

Iran Spreads the Coronavirus Throughout the Middle East (Part 1)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In [a recent BESA paper](#), Dr. Hillel Frisch presents the evidence that the coronavirus has spread from Iran throughout the “Shiite crescent,” a diffusion that testifies not to the Iranian government’s geopolitical power but to its incompetence and weakness in dealing with the epidemic.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Shiite communities are regarded by the Islamic Republic as key tools with which to penetrate and ultimately conquer the Arab world, and pilgrimages back and forth to Shiite holy centers in Iran and Iraq are central to the regime’s ideological identity. But the holiest city in Iran, Qom, is now an epicenter for the spread of the coronavirus. The Shiite crescent is thus functioning as a boomerang to spread the epidemic both out of and back into Iran.

Iran's Shiite crescent, which until recently reflected its imperial reach into the Arab world, has now become pathological with the spread of Covid-19 (the official name of the coronavirus pathogen).

A study released on February 24 by the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota inadvertently revealed how salient Iran's religious ties to Shiite communities in Arab states have been and continue to be in the spread of the epidemic.

The five Middle Eastern countries that first reported Covid-19 cases—Afghanistan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Oman—all have substantial Shiite populations, and all the cases cited are clearly linked to Iran. The first confirmed case in Afghanistan was flagged in Herat province, which is in the country's west on the Iranian border. Another sufferer had recently returned from the city of Qom, Iran's Shiite religious center and, tellingly, the epicenter of the disease in Iran. The first Bahraini to be confirmed as having succumbed to Covid-19 had also just been in Iran, as had all three cases first reported in Kuwait, Iraq, and Oman.

And since Dr. Frisch's paper appeared, Saudi Arabia has announced its first coronavirus patient – a Shi'ite who had returned from Iran.

The link between Shiite pilgrimage and the spread of the virus is to be found at its source in the region: Iran, specifically the religious city of Qom.

As the University of Minnesota report notes, eight of 18 new cases in Iran were in Qom compared to three in the metropolis of Tehran, which has a population seven times greater. Qom has been the site of 40% of the cases identified so far in Iran though it comprises less than 3% of the population.

It is in the holy city of Qom that Shi'a theology students and pilgrims both from Iran and from communities outside Iran find themselves in crowded mosques and teeming seminaries, places where the transmission of the coronavirus has been more likely to take place than elsewhere in Iran. Indeed, though Qom has only 3% of the Iranian population, 40% of the coronavirus cases in Iran have been traced to Qom. The Iranian clerics have naturally been reluctant – in fact unwilling so far even to consider – to lock down the holy city in quarantine, as the Chinese did in Wuhan; this failure, however, has enabled the virus to spread not just all over Iran, but also from Iran to a half-dozen countries in the region, including Afghanistan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Oman, and now Saudi Arabia.

Iraq and other Arab states with substantial Shiite populations have grown understandably apprehensive about pilgrimage to Qom. Flights between Qom and Najaf, the holy city in Iraq, which neighbors a third holy city, Karbalah, usually outnumber flights between the capital cities of Tehran and Baghdad, indicating that most movement between the countries has to do with religious observance and pilgrimage rather than business and commerce. But the Iraqi authorities have banned entry into the country by Iranian nationals and prohibited travel by Iraqi nationals to Iran, and have ceased flights between Tehran's Khomeini airport (which services Qom, a three-hour drive away) and Najaf.

Such moves might be too late. The day after the halt on Iraqi-Iranian travel, Iraq announced its first case of Covid-19.

Data for China indicate that one of around 30 cases of the virus results in death (2,873 deaths out of 79,968 cases as of March 1). The percentage outside China is slightly lower because most of the states in which there have been confirmed cases are more advanced and have benefited from the opportunity to learn from the steps China has taken to control the spread of the virus.

Iran recently announced 43 deaths out of 593 confirmed cases compared with 29 fatalities out of just over 1,128 cases in Italy—the most afflicted European state so far. The ratio in Italy—one death per 39 cases—roughly conforms to the ratio of fatalities to confirmed cases in China and elsewhere. In the case of Iran, however, the ratio is strikingly worse: it appears to be one death per 14 people infected.

The official statistics offered by Iranian officials can be interpreted in one of two ways, and both reflect badly on Iran's government. If it is telling the truth, and there are far more fatalities among confirmed cases than anywhere else in the world, that bespeaks a failure of the medical system in Iran. If the government is lying about the number of cases, as most outside observers believe, in order to make it seem that the Iranian government has the epidemic under control, that means the public, which has other sources of information about the epidemic in Iran readily available on the Internet, will distrust everything the government says about the coronavirus, even when it happens to be telling the truth.

This is a deeply worrying statistic, particularly as there are concerns that Iran is failing to identify many Covid-19 cases. If true, this means some infected sufferers are not being put into quarantine, which increases the likelihood that the virus will spread.

There is a strong suspicion based on the quality of the data provided by Iran's ministry of health that the Covid-19 epidemic inside the country might be far more widespread than the regime says it is, and doubts about Iran's reporting and ability to act efficiently to contain the virus are swirling both within and without the country. A recent report filed by the London Times correspondent from Tehran quotes Iranians as saying they believe the real number of fatalities is four times the figure being given by regime authorities.

The ramifications of Iran's becoming a source of disease are more than medical. The Islamic Republic has seen wide-scale protests in Iraq and Lebanon against regimes it warmly supports. In Iraq in particular, Iranian consulates have become targets of protester anger.

Iran's failure to control its Covid-19 problem will hardly endear it to protesters in Iraq and Lebanon, many of whom feel their states are being damaged by Iran's involvement in their domestic affairs.

In Lebanon, there have been months of protests against the government for its corruption and mismanagement. A leading defender of the government is Iran's puppet Hezbollah, which has thereby earned both it, and its Iranian backer, the rage of those protesters. And it is not just Sunnis and Christians but also many Shi'a who have joined the protesters who are attempting – so far without success – to replace the government of crooks in favor of one with technocrats.

Lebanese politics are paralyzed, while the economy continues to crater. And because Hezbollah so ardently continues to support the government, both it and its backer Iran are now held in disrepute even among Shi'a. Some Hezbollah members, disgusted with Nasrallah's policies, have even torn up their Hezbollah cards in public, demonstrating the depth of their displeasure.

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