clients of the Guards.

This process would take a dramatic leap forward if a transition at the level of the Supreme Leader becomes necessary in the near term. Khamenei is eighty years old, so his risk of death or incapacitating illness is significant. Even if he remains in power for some time to come, he may find himself sidelined in the new environment. Moreover, any transition to a new leader or leadership system is unlikely to be as swift and consensual as the one that followed Ruhollah Khomeini’s death in 1989.

Whatever the case, the pandemic has made the hitherto most probable succession scenario—that of the IRGC playing the lead role in post-Khamenei Iran—even more likely. Until then, Iran’s military leadership is no doubt hoping that the virus-induced global economic downturn will dissuade the United States and other foreign “enemies” from taking risks with Iran, whether by destabilizing it through military means or turning it into a failed state through “maximum pressure.”

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

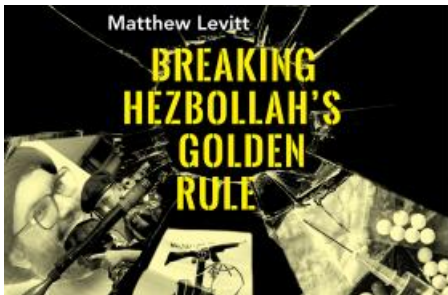
[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)