

# The Coronavirus in Iran (Part 2): Regime Culpability and Resiliency

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Even as their lack of transparency worsens the public health crisis, the Supreme Leader and other officials have systematically gutted any civil society elements capable of organizing substantial opposition to such policies.**

Iran's ongoing coronavirus epidemic has left the people with less reason than ever to trust the information and directives issued by their leaders. [Part 1 of this PolicyWatch \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-1-clerical-factors\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-1-clerical-factors) discussed the clergy's role in aggravating this problem, but the state's mistakes and deceptions have been legion as well. They include scandalous discrepancies between official reports after a period of denial that the virus had entered the country; a health system that was unprepared to deal with such a disease promptly and properly; and official resistance to implementing internationally recommended precautionary measures, such as canceling flights from China and quarantining the center of the outbreak. These decisions have sown widespread confusion about facts and fictions related to the virus, the most effective medically proven ways to control it, and the degree to which it is spreading throughout the country. As a result, an [already restive population \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-domestic-and-foreign-response-options-to-the-protests\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-domestic-and-foreign-response-options-to-the-protests) has become increasingly panicked about the future and angry at the state.

Yet can the coronavirus actually bring down the regime? The harsh reality is that the state has left little space for opposition to organize around health issues, or any issues for that matter. Instead, it has sought to confuse the people and redirect their anger toward external enemies, even as its own policies contribute to the crisis.

## CONCEALING FACTS, DEFLECTING BLAME

In response to health and social challenges like the current epidemic, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his circle frequently resort to two tactics: ideological exploitation and political paranoia. The first centers on Khamenei's insistence that the regime's brand of Islam has a solution for all of society's problems. To prop up this claim against ample evidence to the contrary, the state consistently categorizes data on major social problems as classified information and releases misleading or contradictory reports. For example, despite the growing prevalence of drug addiction among school students, Education Minister Muhammad Bathai has refused to reveal the related statistics. Hassan Mousavi, head of the Iran Association of Social Workers, has complained about the state's denial of such widespread social problems and its resistance to making the data public. Even parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani has criticized the government's policy of classifying statistics related to addiction, divorce, and other issues.

The second tactic involves telling the public that Iran's foreign enemies are bent on treating Muslim bodies as another battlefield on which to destroy Islam. For instance, Khamenei and other authorities have repeatedly accused Western governments of maliciously attempting to lower the birthrate in Muslim societies. In September 2010, he stated: "Westerners are against demographic growth among Muslims...We should not do things in a way that they reach their goal...The decline in birthrate is a very important issue. What is best for our enemies...is that Iran's population remains around twenty or thirty million people...If they could plan for such an objective they would, they spend money, certainly they spend money." In his view, even the domestic increase in drug addiction is the "enemy's conspiracy."

Another example of this paranoia is transgenic food products. In a February 2016 interview with the Khamenei-controlled newspaper *Kayhan*, biotechnology expert Ali Karami extensively argued that "transgenic products are Zionism's conspiracy against the Muslim population."

Even financial corruption and crime are blamed on the West. For example, in December 2013, Khamenei argued, "One of the effects of the enemies' cultural invasion is the increasing rate of armed robbery from banks. We have seen it in [American] movies."

Regarding coronavirus, Khamenei's initial reaction on February 23 was to characterize "this new disease" as the enemy's "pretext" to discourage Iranians from voting in the February parliamentary election, giving him a readymade excuse when his fears of plummeting turnout were in fact born out. This claim was followed by President Hassan Rouhani's warning that the virus was becoming the "enemy's weapon" to shut down the country.

## **GUTTING CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE NAME OF SECURITY**

Under the Islamic Republic's brand of authoritarianism, all independent networks, organizations, institutions, and campaigns are treated as potential threats to state security, regardless of their nature, mission, and impact—including those that benefit the public health. Furthermore, phenomena that a democratic government would define as social disorders or health deficiencies are usually categorized by Tehran as security concerns. This posture often entails blocking nongovernmental actors from intervening in these issues and criminalizing any individual or institution that attempts to get involved.

For example, according to a 2011 Amnesty International report, the Iranian doctors Kamiar Alaei and his brother Arash Alaei were imprisoned from 2008 to 2011 on charges of "cooperating with an enemy government." Their actual "crime"? Founding an NGO for prevention and treatment of HIV/AIDS. Last week, the brothers wrote a *New York Times* op-ed titled "How Iran Completely and Utterly Botched Its Response to the Coronavirus." The article began: "We were doctors in the Iranian health system for years. This is what happens when you make health policy subservient to politics."

Indeed, Tehran's lack of transparency and systematic deception regarding the coronavirus is anything but a new behavior. Many citizens are now deeply suspicious of government claims about health issues by default, even when

they lack access to accurate data sources that would confirm their mistrust. For instance, when authorities issued contradictory announcements last fall about the unusually high rate of AIDS infection in the province of Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, street protests soon erupted. The public's anger was exacerbated when the regime refused to take responsibility for a local medical center's practice of using HIV-contaminated syringes, instead blaming foreign media and domestic political opponents. On October 19, Health Minister Saeed Namaki insisted that the matter was "classified."

The regime has taken a similarly politicized approach to disaster relief. When major flooding struck Kermanshah province in May 2019, many nongovernmental institutions, sports stars, and celebrities managed to raise large sums of money and provide significant aid to the people in need. In response, government media criticized their luxurious lifestyle and complained about their legal tax exemptions, generating significant public resentment toward many celebrities who had previously been well-liked. Such systematic humiliation is Tehran's way of preventing any alternative authority from taking independent action when citizens come under threat, whether due to the state's aggression or its incompetence.

Social media and the Internet have done little to break this overwhelming grip. When crises like the coronavirus emerge, even experienced Iranian Internet users are exposed to limitless messages with conflicting, misleading, or manipulative information, much of it disseminated via the regime's potent cyber capabilities. Most users are therefore quite susceptible to believing and facilitating virtual mass campaigns even if their content winds up sowing misinformation and confusion.

The proliferation of anti-regime campaigns does not necessarily alleviate this problem, especially when some of them tend toward propaganda themselves. When the coronavirus first emerged, regime reports about the crisis failed to persuade many Iranians. Yet the public was similarly skeptical when anti-regime websites and satellite television networks spread dramatically different reports without proof (though in some cases such proof was impossible to obtain given the regime's deliberate withholding of disease statistics).

## IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

**O**n paper, the regime's defining traits seem like a self-destructive combination: declining domestic credibility, international isolation, minimal competence to carry out its basic duties, ceaseless use of violence to maintain control, and an exhausting, defiant, utopian push to expand its hegemony abroad. Perhaps the recent string of crises will make that self-destruction more likely to materialize at some point.

Yet even if the regime founders, the damage it has done to Iranian society leaves little hope for a smooth, speedy transition to a democratic, relatively U.S.-friendly state in the near term. The public is struggling with a profound social trust deficit, the disintegration of shared values, and deep burnout after years of regime aggression and humiliation—all of which would likely delay or abort the strong social and moral solidarity needed to birth a truly promising regime alternative any time soon. Instead, many citizens are focused on just surviving, and have adopted deeply cynical worldviews that create a disturbing sense of living in a lawless space rather than a functioning nation.

In all likelihood, then, only a small subset of actors would be willing and able to fill the vacuum that follows the regime's ultimate collapse—namely, existing factions that already hold the keys to Iran's military arsenal and prisons. Such a replacement government would hardly choose to denounce the police state from which it was birthed, nor the defiant anti-Western animosity that has been Khamenei's calling card.

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