# Iran and the Coronavirus Crisis: Outcomes and Scenarios

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# Contents

**The Iranian government was forced to resume low-risk economic activities in most of the country's provinces despite the fact that the dire consequences of the coronavirus outbreak still loom large. Given the sharp decline in main income sources, economic pressure and harsh living conditions, the Iranian government has become unable to address the coronavirus crisis. However, the Iranian government would not miss the opportunity to reap gains from the crisis at the domestic and international levels. To evade responsibility for the long-standing crisis the country has been suffering and quell the simmering public anger, the Iranian government has accused the United States of creating a conspiracy against the country.**

In spite of the catastrophic economic, social and humanitarian ramifications resulting from the coronavirus crisis, the Iranian government managed to politicize it and reap some temporary and symbolic gains. It called on international organizations and public figures to suspend US sanctions imposed on Iran on humanitarian grounds as well as to activate the long-awaited INSTEX mechanism, announced by the European troika in January 2019 — which had been put on hold for almost one year due to US pressure on the Europeans.

The failure in addressing the crisis and its ramifications will remain the ghost haunting the Iranian government when life returns to normal. This is in addition to the fragile gains the government made from using the coronavirus crisis as it sought to convince the international community to place further pressure on Washington to revise its sanctions strategy towards Tehran.

The coronavirus crisis raises questions about Iran's internal conditions and why the crisis was exacerbated to this extent and how it contributed to worsening the country's internal conditions. Moreover, it triggers a host of questions on how the

Iranian authorities practically managed the variant dimensions of the crisis; how it used the crisis to achieve political gains at home and abroad; and finally and most prominently, the most significant ramifications as well as the future of the coronavirus crisis.

This study argues that the Iranian government failed in managing the coronavirus crisis and deliberately sought to politicize it to achieve specific goals at home and abroad — leading to a deepening of the crisis and generating multiple ramifications and challenges. The study's outline is as follows:

Internal Dimensions of the Coronavirus Crisis in Iran

Power and Handling of the Coronavirus Crisis

Power and Attempts to Exploit the Crisis

Results and Assessment of Iran's Management of the Coronavirus Crisis

Implications and Future Scenarios

## I- Internal Dimensions of the Coronavirus Crisis in Iran

During the worst crisis the ruling system has faced since the 1979 revolution, the coronavirus pandemic spread across the country. The crisis resulted from the US 'maximum pressure' policy against Iran which caused severe economic and social ramifications.[1] Questioning the ruling system's legitimacy, factional and popular protests have never stopped since the 2017 protests. The Iranian ruling system has never faced such enormous protests for three years in a row; 2017-2018 and 2019. It addressed them with unprecedented force. In early 2020, a new wave of protests emerged over the ruling system's denial of shooting down the Ukrainian plane.

Iran has become a hotbed of the virus in the Middle East; topping the list of coronavirus cases and deaths. According to Iran's official statistics, the country registered 4,500 deaths, and 70,000 cases from the beginning of the virus outbreak till April 13, 2020. Iran's opposition and non-biased international

organizations accused the Iranian government of hiding the true number of cases and questioned the authenticity of the government's official statistics, claiming that the death-toll reached 20,000.[2]

The coronavirus outbreak revealed the fragility of Iranian health services; the country suffers from a sharp shortage in basic medical equipment needed to address the crisis. Though most countries face the same crisis as Iran, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned that Iran is unable to withstand the consequences of the virus outbreak.[3]

The Iranian government has been repeatedly accused of lack of transparency about the true number of coronavirus cases. These accusations increased after the Islamic Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) played a role in issuing death certificates without citing the virus. To hide the true death toll and the extent of the catastrophe, some death certificates list 'severe respiratory failure' as the cause.[4] The government's lack of transparency made it lose trust at home and abroad. Some Arabian Gulf countries also accused Iran of 'exporting' the virus because the Iranian government had hidden the truth about the virus spreading and had not put exit and departure stamps on passports of travelers arriving or leaving Iran.

Iran's severe economic crisis has arisen due to the country's main budget revenues declining. Iran has seen a decline in revenues from taxes, oil exports and the service sector. Oil exports have hit their lowest level due to US sanctions, and there has been a sharp decline in international oil prices — owing to a lack of demand for oil due to the global lockdown following the coronavirus spread. As the country's economy is facing extraordinary conditions due to the coronavirus outbreak, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani announced that the government's budget lacks sufficient funding.[5]

Since the very beginning of the coronavirus crisis, the conflicts

between the government branches were apparent. Iranian officials began pointing fingers at each other for exploiting the crisis. Ayatollah Mohammed Fazel Moybedi, a faculty member at Mofid Univeristy in Qom said, "The authorities politicized the crisis as they claimed that it is due to US sanctions imposed on Iran."

The Rouhani government faced a great deal of criticism as it had vastly understated the spread of the virus since its initial outbreak. The government was accused of following the same old policy it had previously adopted to address natural disasters and political crises.

After top Iranian officials were infected with the coronavirus, the devastating sweep of the virus across the country became fully apparent. Many lawmakers were infected with the virus – Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani could not attend the first parliamentary session after the elections as he was infected with the virus. As a result, the parliamentary sessions were suspended from February 25, 2020 to April 7, 2020. Rouhani and other officials rarely showed up, inciting chaos and distrust within the government branches. Some IRGC commanders, members of the Expediency Discernment Council and the Guardian Council were infected with the virus. The virus has ravaged the country, infecting the family of the supreme leader himself, clerics, and top officials and public figures.[6]

## II- Power and Handling of the Coronavirus Crisis

The first coronavirus case in Iran was officially announced on February 19, 2020. Only after the 11th parliamentary elections ended, the Iranian authorities took its first measure to combat the virus by shutting down universities for one week. Five days later, they announced the suspension of Friday prayers. However, on February 28, 2020 the initial spread of the virus across the country set alarm bells ringing.

Iranian officials made variant remarks about the coronavirus;

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and IRGC Commander Hossein Salami claimed that the virus was a form of biological warfare that America had launched against Iran while the health minister said he had warned government officials about the novel coronavirus two months before its official announcement. Apparently, the government branches were not coordinating with each other properly to address the crisis.

The crisis was aggravated further. A new committee headed by the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces Mohammad Bagheri was formed to combat coronavirus. Bagheri said curfews will be imposed on all streets, malls, and markets within 24 hours in efforts to combat coronavirus. Later, Rouhani said on March 16, "There will be no quarantine neither today nor during, before or after Nowruz." The curfew announced by Bagheri was not implemented and no serious measure was taken to fight the virus.[7]

The government tried to redress its failure in handling the crisis, so the National Committee on Combating Coronavirus took a number of proactive measures such as shutting down religious centers on March 15 despite growing pressure from clerics, and a travel ban between cities on March 26 was introduced — however, these measures were taken after the death toll passed 2,000. The government justified its delay in taking these measures on the basis that it did not want to jeopardize the country's economy which has been suffering under US sanctions.[8]

At the early stage, the National Committee on Combating Coronavirus was too lax in dealing with the crisis, turning a blind eye to the warnings of medical experts. Discoordination and the government's stumbling response to the pandemic spiked up the death toll. In early April, the committee resorted to enforcing laws such as banning public gatherings, imposing $31 fines, impounding vehicles for one month, and banning travel

between cities.[9] Low-risk economic activities were partially resumed in most of the country's provinces on April 11, 2020 — except for Tehran which would be unlocked on April 18. Many governmental offices were reopened with one third of staff returning to work. Schools and universities are still in lockdown in addition to the continued banning of cultural, religious and sport gatherings.[10]

On the economic level, the government announced a package of measures to address the deteriorating conditions and to help the people affected by coronavirus. President Rouhani sought permission from the supreme leader to withdraw $1 billion from the National Development Fund to spend on fighting the virus. Khamenei, after receiving a wave of criticism from home and the American administration, approved Rouhani's request — Iran had previously requested a loan from the International Monitory Fund (IMF). The Iranian government would grant a loan of 1 million tomans with a 12 percent interest rate to 23 million low-income families but their subsidies will be reduced within 24 months. This is in addition to allowing small-sized businesses to postpone the payment of installments on their bank loans and helping families affected by coronavirus.[11]

The government provided loans to help companies continue their activities and maintain the welfare of workers. The Central Bank of Iran (CBI) promised to give 75, 000 billion tomans [equivalent to $5 billion] to businesses but it stipulated that they must keep workers on their payrolls.[12]

To cover the budget deficits amid the coronavirus spread, the government requested $5 billion from the IMF — under the IMF debt relief measures to help countries combat the pandemic.[13] Iran's Finance and Economic Affairs Ministry exerted a great deal of effort to receive cash and non-cash assistance from development banks. Iran's deputy minister for economic affairs confirmed that his country is willing to receive funds from

development banks.[14]

To suppress the dissemination of information about the virus which would generate fear and concern among the Iranian people and would definitely provoke further criticism against the Iranian government's performance in addressing the crisis, the Iranian authorities arrested dozens of people who posted videos of coronavirus victims and issued outstanding warrants for others.[15]

### Table 1: Chronological Order of the Measures taken by the Iranian Authorities to Fight the Coronavirus Spread

| | |
|---|---|
| December 31, 2019 | The WHO China Country Office was informed of cases of pneumonia in Wuhan. |
| February, 2020 19 | The Iranian Health Ministry reported the first two fatal cases of coronavirus on the same day. |
| February 22, 2020 | Lockdown on schools and universities for one week. |
| February, 2020 24 | The WHO said that the world must be prepared for a potential pandemic. |
| February, 2020 26 | President Rouhani: No plans to impose quarantines on the virus-affected regions. |
| February 28, 2020 | Friday prayer suspension. |

| February 28, 2020 | BBC (Persian): According to an independent survey, Iran registered 210 deaths from coronavirus infections. 34 deaths were reported by Iran's official statistics. |
|---|---|
| March 31, 2020 | Major General Mohammad Bagheri: Curfews to be imposed on all markets and malls in the next 24 hours. |
| March 15, 2020 | Lockdown on some shrines in Mashhad and Qom. |
| March 16, 2020 | Rouhani refused for the second time to impose quarantine on any province. |
| March 26, 2020 | Travel ban between cities. |
| April 11, 2020 | Resumption of low-risk economic activities. |

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## III- Power and Attempts to Exploit the Crisis

The Iranian ruling system did not spare the opportunity to exploit the coronavirus crisis to entrench its dominance at home and achieve popular support. It claimed that a conspiracy by foreign powers was behind the coronavirus spread in Iran. The Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei accused the United States of creating the virus specifically for Iran. Some voices called out to put political conflicts aside, boost collaboration and avoid mutual recrimination to address this challenge. This is reflected in the remarks of Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri, "Exerting more social solidarity and national resolve will help Iran overcome the crisis soon."[16]

To affirm its role, the IRGC built field hospitals[17] while the Basij Forces deployed 600,000 members across the country to support all organizations working to address the crisis. It also distributed thousands of relief packages in affected regions which were funded by donations.[18] Media outlets publicized the significance of the efforts made on the ground by Iran-backed militias to combat the virus such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Iranian government wanted to improve the image and reputation of its proxy militias which thwarted popular protests in the mentioned countries, killing many people.[19]

Apparently, the IRGC initially avoided getting involved in the coronavirus crisis and chose to assign responsibility to the Armed Forces. It did not want to receive unwanted criticism.[20] To improve its image on the global stage after the intensive use of force to thwart the gasoline protests in November 2019 which resulted in the killing of 1,500 people and the arrests of hundreds of protesters, the Iranian ruling system temporarily released about 85,000 prisoners to slow the spread of coronavirus. The UN special rapporteur on human rights in Iran asked Iranian authorities to temporarily release all political prisoners.[21]

As the whole world remains in a battle against the coronavirus pandemic, Iran seized the opportunity to escalate its military fronts in the region. Its proxy militias in Iraq escalated military attacks against US troops and its Houthi militia attacked Saudi Arabia. Iran aimed to place pressure on regional and world powers to reconsider their policies towards it. Moreover, Iran exploited the coronavirus crisis to gain world sympathy for the humanitarian situation in Iran resulting from the spread of the virus while placing further pressure on Washington to withdraw its troops from Iraq.[22]

Iran has launched its largest diplomatic campaign with the participation of all government bodies to invoke world

sympathy and to gain the support of international powers and organizations in its fight against US sanctions. The campaign was led by President Hassan Rouhani, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, and Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani. They made phone calls with their counterparts across the world, delivered emotive media rhetoric where they linked the coronavirus catastrophe to US sanctions, trying to humanize the impact of US sanctions on the Iranian people. The Iranian government also launched a popular campaign targeting the American people to pressure the US Treasury to stop imposing continuous sanctions on Iran.[23]

Finally, Iran escalated its nuclear threats amid the coronavirus global pandemic. It did not allow the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) experts access to specific sites, claiming that the agency's request to access the sites is triggered by US pressure. Iran also threatened to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if the international community does not respond to its demands.[24] The agency accused Tehran of violating its commitments by exceeding the uranium enrichment percentage level and developing more advanced centrifuges.

## IV- Results and Assessment of Iran's Management of the Coronavirus Crisis

The Iranian ruling system claims that it is well versed in addressing crises, given the fact that it has dealt with sanctions and pressure for more than 40 years since the 1979 revolution. This is clearly reflected in the remarks of Iran's Supreme National Security Council Secretary, (SNSC) Ali Shamkhani: "During the past years we've learnt the art of managing our life in times of crises." The performance and outcomes of Iran's crisis management can be evaluated as follows:

*Implications of Politicizing the Crisis: Limited Domestic and International Gains*

Controlling internal affairs and curbing anti-government

protests at home and abroad: The government benefited from the social panic resulting from the spread of the coronavirus, which has impacted the world and is not limited to Iran alone, as it contributed to restoring calm and internal stability. Following the outbreak of the virus, all mass protests and rallies against the government declined. Along with the decline in national public outrage against the government which lasted for months, there has been a corresponding decline in public anger against Iranian influence in both Iraq and Lebanon.[25]

Improving the image of hardliners: While the crisis and its management has negatively affected the popularity of Rouhani and the reformists, it has enhanced the image of the hardliner wing that dominates power within the system. From the very beginning of the coronavirus crisis, the hardliners called for strict measures including: travel bans, quarantines, curfews, social distancing, and the cancellation of religious and cultural events to confront the spread of the virus in the country. They also called on the government to aid those affected. However, government institutions, especially the IRGC, the Basij Forces and parallel financial institutions also tried to confront the epidemic on the ground. Since the government led by Rouhani dealt with the crisis lightly at the beginning, it was criticized for contributing to the spread of the virus after refusing to impose a quarantine and implement stricter precautionary measures to fight the pandemic.[26]

International demands to suspend US sanctions imposed on Iran: The government has won the sympathy of some significant international powers and organizations with a number calling for the lifting of US sanctions on Iran. The Iranian diplomatic campaign gained some response from international parties. The representatives of Iran, Russia, China, Cuba, North Korea, Iraq, Venezuela, and Nicaragua sent a letter to the United Nations Secretary-General asking him to call for the lifting of sanctions

on Iran. The UN Special Rapporteur on Food Rights, Hilal Elver also called for the lifting of international sanctions on countries such as Iran, Syria and Venezuela due to the coronavirus pandemic.[27]

On April 3, 2020, the European Union supported the idea of exempting some humanitarian goods from the economic sanctions imposed on countries such as Cuba, Venezuela and Iran so that these countries can obtain the necessary medical equipment quickly.[28]

Triggering the first INSTEX transaction: The European Union successfully activated INSTEX for the first time since its creation in January 2019. Germany provided medical and humanitarian assistance to the Iranian government through this mechanism, although the United States tried to prevent the activation of this mechanism. With regard to US endeavors to curb the activation of this mechanism, the President of the British-Iranian Chamber of Commerce, Lord Norman Lamont, said: "America impedes the activation of INSTEX, and prolongs its implementation period." [29]

Presidential candidate Joe Biden called for facilitating the dispatch of medicines and medical equipment to counter coronavirus in Iran as a humanitarian gesture and called for the release and return of Americans detained in Iran.[30]

Receiving humanitarian aid to combat the spread of the virus: More than 30 countries and a number of international organizations have provided assistance to Iran to counter coronavirus. In this regard, China has sent shipments of aid since the outbreak of the crisis via 28 flights. This aid included: more than 10 million masks, 500,000 coronavirus testing kits, and 300,000 clothing items for surgery and isolation, as well as 2,200,000 medical gloves, 350 industrial respirators, 500 prefab hospital rooms, and a variety of drugs and equipment for hospitals.[31]

Banks and development organizations have also provided assistance to Iran. For example, the OPEC Fund for Global Development provided $500,000 in assistance to the World Health Organization for buying and distributing the necessary equipment for hospitals to counter the coronavirus in Iran. The OPEC Fund for Global Development had previously provided flood relief assistance to Iran in 2019.[32]

Although Iran attempts to politicize the crisis and claims that its failure to manage the virus crisis is due to sanctions, Iran has also received assistance including medical equipment and tools worth $200 million from Turkey, Qatar, Japan, France, China, and from several international organizations such as the World Health Organization.[33]

*Outcomes of the Containment Policy: Failure in Performance and Suspension of Sanctions*

The limited gains Iran achieved out of the coronavirus crisis led to ramifications for the ruling system and on the whole internal and international situation.

Slow response to the coronavirus spread: In reality, however, the decisions of the government exacerbated the crisis. Iranian authorities were late in detecting and announcing the presence of coronavirus which was confirmed on February 19, 2020. It is believed that this delay was done intentionally at a time when the disease had not spread, and its risks were still unclear. This delay was due to the government's desire to ensure that public participation in the parliamentary elections held in the second half of February 2020 would not be affected. However, it follows therefore that the authorities were late in taking the necessary measures to confront the disease which led to the rapid spread of the virus.[34]

Failure in crisis management: There was also a lack of coordination between state institutions. The institutional dualism that the political system suffers from affected the

management of the crisis and decision-making. Rouhani avoided taking the responsibility for running the Committee on Crisis Management because of his limited authority in confronting parallel institutions and military institutions and because of the tense relations between him and these institution. He most probably wanted to place the burden of the crisis on the wing led by the supreme leader that opposes him. Rouhani has always held this wing responsible for his lack of power over the last few years since the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement.[35]

The Iranian government failed to manage the coronavirus crisis compared to other countries in the region specifically, for many reasons: the late response to the crisis, the absence of transparency and attempts to politically capitalize on the crisis rather than addressing it. This approach has led to popular dissatisfaction toward the government's policies, especially considering the devastating spread of coronavirus; viral news and videos expose the reality of the disaster, and the unprecedented deterioration in living conditions.

People lost trust in their government: Despite the weak precautionary measures undertaken by the government and its institutions, the Iranian people did not respond appropriately. Public compliance to decisions and directives was limited due to the people losing trust in the government.[36] This loss of trust is due to the government's poor response to the crisis and the contradictions in official statements regarding the crisis. Furthermore, there is a gap between the Iranian people and the government due to the strategy of plausible deniability which is employed by the government in every crisis. This was the case during the Ukrainian plane crash in January 2020 and other incidents which have played a role in influencing public behavior toward the government.

Clerics' negative impact on the crisis: The clerics helped to exacerbate the crisis when they opposed the closure of the

shrines in the city of Qom and refused to impose a quarantine on the city where the epidemic broke out resulting in the virus being transferred to other Iranian cities. Rather, their religious opinions and *fatwas* played a role in complicating matters, especially since these fatwas had an impact on public non-compliance with the necessary safety precautions.[37]

Exacerbating the economic crisis: The government was undoubtedly not ready to counter a crisis of this size. This crisis has placed additional economic strain on the government which is unable to bear its consequences. It has also worsened the suffering of citizens and their living conditions. In addition, the economic repercussions of the coronavirus crisis will be particularly catastrophic for Iran compared to other countries due to sanctions, international pressure and its budget deficit exacerbated by the loss of its oil exports.

The crisis also revealed the fragility of the economic situation and the inability of the system to bear the burden of the crisis. This was evident in the government's hesitation to impose quarantine and its calls for companies to continue their activities. The government feared that workers would lose their jobs and was unwilling to take responsibility for this.[38]

The diplomatic campaign failed to impact the US maximum pressure policy towards Iran: Iran's attempts to alleviate American pressure by blaming sanctions for impeding its ability to counter the spread of coronavirus have failed. The United States did not pay attention to Iranian pressure, nor international demands to lift sanctions, and continued to exercise economic pressure by maintaining its policy of maximum pressure, and punishing any foreign parties cooperating with Iran outside the framework of humanitarian assistance.[39]

## V- Implications and Future Scenarios

The government's policy response to the coronavirus outbreak would not stop the virus spreading in near future. The resumption

of low-risk economic activities will further the spread of the virus. Economic necessity has triggered the government to take this measure in order to address the looming recession due to the lockdown in Iran. However, this measure contradicts efforts to counter the spread of the virus and it may still cause the recession that the government fears, especially if the spread of the virus continues unabated.

The government will find itself in a corner after the coronavirus crisis is over. US sanctions are ongoing and there is no way to lift them. If the government did not impose complete lockdown and quarantine across the country, more Iranians would definitely be infected by the virus. With the further spread of coronavirus in Iran, the legitimacy of the government is likely to erode further, and public anger rooted in political, economic and social factors will increase.

If quarantine and complete lockdown are imposed, Iran is likely to experience an economic recession, widespread inflation, and bankruptcy. This will inevitably create widespread public anger and trigger protests like those in 2019. Overcoming this impasse can be possible once the crisis has ended globally. But this does not mean that the crisis in Iran will be over or will result in a revision of Iran's strict position on negotiations with the United States.

Iran may pursue a resistance policy and thus bear the consequences of the crisis for a limited period if there is no internal threat to the legitimacy of the system. This scenario is the most likely, until November at least, pending the results of the American elections. Iran believes that Trump's fortunes may decline due to the coronavirus crisis. If this happened, Iran believes that the Americans would be preoccupied by a conflict Trump may incite in Iraq before the November 2020 presidential elections to cover his poor performance in addressing the coronavirus crisis in the country.

Likewise, betting on the political exploitation of the coronavirus pandemic to serve as a tool to lift sanctions and alleviate pressures is not guaranteed in any way. Although Iran exploited the coronavirus and attempted to exert pressure on the United States to withdraw its forces from Iraq, the decisive American response, the deployment of its troops, the transfer of its embassy to the Ain al-Assad base, and the deployment of Patriot missile batteries, have sent a strong deterrent message to Iran, which in turn prompted it to reconsider using the coronavirus pandemic to pressure the United States and its allies through military escalation.[40]

The government has made some gains from the politicization of the crisis, resulting in some countries, international organizations and political figures calling for the lifting of sanctions imposed on Iran due to humanitarian reasons. However, these gains do not represent an impressive success as the sanctions remain in place. The humanitarian aid Iran received amid the coronavirus crisis is limited to medicines and basic food products. The United States has refused to respond to these pressures. None of these countries, however, can dare to challenge the United States and violate its sanctions on Iran. Proof of this is that the United States, despite the crisis, imposed several sanctions on countries, companies and individuals that have cooperated with Iran to export Iranian oil or to circumvent the sanctions imposed on financial transactions during February and March 2020. Iran's clandestine oil exports and financial mechanisms have faced further setbacks as a result of the coronavirus crisis.[41]

The activation of INSTEX does not indicate that the participant states seek to expand the scope of its work. Therefore, the prospect of expanding the scope of this mechanism for other than humanitarian assistance is unlikely because European companies are not ready to work under this mechanism fearing

American sanctions. The European countries themselves had their own conditions to fully activate this mechanism including Iran's accession to the FATF. However, Iran failed to comply with the FATF regulations. Accordingly, Iran was blacklisted by this organization.[42]

Europe remains concerned about Iran's nuclear policy after it breached its obligations under the nuclear agreement. Tehran increased its uranium enrichment, installed advanced centrifuges, evaded the International Atomic Energy Agency's supervision over its nuclear sites and activities,[43] and continues to develop its ballistic missile program. European countries have criticized Iran's destabilizing regional behavior. The United States will not accept measures that may thwart its maximum pressure strategy on Iran by any international party, especially the Europeans.

Experience has proved that the Iranian government uses humanitarian aid for purchasing goods, food, and medicine in order to circumvent the sanctions. It also uses this aid to finance the government's expansionist activities and its ideological and revolutionary policies. This is what the US administration recently revealed when it accused the government of misappropriating humanitarian funds received from the European Union.

Some facts disprove Iran's claims about the impact of sanctions on countering the crisis. While the Trump administration is pursuing its maximum pressure policy, it has exempted food and medicine from the sanctions. Indeed, Iran imported basic commodities and medicines in 2019 worth $15 billion from the oil revenues earnt. The United States, in cooperation with the Swiss government, launched a financial mechanism in early 2020 to that end, through which some companies conducted transactions with Iran.[44]

The Iranian people have lost trust in their government. The

record of the Iranian government has repeatedly proved to the Iranian people that their government is deceitful and always denies its failures. It is very likely that the international community has also lost trust in the Iranian government; therefore, it is not willing to lift sanctions. After years of experience, it has become clear that the Iranian government does not care about the Iranian people as much as its survival in power. The government, within six days in November 2019, killed 1,500 protesters for opposing the gasoline price hike, arrested nearly 7,000 people, and ignored the spread of the virus across the country until it became a disaster. The government's delayed response in countering the coronavirus outbreak in Iran was driven by political considerations, to renew its legitimacy during the elections.

If the government truly prioritizes the welfare of the Iranian people and desires real legitimacy rooted in public support, why does the government continuously ignore popular demands to stop financing its expansionist project? And why has it failed to improve living conditions? On the contrary, despite the worsening crisis, Iran still directs its militias in Iraq to step up the fight against the United States as well as its militia in Yemen to step up the fight against Saudi Arabia.

It can be said that the Iranian government made two serous missteps in managing the spread of the coronavirus crisis. The first failure was when the authorities dealt with the crisis casually, did not take it seriously and sent its planes to China where the pandemic originated. Iran was also late to announce the presence of the disease and to take the appropriate scientific measures to limit the spread of coronavirus. Iran made the second mistake when it politicized the coronavirus crisis at home and abroad, not for the interest of the Iranian people, but in order to ensure the survival and continuity of the government. However, this failure will undoubtedly have implications when

the coronavirus crisis is over and will deepen and worsen, as never before, the internal crisis that the government has been facing since the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement.

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