

Defiance In Iran Over Mishandling of Coronavirus Pandemic

by Hugh Fitzgerald



An astonishing display of defiance, as more than 100 Iranian academics sign a letter ferociously [criticizing the regime](#) and, above all, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In another sign of popular anger with the Iranian regime's handling of the coronavirus pandemic within its own borders, more than 100 academics have signed a protest letter charging Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – the country's 'supreme leader' – as "the No. 1 culprit in the COVID-19 pandemic becoming a national disaster!"

This is a direct assault on Ayatollah Khamenei, blaming him for the failure of the country to contain the outbreak. He doesn't dare to arrest these signatories; they are not the man-on-the-street protesters, but distinguished academics whom

he would do best to ignore rather than try to engage them in debate. For he has only his crazed conspiracy theories, involving Americans, Israelis, and djinn, who have, in his view, been collaborating in spreading the coronavirus in Iran and around the world. The signers of this letter, on the other hand, have the facts and medical experts on their side.

The March 29 letter, translated into English by the Middle East Media and Research Institute (MEMRI), asserted that Khamenei and other regime officials had concealed information about the coronavirus outbreak from the public and failed to take measures to curb the spread of the disease, out of political and religious consideration.

The Iranian regime waited nine days after the first appearance of the coronavirus to let the public know it was now in Iran. Furthermore, the Iran's Leaders consistently under-reported both the number of cases, and the number of deaths, from the coronavirus. This under-reporting came from independent sources in Iran, with wide contacts among the medical personnel, who knew early on that the regime was understating the outbreak. The worst mistake of the Supreme Leader was in not shutting down the city of Qom. That was, and remains, the epicenter of the disease in Iran. But the clerics, and many of the faithful, in that city, refused themselves to shut down the shrines and the mosques, and resisted attempts by others to shut them down. Some clerics have insisted that far from spreading the disease, going to the mosques helps to contain the illness, for such devotion make mosque-goers immune to the disease. Meanwhile, In the real world, Shi'a pilgrims and students in Qom returned home, spreading the virus. It is now known that Shi'a returning from visits to Qom the spread the coronavirus to Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Iraq, Syria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. And still Qom is not in total lockdown.

The other great error by the Iranian regime – even two months

after the outbreak in Wuhan Province – was to continue to allow Mahan Airlines, Iran’s largest carrier, to fly between Iran and China, bringing back to Iran some who had caught the disease in China. The government ought to have immediately shut that airline down, but was too afraid of the economic consequences of shutting down Iran’s major airline, and of the effects, too, on Chinese trade with, and investment in, Iran, if the Iranians cut off transportation links with China.

The “political and religious considerations” mentioned in the letter refer obliquely to two considerations. The government in Tehran wants to appear fully competent, not as confused, uncertain, or overwhelmed by events. By understating the morbidity and mortality rates from the coronavirus, it hopes to convince the Iranian public that it has things under control. It was an absurd hope, for the regime could not indefinitely understate the dangers as the mass graves were dug, and lines of coffins appeared on city streets for all to see. Instead, the Iranians no longer trust any of the statistics released by the government, and even when – if – the regime finally provides accurate numbers, it is likely to be disbelieved. Iran’s medical personnel have seen enough cases and deaths in their own hospitals to convince them that the government is lying; some believe the regime’s statistics understate the true figures by a factor of ten.

As for “religious considerations,” there are many clerics, and Believers, in Iran who insist that the mosques must remain open. These people are convinced that in attending the mosques, Muslims win favor with Allah, who then protects them from the coronavirus. There have been riots at some of the country’s mosques when the police have tried to close them. The theocratic regime in Tehran has been reluctant to take on fellow clerics. It has instead downplayed the urgency of the crisis and, therefore, the need to shut down mosques. Thus it minimizes the possibility of clashing with those clerics who want the mosques to remain open. And the people pay for the

regime's timidity with yet more cases of the virus.

At the same time, the letter [from the 100 Iranian academics] pointed out, the regime had been actively promoting conspiracy theories about American and "Zionist" responsibility for the pandemic.

The Supreme Leader has been a main source for the conspiracy theory that blames America for deliberately spreading the coronavirus, but he is not the only one; many others in the regime have placed the blame on the Great Satan, and some have also included the Little Satan, Israel, as another source of the coronavirus. Both America and Israel have been hard hit by the disease but that has not changed the minds of the conspiracy theorists; those Iranians don't want to be confused with facts. The academics who signed the letter, however, will have none of this nonsense; they want the government not to wallow in misleading conspiracy theories, but to help the public understand the outbreak as medical personnel do. Trust in Science, they know, is the only way to come out the other end of this unprecedented health crisis with the fewest victims.

As of Thursday, more than 3,000 people had died from coronavirus in Iran, out of a total of over 50,000 infected. The dissidents' letter noted, however, that "Iran's doctors, as well as the heads of the World Health Organization, estimate that the number of officially-recognized deaths [in Iran] is much smaller than the true number."

Iraq has thousands of confirmed COVID-19 cases, many times more than the 772 it is has publicly reported, according to..

Adopting a defiant tone, the letter observed, "As the crisis is reaching its peak, Leader [Khamenei] adds demons to his list of perpetual enemies, and aid from Doctors Without Borders is turned away. While all citizens are forbidden from performing burial rites, military personnel under the

leader's command held a funeral for the IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] general who died of the coronavirus, calling him a martyr, and misinforming citizens with the utter falsehood that the funeral was a spontaneous event."

The Supreme Leader first mentioned on March 22 that "demons" (that is, Islamic "djinn") were working in cahoots with the Americans and Israelis to spread the virus in Iran. The IRGC Cyber Division "confirmed" that "demons" were indeed at work, just as the Supreme Leader had said. And Khamenei also noted that since Israelis are "masters of sorcery," it is hardly surprising that they should have enlisted the help of these "demons." This is the bizarre understanding of the coronavirus at the highest levels of the Iranian regime. No wonder the academic signatories – many of them scientists – were appalled by the Supreme Leader's assertions and those of his echoing epigones, each one crazier than the next.

The letter urged Iranian citizens to heed only the advice of medical professionals.

"Dear people of our homeland!" it said. "In the absence of a responsible, efficient and truthful regime, only doctors and medical professionals are devoted to protecting citizens from this virus. They can be the source for citizens seeking to carry on with life despite all the limitations."

This letter is astonishing in its full-frontal attack on the regime – lists to medial personnel "in the absence of a responsible, efficient and truthful regime" – and even more, its furious dismissal of the Supreme Leader. For in his deliberate withholding of truthful information about the number of those infected and of the numbers of deaths, he failed to communicate the sense of urgency that the situation demanded, if 80 million Iranians were to practice social distancing, hand-washing, and mask-wearing. The Supreme Leader

was also to be faulted for the slowness and inadequacy of his response in not locking down Qom early on, as soon as the first batch of cases in that city were known, and for not shutting down mosques nation-wide, to prevent the virus spreading among worshippers, and finally, in not ending the flights between Iran and China by Mahan Airlines until long after a traveler on one of those flights first brought the coronavirus to Iran. For all this ,and more, Khamenei was described in the letter of those academics as **“the No. 1 culprit in the COVID-19 pandemic** becoming a national disaster!”

Will those who composed and signed the letter be seized and tried as traitors to the state? It’s doubtful. These are distinguished academics, people of importance in Iranian society. And the truths they wrote are so obvious that the Supreme Leader would be wiser to ignore the letter, rather than making them a cause celebre by answering or, still worse, by punishing them. They are a signpost on the way: the Islamic Republic of Iran is starting to crumble from within. And its mishandling of the coronavirus will only hasten that internal collapse.

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