

# **The Religious Seminary and Coronavirus** **The Behavior of the Iranian Religious** **Elites Towards the Crisis**

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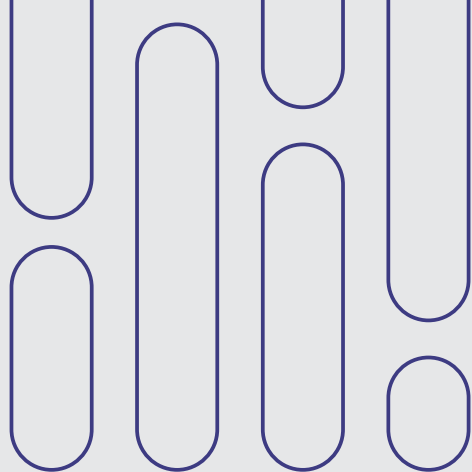
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**S**tudying the behavior of religious institutions and their position towards crises and disasters discloses the sectarian mindset and the conflict of religious thoughts, and how they deal with developments and calamities. The aforementioned could help one to understand the way of thinking of the religious elites responsible for official religious institutions. They are part of the religious, cultural, and political scene, and steer public opinion in the Iranian state. Thus, the coronavirus crisis has played a significant role in exposing the motivations of Iranian clerics and has shed light on the relationship between the sectarian/religious currents.

This study aims to shed light on the religious dimension of the coronavirus crisis, its politicization, and how it has been used to enhance sectarian and political legitimacy. It attempts to answer several questions: How do the religious elites deal with who they consider to be pro-Velayat-e Faqih and what they believe to be the rules of God (the primary source of law); the rules generated from the ijtehad of clerics (a secondary source of Shiite Islamic law)? What are the reasons for the government's anger against those who rejected its decisions in regard to religious rituals during the crisis? What is the vision of the government towards clerics who do not believe in Velayat-e Faqih or who believe that it is nonbinding when it comes to public affairs? The belief in the nonbinding nature of Velayat-e Faqih is problematic for the government as public affairs can include concepts such as the civilian state or Shura of the Jurists, in line with different clerical and philosophical standpoints.

The study raises the central philosophical question promoted by clerics in their public speeches: to what extent is the philosophical model in Iran idealist compared to the Western philosophical model? This question will be de-

constructed to understand its underpinnings and political and sectarian implications.

### I- **Coronavirus and Targeting the Iranian State**

The religious elites in Iran have inclined to the belief that coronavirus has been created by arrogant global powers to target Iran and the 'Islamic' revolution [the 1979 revolution]. This allegation began to be disseminated from the leader of the religious and political establishments in Iran, Ali Khamenei. According to him, coronavirus may be a deliberate biological attack.<sup>1</sup>

The religious and media elites enthusiastically welcomed the remarks of the supreme leader and worked to promote them as an axiomatic issue which cannot be questioned. Hojatoleslam Ebrahim Raisi repeated the "biological attack" remarks and called for strengthening the biological defense capabilities of the country.<sup>2</sup>

In the same context, Ayatollah Khatami did not rule out the possibility that the virus had been created in laboratories, announcing that the Americans are behind the spread of the virus, saying, "The possibility of a biological war is not ruled out when considering the spread of coronavirus. The accusations against the United States have been made by other countries. This accusation has not been leveled by Iran only. But scientists across the world raised this issue, and the truth will be revealed in the future."<sup>3</sup>

Promoting the same narrative, Ayatollah Haideri said that there are two theories related to the source of the virus. The first is that it is natural. The second is that the virus has been created biologically. He inclined toward the latter. "The main objective of this war is to confront the Islamic revolution in Iran [by the world oppressors]," he said.<sup>4</sup> Mehdi Talib also gives precedence to the likelihood that the virus has been created to target Iran and the 'Islamic' rev-

olution.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the remarks of the clerics are in line with the remarks of the supreme leader. They have promoted the belief that the virus has been created by the United States to target Iran and its revolution.

The remarks of the Iranian religious elites are consistent with Chinese allegations, without conclusive scientific proofs. But there is evidence suggesting the opposite. Some Western powers have accused China of being behind the spread of the virus.

Some reformists criticized the conservatives for adopting the Chinese position. The reformists wonder how the Iranian religious elite who has always spoken about the independence of Iranian decision-making – “No East, No West”<sup>6</sup> is now leaning towards the East.

According to some reformists, China’s handling of the crisis has been supported in Iran as Chinese influence in the country has grown and criticizing its performance would contradict Iranian foreign policy. The aforementioned fundamentalists described criticism targeting the Chinese Health Ministry’s spokesman as “costly, and it should be dealt with firmly.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, some of them justified the persecution of the Uighur community by the Chinese authorities, arguing that members of the Uighur community are ISIS operatives who should be repelled.<sup>8</sup>

This, on the ground, marks the end of the Khomeini-coined slogan “No East, No West,” which has been chanted since the revolution to this day. This is in addition to his quote “Islam supports those oppressed, not those arrogant.”<sup>9</sup> Such slogans have been used to please the domestic front in order to mobilize supporters and promote Iran’s sectarian project.

In conclusion, the conservatives arguing that the virus was deliberately created as a form of biological warfare was an attempt to deflect attention from the accusations leveled by some members of the clergy. They have argued that the failure to close shrines and religious cities was the main reason for the spread of the virus. Ayatollah Haideri upheld the position adopted by the clerics when he stated that the aim of the 'global arrogance' is to destroy the city of Qom – the capital of the Islamic revolution. He said, "Qom is the capital and center of the Islamic revolution. It is the religious and spiritual resort and haven for the followers of this model [Velayat-e Faqih] which is against the global arrogance and supportive of the Islamic resistance. Therefore, we have noticed how the enemies did seize this opportunity – the coronavirus crisis – to tarnish the reputation of the holy city of Qom."<sup>10</sup>

In clear-cut language, he said Qom and the clerics are not to blame for coronavirus. "The global media mouthpieces seized the opportunity under the guise of the coronavirus outbreak to defame Qom, clerics and the marjaya. They have falsely announced that the source of the virus is Qom and that if the city was placed under lockdown, the Iranian people would not have been affected."<sup>11</sup>

## **II- Unachievable Dream: The Iranian Philosophy as an Alternative**

The speech of the Iranian religious elite focused on the home front in Iran, especially the sectarian and pro-Velayat-e Faqih blocs. Their statements indicate that the coronavirus crisis is an opportunity for Iran's philosophical model to emerge across the world, as an alternative to the Western model, which has failed, according to the perspective of Iran's religious elite.

The clerics via promoting the nationalist model over the Western one, have intended to enhance the sectarian legitimacy of the government, and to express the failure of the Western philosophical model in managing the crisis. This is in addition to discrediting past models and promoting new ones as done by the supreme leader of Iran. He believes that the Iranian model has proved to be much more superior than the Western model amid the recent crisis. Ayatollah Khamenei said in a televised speech marking the birth anniversary of Imam Mahdi, “During the past two decades, certain [parties] made attempts to undermine the Iranian-Islamic culture, but this sense of Islamic culture and the chain of Islamic values is very strong among the people. Western civilization showed its outcome too, one of the most appalling of which is the US and some European countries: Confiscating other nations’ masks, emptying shops, fighting over toilet paper and long lines for buying guns during the coronavirus outbreak are the logical and natural outcome of the philosophy that governs western civilization.”<sup>12</sup>

It is noticeable that he speaks of countries but also of individuals. He believes that the state is responsible for the culture of its people and influences their morals. Hence, he is not only judgmental of Western countries but also of their societies as well. He said in a speech on May 11, 2013, “Westerners, particularly European races, are wild. They have a neat appearance, they wear ties and they use perfume and other such things, but they still have the same wild nature and they still behave in the same wild way that they have always behaved throughout history.” In a meeting with the Committee on Combating Coronavirus, Khamenei reaffirmed that the West has failed in confronting the coronavirus saying, “This failure manifested itself in three areas: Managerial capability, social philosophy and moral-



ity.”<sup>13</sup>

The reason for this failure is that the spirit and basis of Western social philosophy is based on “materialistic motives.” The failure has not been confined to the philosophical aspect only. According to Khamenei’s viewpoint, a failure to display “public morality has also been apparent.”<sup>14</sup>

Mohammadreza Yazdi, one of the commanders of the IRGC, made remarks similar to Khamenei. He believes that the coronavirus thwarted the plans of the West to spread globalization and destroy the family structure.<sup>15</sup> The representative of the supreme leader in Syria, Ashkezari, also made similar remarks.<sup>16</sup> Sheikh Mohammed Layali asserted that we are witnessing “the age of the demise of the United States and the fall of the liberal system.”<sup>17</sup> Sheikh Mohammed Malikzadeh stated that what we are witnessing “the signs of the fall of the liberal government ruling the West.”<sup>18</sup>

The dimensions of such remarks highlight the core philosophical religious thought adopted by those who support Velayat-e Faqih. Here we notice generalizations even though Western philosophy is not represented by a single model. There are Western concepts which are critical of modernity and postmodernity from which the philosophers of the East themselves benefited.<sup>19</sup> On another level, developing philosophy should not be based solely on Western political systems because each system has its own philosophy, methods and theoreticians.

However, maybe the reason behind this is the Iranian religious elites’ contempt for Western philosophy.<sup>20</sup> This is due to their indoctrinated sectarian mindset which sees salvation in no other model than their own. They believe in one absolute model. Therefore, they believe that they are responsible to promote their own philosophical model, and

the salvation of people in the hereafter is their task.

This indoctrinated mindset is completely unable to understand Western philosophy, with all its overlapping issues, outcomes, and diversifications.

For example, Majid Mohammadi argues that Mortaza Muthari has always showed contempt for Western philosophy. This is attributed to “his scant knowledge of Western philosophy, especially medieval philosophy. He is heedless of the fact that all this heavenly wisdom that we have was once adopted by Christianity as well. The three schools: the Peripatetic school, Illuminationism and Gnosticism raised these issues during the medieval centuries in Europe.”<sup>21</sup>

**This supremacist mindset has led to two outcomes:**

**First:** the call for self-sufficiency. Iranians have promoted the idea that they are self-sufficient in the philosophical and cognitive fields as well as materially self-sufficient and do not depend on the West. The idea of philosophical self-sufficiency strengthened the Velayat-e Faqih model because it completely negates the multiplicity of ethnicities and cultures believing that there are no human variations, hence, preparing people to accept Iranian culture based on Velayat-e Faqih, and developing it into a specific philosophical model.

The idea of material self-sufficiency was widely discussed during the coronavirus crisis. The supreme leader of Iran said that Iranians are in no need of US medicine. In one of his speeches, he refused to accept American aid, medicine or even vaccines.<sup>22</sup>

One of the commanders of the army, Rear Admiral Habibullah Sayyari, reiterated this. Iran, according to him, will overcome the virus using its own resources.<sup>23</sup>

**Second: Restoring the imperialist dream.** Those supportive of Velayat-e Faqih in Iran seek to reach the stage of a global government. They make such remarks, paying no heed to the borders of national countries, their sovereignty, or international and diplomatic norms.

Therefore, they support groups and currents other than the nation-states and meddle in their affairs. Among the significant remarks in this regard were the ones made by Ismail Qaani when he was the deputy chief of the Quds Force. He said that Iranian interventions in Karbala, Najaf, Syria and Lebanon are nothing but pragmatic interventions aimed to establish the government of the Infallible Imam who will rule the entire world.<sup>24</sup>

This dream to take control over the world and establish a globalist government has been instilled into the Iranian mindset. It has become a key concern for Iran's religious elites, decision-makers, politicians and military officials. Regardless of the morality of this dream, it is one of the reasons why the government has survived to this day despite all the economic sanctions imposed on it. On the importance of this dream despite it not being realistic or moral, El-Messiri says for example, commenting on Haykel's forecast that the Soviet Union would collapse due to not having a dream, "Those who don't have a civilized project proceed steadily towards the dustbin of history."<sup>25</sup>

Hence, we find that the Iranian government competes with Western philosophy as it wants international legitimacy and a global presence in intellectual and political arenas. Moreover, the Iranian government wants to exclude others, as they consider Islam, according to their interpretation, not open to multiple cultures, ethnicities or philosophies. The Iranian ruling elite also does not accept the multiplicity

of religious visions and ethical morals. This is the vision of the advocates of the Iranian state, it is absolute, non-relativistic and fixed, as Mortaza Muthari argues.<sup>26</sup>

### **III- Characterizing the Crisis in Sectarian Terms and Exploiting Religious Sentiments**

Clerics used pure sectarian and religious terms to address the public during the coronavirus crisis. They considered the crisis a test from God and a trial which people need to bear to transform it into a gift. They also viewed it to be an important factor in preparing the Earth for the reappearance of the Infallible Imam and establishing a global government.

#### **1- *The Appearance of the Infallible Imam and Establishing a Global Government***

Since the proponents of Velayat-e Faqih view their model as ideal, their 'Iranian version of Islam' as superior and have questioned the Western model and consider it a failure, they have not only created a parallel to the Western model which they consider destructive, they have also worked on dismantling the Western model and replacing it with their cognitive model. The aim of this is to pave the way to establish a global government and the rule of the Infallible Imam. The Shiite supporters of Velayat-e Faqih see eye to eye with the Sunni movements which seek to establish the so-called "Mastership of the World" and the global caliphate.

The Iranian religious elite considers that the coronavirus crisis has paved the way for the reappearance of the Infallible Imam. Several clerics supportive of Velayat-e Faqih spoke of the link between Imam Mehdi and the coronavirus crisis. They view the pandemic as an indication of the imminent reappearance of the imam. In addition, they believe the reappearance of Imam Mahdi is a must as the Western

model is on the verge of collapse. .

It is no secret that such discourse targets the Iranian public. There is an attempt to convince Iranians that this crisis will bear long-awaited ideological fruit, hence alleviating the psychological burden placed on the public. Some Iranians have accused the government of failing to combat the coronavirus crisis.

Their discourse is directed to the home front, as the outside world is not concerned about the issue of the Infallible Imam. However, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei argues that the entire world today feels that it needs a savior, a messiah, and a heavenly force. There is a need for the Infallible Imam, infallibility, and heavenly guidance.<sup>27</sup>

Such discourse is not only promoted to help the government to deal with coronavirus outbreak, but it is also important to mobilize the sectarian mindset. The discourse has ideological undertones related to deliverance and rescuing humanity. This is an important to understand in order to deconstruct the current Iranian religious mindset, and to identify the conditions which helped shape it, as well as to understand the consequences of this religious dimension on social and political realities.

By adopting the same vision of the supreme leader, Al-amulhuda reiterates that the crisis showed the inability of ruling governments across the world to manage the crisis.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, according to his point of view, the solution to reform the world lies in the leadership of the Infallible Imam and a global government.

The ideology based on the reappearance of Imam Mehdi is a global political thought. It has been developed to completely govern public affairs in a way which supersedes all other laws and regulations. This comes as the world is now fed up with different administrative systems.<sup>29</sup>

This exaggerated role of the Infallible Imam in saving the world and correcting its path led to significant juristic comments. Cleric Qassem Torkhan, said that the Infallible Imam could fall ill due to coronavirus.

“The Infallible Imam could become a patient and we could ask the people to pray to God to give him good health.”<sup>30</sup>

“The Infallible Imam could be hit with the disease. Coronavirus or any other factor could cause him to become a patient or in ailing health.”<sup>31</sup>

But it seems that he felt the ramifications in the aftermath and the problematic nature of what he said. If his comments are taken to their logical end, several other conclusions can be drawn, such as the possibility of the imam’s death, incapacity and so forth. Therefore, he reconsidered and hinted that the Infallible Imam could heal the sick. But he cannot intervene to change the universe’s fixed God-prescribed laws and he will refuse to intervene due to human sins.

“It is not expected from the Infallible Imam to demolish the system based on cause and effect. The same thing applies to the fixed God-prescribed laws in the universe. Sometimes the illness comes because of the sins committed by people, as is the case with several diseases resulting from the poor health of the people.”<sup>32</sup>

The Mahdi’s reappearance has become a source of political conflict and leverage. It is invoked at times of crises to turn to ideology, influence public opinion, enhance legitimacy and mobilize sectarian minds.<sup>33</sup>

## ***2- From Calamity to Gift: A Plague not a Pandemic***

The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called on everybody to supplicate and turn to God Almighty to lift the pandemic. According to him, “[this plague] is not the severest. We have seen severer plagues. But I pin a great deal of hope on

prayers springing from the pure and untarnished hearts of the young men and those pious people in order to wipe out such huge calamities.”

He called for a purely sectarian prayer to be recited saying, “The seventh prayer in the *Al-Sahifa al-Sajjadiyya* book is distinguished and involves sublime meanings.”<sup>34</sup>

He also reiterated on another occasion that prayer leads to societal blessings and that coronavirus is a plague and a test for governments and peoples.<sup>35</sup>

Ayatollah al-Arafi made remarks similar to aforementioned in relation to the virus.

“Calamities and natural disasters according to the perspective of Sharia are nothing but tests and trials from God to his servants to elevate the position of the believers and increase their ranks by God Almighty. They are also a warning to those negligent and complacent when it comes to obedience to God and the Sharia.”<sup>36</sup>

Ayatollah Khatami encouraged the people to supplicate God to lift this calamity.

“Verses and narratives call on the believers to endure with patience and deliberation in the face of problems and calamities. Surat *al-Baqarah* (The Cow), verse 155: “And indeed, We will definitely try you with something of fear and hunger, and diminution of riches, and selves, and products; and give glad tidings to those patient.”<sup>37</sup>

The reiteration of such religious discourse when there is a plague or a calamity, and the call to supplicate, raises questions about free will and predestination withing the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih.

As for Shiite scholars in *Ilm al-Kalām* (knowledge of discourse also called the Islamic scholastic theology), they do not incline towards man not having free will. Ayatollah Jafar al-Sabhani, shedding light on the issue, has argued

that man is free to choose. And God's knowledge of outside realities does not contradict at all with man's free will; because God knows beforehand what a man will do.<sup>38</sup>

Misbah Yazdi reiterated the same. He says: "If such actions happened out of compulsion, it shall happen in a way that contravenes and disputes God's knowledge."<sup>39</sup>

What has been said about the concomitance between knowledge and will can be added to the aforementioned. Abu Jafar al-Qommi argues that knowledge and will converge. God has a will about something that He knows. But Sheikh Mofid responded to him, saying that his argument does not reflect the doctrine of the Twelver Shiites.<sup>40</sup>

Among the most famous Shiite principles on this issue is what was said by Jafar al-Sadiq. He said, "There is no compulsion or total freedom. There is something between the two."<sup>41</sup>

This argument is close to the Ashari viewpoint although the Shiites did not render legal the Ashari principle or deal consistently with it.

As for the supporters of Velayat-e Faqih, in theory, they do not believe in compulsion. Mortaza Muthari said in regard to forcedness and compulsion: "If the historical happenings take place on the principle of forcedness and compulsion, individuals should bear no responsibility. No individual shall be worth thanking and praising or reproving and blaming."<sup>42</sup>

Jafar al-Sabhani has adopted the same position, arguing that man is not forced but he is granted the ultimate freedom to choose and act.<sup>43</sup> Yazdi's position is in agreement with the aforementioned.

At the same time, we find that fate is invoked at the practical/political level. Everything that happened is based on God's will and action. The coronavirus is a trial and test from God. It shall be lifted only with prayers. It is part of the



preparation for the reappearance of the Infallible Imam. It is ironic that supporters of Velayat-e Faqih support freedom and choice. But they argue that the cognitive model of all humans is one, adding that there is one philosophical culture for the whole of humanity, as Muthari stated. This means that mankind should adopt a single model, which contradicts the concept of freedom and choice.

Misbah Yazdi attempts to overcome this dilemma. He argues that prayer and supplication do not contradict the general law of causality. "There are suspicious arguments about prayer that supplication to God and praying to him contradicts the law of causality, which is proven by the mind and on which scientific research depends. Prayer has a positive effect on mankind which cannot contradict the general law of causality. For instance, seeking perfection from God Almighty bears no contradiction with the general law of causality," Yazdi argues.<sup>44</sup>

He backed up his argument with the point that the universe has reasons which man cannot discover. They could be counted in the non-material causes. Therefore, the clear effect of prayer does not contradict the law of causality.<sup>45</sup>

#### **IV- The Centrality of Shrines: Reasons for Closure and Motives Behind Reopening**

The prevalent jurisprudential opinion since the beginning of the coronavirus crisis was that shrines, and religious centers would not be closed nor would cities be put under strict lockdown. It seems that according to the sequence of events that this was the opinion of the supreme leader and the religious elites.

The position of clerics on the issue swiftly changed due to the considerable level of coronavirus infections which impacted several Iranian clerics and officials. This forced the religious establishment to address the issue in a differ-

ent way. Cleric Hadi Khosroshahi and Mohsen Habibi died. Cleric Mousa Shubairi Zanjani was reported to be infected after one of his aides tested positive for coronavirus. He was examined by doctors and tested positive. He missed his lessons and congregational prayers.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, the sister of Mousa Shubairi Zanjani was infected with coronavirus and died at one of the hospitals in Qom. She was the mother of Mohammad Mirmohammadi, member of the Expediency Discernment Council, who died from coronavirus too.<sup>47</sup>

Due to these deaths, the authorities shut down shrines. Those clerics who initially rejected the closure backed down. They brought forth jurisprudential justifications and legal reasons. Moreover, those protesting the closure have been branded as 'Khawarej.' There was also pressure from the international community and the media to close the shrines which were deemed to be one of the main epicenters for the spread of the virus across the country due to continuous gatherings at these holy sites.

In addition, Iranians' resorting to the international community to seek medical and financial support made it imperative for officials to take some serious measures in advance at home. The position of the clerics on the closure of shrines can be divided into the following phases:

### **The First Phase: Between Sectarian Necessities and the Public Interest: Rejecting the Closure of Shrines.**

A significant number of Shiite narratives revolve around the purity of shrines and how they are havens for those seeking recovery from pain and illnesses. These narratives have shaped the collective mindset of the clerics and have influenced the cumulative memory of the public for decades and centuries. These narratives were a main reason behind the position of the clerics. Among these narra-

tives is what was narrated about Imam Hussein who told the Messenger of God: “What reward shall be for those who visit you, father?”

Then the Messenger said: “O son, those who visit me while I am alive or dead, visited your father, visited your brother or visited you shall be worth a visit by me on the Day of Resurrection to rid them of their sins.”<sup>48</sup>

They have projected the blessings of visiting the Holy Prophet on visiting the shrines of the imams, as well as all the shrines belonging to the relatives of the imams and notable jurists.

Al-Kulaibi narrated from Jafar al-Sadiq’s chain of narration: “He was told, ‘What reward shall be for one of you?’ He answered: ‘A reward equivalent to those granted for visiting the Prophet (PBUH).’”<sup>49</sup>

In another narrative, Jafar al-Sadiq urges some people to visit, saying: “Won’t you visit those visited by God with angels, prophets and the believers?”<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, the closure of shrines was rejected by most clerics. Ayatollah Saeedi, representative of the supreme leader in Qom, called on the people to visit the holy shrine as it is a haven for those seeking recovery.

“We consider this sacred shrine a home for healing, which means that people come here to get treatment for their physical and spiritual illnesses. Consequently, this place should remain open. People should come in bulk. Of course, we consider taking precautionary measures as a condition. And we should consider health requirements.”<sup>51</sup>

When Qom City Council suspended the congregational prayer at Fatimah Masoumeh shrine in order to sanitize it, the website of the shrine issued a notice criticizing the decision of the city council. It cited that the structure of the shrine is antibacterial and a strong barrier against coro-

navirus.<sup>52</sup> We can notice that the objection to the shrine's closure was also linked to its sanitization level, with it promoted as site to heal the sick and having an antibacterial structure.

As a result of such positions steeped in sectarianism and ritualism, the spread of the virus spiked and expanded. Juristic positions in regard to visiting the shrines influenced the Iranian people. Some Iranians violated health regulations by licking the shrines, because they view them as places of healing, not epicenters of the pandemic!

The authorities arrested some of those who posted videos showing people licking the shrines as they breached the directives of the Ministry of Health. The judicial authority said such acts are uncommon.<sup>53</sup>

Other clerics hesitated. They did not have a decisive opinion on the issue via traditional jurisprudential proofs. Cleric Nouri Hamadani said in response to a fatwa on travelling to Qom for the sake of visiting shrines or fulfilling *nazr* (in Islam it is a vow or commitment to carry out an act) that "the *nazr* shall be fulfilled on another occasion, to avoid harm."<sup>54</sup>

In response to the same question, cleric Makarem Shirazi said, "If there is no huge danger to your health and if you consider the health requirements, there is no problem in making the visit. And you are not obliged to observe the offering in these circumstances, and you can do so after the end of the lockdown."<sup>55</sup>

Based on this cautious position, many official conferences, and forums at several historical mosques such as Jamkarān and other mosques were suspended.<sup>56</sup>

But the shrines remained open for the aforesaid considerations.

It is noticeable that the recommendations of the clerics were not decisive, but they were in line with the govern-

ment's official position which outlined health controls for visiting shrines.<sup>57</sup>

The visits to the shrines were not totally banned. . Among the requirements were sanitization, washing hands and wearing medical masks.<sup>58</sup>

This hesitation came as doctors and health experts had their own say on the certainty or uncertainty of the damage which could be caused by visiting the holy shrines. They called for visits to Qom and the shrines to be banned as they were identified as epicenters of the virus in the country.

The position of clerics against the closure of the shrines depended on several complicated and intermingled issues. The issue of finances and resources was a strong reason for their position. People who own hotels and firms are dependent on visitors coming to the shrines and the revenues contribute to financing clerics via Khoms and other means.

Hence, the resources of clerics were under threat due to the closure of the shrines. Also, clerics were concerned that their prestige would be undermined in society as well as their legitimacy among their followers.

Taqlid is based on a continuous jurisprudential relationship between the cleric and his followers. This relationship can either be jurisprudential or ritual. Also, the government felt undermined by the closure of the shrines as government apparatuses and institutions significantly benefit from them as they are responsible for pilgrims. In addition, these rituals confer legitimacy on Iran at home and abroad across the entire Shiite community.

### **The Second Phase: The Interest of the Public is Given Precedence - Closing the Shrines**

After the rapid spread of the virus, the increasing number of infection cases, the repeated advice by doctors to imple-

ment harsher precautionary measures when it comes to the shrines, and the deaths of several Iranian officials, the Iranian authorities decided to close the shrines and tombs.

In a joint statement, officials from the Razavi Shrine and the Fatimah Masoumeh Shrine explained, "Given the advent of the new Iranian year and the flocking of visitors to holy shrines in the cities of Qom and Mashhad, and to avoid the spread of diseases and pandemics, we announce the suspension of visitors at these two holy shrines as of Tuesday morning, correspondent to March 17, until further notice."<sup>59</sup>

The public relations department at Abd al-Azim al-Hasani shrine announced that the shrine shall close its doors until further notice to protect visitors. Jamkarān took the same measures.<sup>60</sup>

The decision was expected to cause concern among clerics. Therefore, President Rouhani attempted to contain the anger of the clerics.<sup>61</sup> The decision was opposed by clerics including some anti-government clerics. The opposition and dealing with it had political dimensions as follow:

### ***1- Supporters of the Decision: Enhancing the Legitimacy of the Supporters of Velayat-e Faqih***

The clerics who support Velayat-e Faqih attempted to align with the official decision to shut down the shrines. They brought forth jurisprudential and religious justifications for the closure, even those who opposed the closure before justified the closure.

Ayatollah Alamulhuda called on those he called lovers of Ahl al-Bayt to control their emotions so that the enemies do not to exploit the situation. Alamulhuda attempted to bring forward jurisprudential justifications and logical reasons for the authorities' decision to close the shrines. His statements were as follows:

- If seeking refuge with Ahl al-Bayt is the best means to wipe out calamities, the people should stand on rooftops and turn to Imam Kazim, read the visit prayer and supplicate for this calamity to be lifted.
- Visiting the shrine of Imam Reza is not possible as medical experts and officials in charge of combating the virus had issued the decision to close it.
- Officials in charge of this issue are disturbed and concerned about the closure. They have the same feelings as the public.
- There is nobody to blame. It was not the enemies who closed the shrines, so that we need to fight them. Social requirements and the existence of the virus forced officials to take this decision.<sup>62</sup>

We find that Alamulhuda attempts to attribute the closure to the rule of Velayat-e Faqih and the interests of the people who love Ahl al-Bayt. These interests are recognized by the guardian jurist who is also disturbed and concerned about the closure. Therefore, he is not to blame, he is not the enemy who should be resisted.

As for Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi, he cited the jurisprudential rule of 'dispute between two jurisprudential issues,'<sup>63</sup> and explained the issue based on jurisprudential fundamentals as follows:

- There is a conflict between benefit and harm. We should determine which one is prevailing. This determination cannot happen via emotions and sentiments.
- The supreme leader abstained from visiting Mashhad and cancelled his sermon there.
- If the closure continues for several years and causes the people to forget, this will require a special program. The imam should send some people with their expenses covered by the state treasury, as is the case to prevent the suspension of pilgrimage. But such resources are limited.

- Some parties want to exploit the closure for political and personal purposes, to sow division among the people.<sup>64</sup>

Misbah Yazdi focused on the step taken by the supreme leader to abstain from visiting Mashhad. Such an action has become a precedent, and people should follow in his footsteps when it comes to abstaining because this measure is obligatory. The supreme leader began with himself. He then cited the rule of 'dispute between two jurisprudential issues,' which jurists have the final say over. But if the question is related to the affairs of the state, the decision of the supreme leader has precedence, given his guardianship, unlike other jurists.

But the paradox here is that he compared visiting the shrines to pilgrimage, which is incorrect when it comes to the principles of Islamic jurisprudence. But such a comparison indicates the stature of such shrines in the collective mind of the Shiites and Iranians and clarifies the reasons why the closure was delayed.

## ***2- Those Rejecting the Closure: A Face-off With the Guardian Jurist***

Some people from the religious elite protested the closure of the shrines and tombs. A group of Shirazis and religious people stormed Fatimah Masoumeh shrine and opened it by force. Up to 11 people were arrested for violating the sanctity of the Ahl al-Bayt shrine, according to the attorney general in the city of Qom.<sup>65</sup>

The protesters compared this to Reza Khan's inability to close the shrines and tombs while the government of the guardian jurist managed to do this. Advocates of the government<sup>66</sup> hastened to refute this comparison. They believed the comparison was unfair as Reza Khan was opposed to religious rituals while the current closure is temporary to protect the lives of the people. They cited the rule of Velayat-e Faqih which grants the supreme leader the right to



suspend any religious ritual even if it is prayer and Hajj if there is an interest, he deems more appropriate.

The laws of the Islamic government, on top of which sits the supreme leader, is binding on everybody. Khomeini believed that exceeding redlines is unlawful because it breaches the laws of the Islamic government.<sup>67</sup>

Those protesting the decision were described by officials as intellectually stubborn and 'Khawarej.' Ali Muthari described them by saying, "Those intellectually stubborn people who stormed Fatimah Masoumeh shrine in protest at closing its doors and broke in must be arrested and punished, whether because they helped the coronavirus to spread further or because they weakened Islam and Shiites. Those people remind us of the Khawarej."<sup>68</sup>

There is no doubt that citing the term 'Khawarej' in a sectarian atmosphere over a ritual issue invokes incitement and defamation. The word is an excuse for the state to deploy its security apparatuses to crackdown as spilling the blood of the 'Khawarej' is legitimate and their history with Shiites is full of problems. The use of the word is also a form of sectarian defamation which strips them of being part of the Shiite community, counting them among the enemies of Ahl al-Bayt.

Other officials considered such protests as evidence of the strict implementation of the decision by those responsible for the shrines in the provinces. Hence, "there should be appreciation and support for the clerics, and the people will express appreciation to them and to the dangers to which they are exposed."<sup>69</sup>

The Shirazi movement seemed to be among those rejecting the closure of the shrines although they did not claim responsibility for storming the Fatimah Masoumeh shrine. But an official condemnation of the authorities' arresting those who stormed the shrine was issued by the office of

one of the leaders of the Shirazi movement. Cleric Yasser al-Habib considered the arrests a crime: "This crime is added to the horrendous record of this sectarian government which knows nothing but repression and cracking down on the people; regardless of their ties and kinship."<sup>70</sup>

Iranian media outlets accused Sheikh Sadiq al-Shirazi, leader of the movement in Qom, of standing behind such incidents.<sup>71</sup>

The Iranian government officially accused the Shirazi movement of storming the Fatimah Masoumeh shrine. A government source mentioned that there were five people affiliated with the Shirazi movement among the 11 people who were detained. One of them oversaw the Marjaya Network channel affiliated with the movement. Several of them are 'sword strikers' during Ashoura celebrations in Qom. Another group confessed that they sought to stir up chaos. Therefore, the movement has been blamed for the storming of the shrine. "The movement is behind the storming, and what is rumored that another movement is behind the incident is totally untrue."<sup>72</sup>

It also seems that the government has found sufficient justification to contain the anger of some religious elites in regard to the closure of shrines. It blamed the Shirazis for the storming and protests even though pro-government clerics are the ones who opposed the closure in the beginning before the government decided on the matter.

A brief comparison between the marjaya in Najaf and the clerics in Iran will lead us to the conclusion that the marjaya in Najaf, despite facing opposition to the closure of shrines, understood the anger of the people and their sectarian sentiments. It did not crackdown on dissidents or seek to defame them at the political and sectarian levels even when the shrines of Imam Ali and Imam Kazim were stormed by certain movements.<sup>73</sup>

Ayatollah Bashir Najafi said at the time that the decision to close the shrines was made to protect the lives of Shiites and safeguard the sect. He called for praying “remotely” to the shrines in pursuit of recovery.<sup>74</sup>

The basis of the Najaf position is that the marjaya there does not believe that its fatwas are absolute rules, unlike the religious elite in Iran.

The anger of the authorities against those who attempted to forcibly open the shrine could be interpreted as an opportunity to persecute the wrongdoers who are affiliated with a movement known to be opposed to the supporters of Velayat-e Faqih and their jurisprudential school and model of governance. The authorities considered it as a rejection of an official decision it issued and an attempt to breach it and not abide by it, which undermines its legitimacy among Shiites in general.

The government also considered the move as breaking from its rules. In Shiite jurisprudence, the rules are divided into three main parts: The rules of God (the primary source of law); the rules generated from the *ijtihad* of clerics (a secondary source of Shiite Islamic law), and the rules passed by the supreme leader (called the government’s rules). The government is fully aware of the fact that undermining government rules will lead to ramifications among Shiites, taking into account that there is no consensus among clerics that the government’s rules come before the secondary and primary sources.<sup>75</sup>

If the clerics who opposed the shrine closure were allowed to move ahead with their jurisprudential interpretations on the ground, this would grant followers of the clerics the right to break the government’s rule, i.e., the government will lose its political power and sectarian significance. Hence, the government opted to curb the excesses of those clerics and punish them instead of understanding

their demands and religious sentiments. The proof of this is that the conservatives themselves called on the government to open the shrines a few days after the incident.

### **The Third Phase: Preparing Public Opinion for Resuming Religious Rituals**

In this phase, pro-conservative voices called for opening religious centers in the country. It seemed to be a sort of pressure on the government and to prepare public opinion for their opening.

Nearly 266 clerics and *maddahin* (singers of religious stories) sent a letter to President Rouhani, asking the government to reopen religious centers during the month of Ramadan. Conservative media outlets considered these demands as a “reflection” of the will of the Iranian people.<sup>76</sup> The director of religious seminaries called for putting forward the date to reopen religious places. It seems that President Rouhani understood the pressures of the conservatives and their reasons.

He said, “The government changed its decision at the request of the director of religious seminaries and put forward the date of reopening of religious places by 15 days.”<sup>77</sup>

It is noticeable here that he said that putting forward the date of reopening the shrines came at the request of the director of shrines. This is an indication that he and his government do not support the reopening at this stage or at the minimum they do not want to be held accountable for the consequences of the decision.

His statement was a message to the public that the issue of reopening the shrines is a complicated one and is not confined to the government only. But there are other actors connected to the matter, such as the ruling religious elite.

Although Qom and Mashhad had not joined the white cities at that time, Rouhani, coping with the aforesaid pressures, hoped the two cities would quickly join the white ar-

eas, hence the shrines and mosques could be reopened to citizens.<sup>78</sup>

Rouhani defended the clerics and their position in regard to the crisis. He said: "Sensitivity and concerns displayed by clerics and marjayas to protect the lives and health of citizens amid the spread of coronavirus were exactly, and in the same proportion, parallel to those of the health officials, which is an issue of utmost importance."<sup>79</sup>

### **The Fourth State: Restoring What Is Sectarian: Reopening Shrines**

After the pressure of the conservatives and clerics on the government to reopen the shrines and religious centers and restore religious life, government officials decided to reopen the shrines and religious centers by the end of May 2020. However, they previously reiterated earlier in the month that the religious centers and shrines would remain closed until the concerned medical authorities decided to reopen them.

The supreme leader himself stated that he does not interfere with the issue of reopening the shrines and that he follows the opinions and assessments of the experts of the National Committee on Combating Coronavirus.<sup>80</sup>

But he returned to say: "We should pay heed to the fact that prayer and supplicating to God Almighty especially in the holy month of Ramadan and the Night of Power are among the basic and indispensable needs of citizens."<sup>81</sup>

He then pointed to the possibility of outlining strict rules in case of the reopening of religious centers, reiterating that "believers and mosque-goers will abide by them."<sup>82</sup>

Such remarks were a preparation and reassurance to the public in regard to health precautions. Ayatollah Alam-ulhuda made similar remarks.

He expressed the readiness of officials at the Khorasan and Razavi shrines to receive visitors while implementing

the health protocols as decided by experts.<sup>83</sup>

It seems that the supreme leader and religious elites exerted pressure on health officials to reach a solution to end the closure of religious centers and seminaries in the country. An indication of this is the remarks made by the Minister of Health Saeed Namaki when he said that a meeting was held at the request of the supreme leader to find a way to reopen mosques to worshippers. “Fortunately, we have reached an appropriate solution which will be announced soon.”<sup>84</sup>

The statement clearly indicates that the meeting was held at the request of the supreme leader to find a suitable solution.

As a result, the National Committee on Combating Coronavirus on May 16 took a series of decisions, including the reopening of the shrines by the end of May, establishing Eid al-Fitr prayers across the country and allowing gatherings on Quds Day in the white provinces.<sup>85</sup>

The shrines were reopened on Monday, May 25, after a 70-day closure.

The decision to reopen the shrines included a condition that visitors should enter the shrines one hour before sunrise and one hour before sunset. But this condition was repealed afterwards. The decision also stipulated the necessity of abiding by all health rules and guidelines.<sup>86</sup>

However, Ayatollah Alamulhuda protested the conditional and restricted reopening of shrines.<sup>87</sup>

“People communicate in the market and speak to each other. But at the shrines, all people visit, but all that they can do is to stand together. What is the medical or scientific justification to determine which shrines shall be closed during nighttime and opened during daytime?”<sup>88</sup>

He then touched on the central point of his protest, which prevented the concerned institutions from closing the

shrines earlier, which is the financial concern.

He said: “In this holy city, firms and hotels have lost billions of tomans. No one comes to Mashhad. Shall we close the doors of shrines and suspend visits? Unfortunately, the economic interests of the province and the people’s religious sentiments have been ignored.”<sup>89</sup>

This statement explains the reason behind the desire of the religious elite since the beginning of the crisis to keep the shrines open, and the call for accelerating their reopening. The economic interests of the province, and hence the financial interests of officials, are at risk. Therefore, the official call for “adapting to the virus” surfaced, which was expressed by the Minister of Interior Abdel-Reza Rahmani.

“We should be able to live in peace with coronavirus and life should go on smoothly, with activities in society being carried out. This should happen amid full implementation of the health protocols and principles by officials and the people.”<sup>90</sup>

The jurisprudential lessons in the Qom seminary resumed on May 28. Ayatollah al-Arafi, chairman of the religious seminaries in Iran, announced that seminary lessons (postgraduate and intermediate stage) were resumed after coordination with clerics, the Supreme Council of Seminaries, and the National Committee on Combating Coronavirus.<sup>91</sup>

In this context, we should pay heed to the remarks of Rouhani about the request of the director of seminaries to put forward the date of reopening the shrines.

All in all, the opinion of clerics, expressed since the beginning of the crisis, refusing to close the shrines and religious centers, and their argument to accelerate the pace of reopening shortly after the closure, has been given precedence over the opinions of health experts. Moreover, those concerned in the health sector may have come under pres-

sure to pass such decisions and approve them. The position of clerics is attributed to sectarian and sometimes personal reasons, which the clerics sectarianize and religionize.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that the religious elite supportive of Velayat-e Faqih attempted to maximize its ideological and political gains during the coronavirus crisis via promoting conspiracy theories against Iran. They have repeated the allegations in the media and across the sectarian arena that the virus has been created by the Americans to target the Islamic Republic and the Iranian civilizational model. At the same time, in parallel with the claims of conspiracy and virus creation, the pro-Velayat-e Faqih groups cited proofs showing the failure of the Western model in combating the coronavirus. The failure of the Western model became apparent when Western countries were disputing the shipment of facemasks. Therefore, the world now has one option, the Iranian civilizational and philosophical model which in turn paves the way for the reappearance of the Infallible Imam to establish a global government. They saw no contradiction in this with their earlier allegations that the West created the virus to target Iran.

Iran's religious elites via repeating such claims have targeted sectarian and pro-Velayat-e Faqih blocs at home to strengthen and deepen their loyalty. This is also directed against pro-Western currents that promote the Western model and its philosophy to curb their influence and strip them of their base and undermine their standing. In other words, such remarks are part of a battle with pro-Western currents at home and against the currents demanding more freedom, separation of powers and for social and political life to be more liberal.

Yet, clerics who have engaged in sectarian and ideological discourse, such as free will and predestination and



turning calamities into gifts, believe that there is no contradiction in their remarks with their *Ilm al-Kalām* arguments denying forcedness and compulsion.

Perhaps the way in which the religious elites dealt with the coronavirus crisis indicates their dwindling capacity to provide effective and rational solutions which satisfy society and have vast public acceptance.

Also, Iranian authorities did not turn a blind eye to ideological and sectarian beliefs which emerged during the crisis. The authorities arrested some of those who protested against the closure of the shrines, deeming this as a threat to the concept of Velayat-e Faqih, a violation of the government's rules and providing a platform to different opinions which deem the government's rules 'legally nonbinding' as the issue is a matter of public interest — which cannot be compared to God's rules (primary sources) and rules generated from the *ijtihad* of clerics (secondary sources). Hence, the pro-Velayat-e Faqih elites, along with deploying security apparatuses, strengthened their jurisprudential presence using certain principles and rules. They cited the rule of 'dispute between two jurisprudential issues' and other rules which support the decision of the government in jurisprudential matters and negate the arguments of opponents who also cite jurisprudential and sectarian principles and rules.

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