

The Coronavirus in Iran (Part 1): Clerical Factors

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

Mar 9, 2020

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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



Brief Analysis

The clergy's ambitions for global Shia revolution made the city of Qom uniquely vulnerable to the disease, and their resistance to modern medical science weakened the state's ability to combat its spread.

On February 19, two days before the Iranian government officially announced the arrival of coronavirus, an infected businessman who had recently returned from China to Qom passed away. The location and timing of his death illustrate how the Shia holy city and the religious leaders and institutions who call it home have played an outsized role in the disease's disproportionately rapid spread inside Iran compared to other countries. How did this situation come to pass, and what does it say about the current state of the clerical establishment, its relationship with the regime, and its alienation from large swaths of Iranian society? ([Part 2 of this PolicyWatch \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-2-regime-culpability-and-resiliency\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-2-regime-culpability-and-resiliency) discusses the regime's role in the outbreak and its resiliency to such crises.)

FROM CRISIS TO CRISIS

The epidemic hit Iran at the worst time and place. It emerged just after two major domestic crises—the gasoline protest movement that began in November, and the military's downing of an airliner full of Iranian citizens in January—and just before [the February parliamentary election \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-predetermined-parliamentary-election\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-predetermined-parliamentary-election). Moreover, ground zero was Qom, the ideological capital and spiritual center for Shia Muslims worldwide—including many potential disease carriers from China.

In addition to fostering a general climate of instability, the lead-up crises made much of the Iranian public instantly suspicious toward the government's statements, statistics, and containment strategies in reaction to the virus. From refusing to acknowledge the protestors it has killed (more than 1,500 according to Reuters), to denying responsibility

for the airline disaster and treating the victims' families badly, to displaying cold indifference about the historically low turnout for last month's election, the regime has inadvertently instilled an even deeper level of mistrust among the people. This sentiment encompasses not only the leadership's competence in times of crisis, but also its commitment to its legal duties and moral principles.

One practical consequence of such mistrust is that citizens are now ignoring the recommendations issued by the political and religious establishment as much as they can, instead listening to their own instincts or consulting alternative sources. For instance, in Tehran and other cities, parents have refused to send their children back to class after the government decided to keep schools open.

“HOLY HAVEN” BECOMES GROUND ZERO

Iran's virus outbreak began not in the capital or the centers of tourism, but in Qom, a city widely viewed as an unattractive place to move given its location in the middle of a desert and its rigid social environment. The city's religious epithet—“the nest of the Prophet and his family”—was intended to reassure believers worldwide that it was insulated against epidemics and other disasters. Indeed, the Shia conviction of Qom's immunity against catastrophe seems as firm as the wider Muslim faith in Mecca and Medina's indestructibility.

To be sure, Qom has been repeatedly ruined and evacuated over the centuries by both human conflicts and natural calamities. For example, the great famine of 1870-1872 led to a 30 percent decrease in its population. Yet its ability to survive and rebuild has only cemented its mythological image in believers' minds—a conviction whose rigidity stems not so much from the devotion of individual worshippers, but from the complex web of theology, social institutions, financial resources/exchanges, and political power relations in which they live. And if early reports about the spread of the coronavirus prove correct, Qom's status as the ideological capital of the Islamic Revolution helped make it the pathogen's transmitting center to the rest of Iran and at least seven other countries.

The dangerously irresponsible decisions that authorities have made about preventive measures in Qom provide a window into the regime's religiously superstitious orientation. Both Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the clerical establishment he controls have opposed the medical recommendations given to them by the Ministry of Health, including calls for setting up quarantines in Qom. They tend to justify their resistance by touting the city's divine immunity, even going so far as to encourage people to visit the local shrine of Fatima Masoumeh and pray for the sick to receive miraculous cures. When health officials pushed to quarantine the shrine itself, Mohammad Saidi—the site's custodian and Khamenei's top local clerical representative—joined other religious authorities in resisting the decision, causing significant delays in implementing much-needed precautionary measures.

In addition to exacerbating the people's feelings of panic and anger, such developments will surely widen the cultural divide between the religious establishment and Iran's educated middle- and upper-middle-class urban populations. In recent years, the Shia clergy's longstanding quarrel with the medical field has helped nurture a previously marginal trend: that of uncompromisingly rejecting modern medicine and promoting “Islamic medicine” as the true science inspired by divine knowledge. Regime officials have systematically promoted “Islamic medicine” in parallel to modern medical care, even though the phrase was coined not too long ago and lacks any deep historical tradition or legitimacy.

The political aspect of the clergy's opposition to quarantining Qom bears mentioning as well: namely, the notion that “the enemy's hidden hands” were behind the cabinet's emergency health recommendations. As Saidi reiterated in a February 22 speech, “No one allows the enemy to portray Qom as an unsafe city; defeating Qom is the dream of treacherous Trump and his domestic mercenaries, but this dream will not be realized even in their grave...Now it is clear that this malicious, dirty, and devilish man [Trump] has targeted Qom as the shrine of the Prophet's family, the birthplace of Islamic Revolution, the haven for the world's Shia...[and] the hometown for those who are brave, heroic,

and faithful to the Supreme Leader. [Trump] wants to make coronavirus an excuse to culturally strike at Qom's prestige."

CHINESE MUSLIMS AND SHIA GLOBALIZATION

The current crisis highlights the stunning extent to which the Shia clergy and community have become globalized under the Islamic Republic. Such a process would not have occurred so quickly (if at all) without elements of the clergy ascending to political power and gaining access to the nation's wealth. In the pre-revolutionary era, the clerical world was closed and calm—a trait that greatly curtailed the domestic and international travel patterns of individual religious figures, among other effects. But the revolution opened the door to an unrecognizably borderless space for the clergy, no less vast than the globe.

Today, one of Qom's wealthiest and most important institutions is al-Mustafa University, built and run by Khamenei with dozens of branches inside Iran and abroad. Its 40,000-plus students include many foreigners who are viewed not simply as religious pupils, but as missionaries in the regime's ideological expeditionary force. According to Muhammad Hossein Bahreini, president of the Mashhad University of Medical Sciences, Iran's high rate of coronavirus infection was at least partly attributable to the presence of 700 Chinese seminarians in Qom, suggesting that some may have been virus carriers. Predictably, clerical officials denied his claim immediately and ruled out the possibility of any connection between the virus and the city's Chinese seminarians.

Qom also hosts a considerable number of Chinese workers, probably many more than the clerical community. The government does not release reliable statistics about the many thousands of foreign nationals who reside in Iran, especially Qom, but the city's Chinese residents are undoubtedly Muslim, if not Shia.

Islamic sources claim that China has roughly forty million Muslims, approximately four million of them Shia (mainly Ismailis or Twelvers). The greatest concentration of them can be found in the eastern region of Xinjiang, which has a large Uyghur population. Many Chinese Muslims have long suffered from systematic suppression, persecution, discrimination, and even elimination by the Chinese state. Yet Iran and other major Muslim countries typically refuse to criticize Beijing in public for such massacres or offer their political support to victims, instead prioritizing their relationship with the government over pan-Islamist gestures.

At the same time, Tehran has found other ways to cultivate influence among Chinese Muslims. In line with its general policy of exporting the revolution, these mechanisms include making religious investments in Muslim areas of China, building networks of Iran-friendly elites, and proselyting its brand of Shia Islam within the larger Chinese Muslim community. Unofficial reports indicate that the regime has also facilitated the entry of undocumented Chinese Muslims for the purpose of ideological training in Qom, with some of them returning to their homeland as regime-funded missionaries.

But the Chinese presence in Qom goes well beyond residents. Around 2.5 million foreign tourists visit the city annually, including thousands of Chinese. Six years ago, Qom clerical centers began to teach the Chinese language, and such programs have since expanded to seminaries in Isfahan and other cities. The Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute, headed by Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, is among the clerical entities that now admit Chinese students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

In the immediate term, U.S. officials should use government radio and television organs, social media, public statements, and other outlets to disseminate accurate information about the coronavirus situation in Iran: for example, how the disease reached the country, how it spread from Qom to other cities, how many cases have emerged, and what the regime and clergy have done in response. They should also consider effective ways to counter the massive amounts of virus-related misinformation and disinformation being disseminated through various

television networks and cyberspace, as both the regime and the opposition rapidly politicize the issue for contrary purposes. Yet they should avoid directly criticizing clerical institutions or further panicking the public, instead letting the facts speak for themselves.

In the longer term, the crisis should help remind Washington that the clergy is completely beholden to Khamenei and, as such, should not be considered as an alternative channel for outreach or a potential independent actor if the Islamic Republic becomes destabilized. Since the revolution, the regime has steadily subjugated Iran's clerical institutions, depriving them of their traditional autonomy and facilitating the demise of the deep-rooted multidimensional authority they held in the past. In return, they have seen **exponential growth in their wealth, bureaucracy, and state functions** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-shiite-clergy-post-khamenei-balancing-authority-and-autonomy>). Their reliance on government funds and private businesses have made them less dependent on collecting religious taxes directly from the people—but also distanced them from society, exposed their intellectual poverty, and dissolved their past status as the exclusive medium for religious learning and community leadership.

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