

Iran Spreads the Coronavirus Throughout the Middle East (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



In Iraq, it is much the same story – large-scale disaffection even among the Shi’a – as in Lebanon. Shiites have been protesting against the Iraqi government’s corruption and mismanagement, just as in Lebanon, and just as in Lebanon, have also been decrying Iran’s power in the country. Iran is seen as meddling in Iraq primarily through its support of the Iranian militias that have helped suppress the protestors and given their support on the street to the “thieving” government that so many Shia want to see overthrown. Iran was once regarded with admiration by the Iraqi Shi’a, but not any longer.

The recent failure of the newly designated Iraqi PM Tawfiq Allawi to set up a government is the most recent indication

of Iran's declining stature in the region. Allawi's appointment, which was presumably intended to mollify the mostly Shiite protestors in the streets of Baghdad, Najaf, and Basra, was strongly backed by the two most powerful pro-Iranian political forces in Iraq: the Fath coalition, which is basically the pro-Iranian militias' political wing; and the Sairoon coalition headed by Muqtada Sadr. It was Sadr's al-Mahdi army that fought US forces in the early years of the post-Saddam era.

Despite that support, Allawi failed, because Sunni and Kurdish political opposition figures within the Iraqi parliament and protestors outside it vehemently opposed him.

It was not just the opposition of Sunnis and Kurds in the Iraqi parliament that prevented Allawi's attempt to form a government, but Shiite protestors, too, who objected to Allawi precisely because he was Iran's candidate.

No doubt, most of Iran's declining fortunes in Iraq can be attributed to the targeting of Qassem Soleimani. Iran's Covid-19 problem is having a reinforcing effect.

The assassination of Qassem Soleimani, the most powerful man in Iran after Ayatollah Khamenei, revealed the weakness of the Iranian regime – that it could not protect Soleimani, nor after his death mount a sufficient response to his killing. Despite all the bloodthirsty threats from Iranian leaders, the Iranian attack in response did not result in the death of a single American. The Iranians kept claiming they had killed “80 American terrorists,” but no one, in or outside Iran, any longer believed them.

For years, the (Arab) Shiite majority in Iraq and Bahrain and the significant Shiite minorities in the neighboring Arab states were regarded as the pillars of Iran's imperial designs over those states.

The Shiite protests in Iraq and Lebanon against Iranian involvement suggest that this may no longer be true.

Iran made fatal political errors in Lebanon and Iraq. It could have instructed Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, to stop supporting the Lebanese government and ordered him instead to support the demands of the protesters for a complete change of personnel at the top. Nasrallah's embrace of the government and denunciation of the protesters has caused Hezbollah – and its backer Iran – to lose popular support in Lebanon, even among Shi'a.

In Iraq, the Shiites have been setting fire to Iranian consulates, making known their rage at Iran's interference in Iraqi politics where, as in Lebanon, Iran has chosen to back the government – in the latest version, that of Prime Minister-designate Tawfiq Allawi – despite well-founded charges of corruption. Those violent attacks on Iranian consulates testify to the rage felt by Iraqi Shi'a against Iranian meddling in Iraqi internal affairs.

That imperialism comes at a price could have been predicted. Not so Covid-19 and its ramifications, and least of all its effect on the Iranian Shiite crescent—a crescent that, true to form, is fast turning into a boomerang headed back into the heart of the Islamic Republic.

The coronavirus (Covid-19) has been spread to the same Shi'a communities that were once considered to form part of Iran's Shi'ite crescent – an overseas source of Iran's strength, promoting its ability to project power. Now Iran is "projecting" not power but the coronavirus that is a sign of its own incompetence, in not having been able to contain the virus through the imposition of quarantines, in not having enough Latex gloves, masks, Purell, test kits, and in not having appropriate protocols in place. Ayatollah Khomeini has issued bromides about how the illness will soon pass, no one

should worry, just pray to Allah for surcease and all manner of things shall be well. Meanwhile, Iran continues to spread an illness that weakens the very Shiite states and communities that Iran had hoped to fashion into a powerful "Shiite crescent" that could threaten the region's Sunnis and, ultimately, the Western world.

Each new coronavirus case that can be traced back to Iran makes more people anxious about travel to and from Iran. Shiites outside Iran will be reluctant to engage in theological studies in Qom, or to visit Shiite shrines in Iran. Iran is already losing prestige in the international community for its continuing misrepresentation of the severity of the crisis – the real number of cases – in Iran, and its inability to halt the spread which has even laid low some of the most important officials in the government, including the Deputy Health Minister, the man in charge of handling the coronavirus outbreak, who was seen on television by millions of Iranians, repeatedly wiping his brow, coughing, and sniffing – testament to his own, and his government's, incompetence in dealing with the spread of the disease.

Hillel Frisch is right: the links between Iran and other Shi'a populations are no longer the ties that bind but, rather, the ties that inspire fear and loathing. Iran has mismanaged the illness within its own borders; the numbers stricken are far larger than Tehran has admitted; so far seven of its top officials have caught the illness, a worrying sign to the populace that the government in this crisis does not know where to put its feet or hands. It's a health crisis but also a political crisis. The countries that have Shi'a populations may want to cut off all travel to Iran, given the record of the coronavirus having been spread to so many countries by visitors to Iran who then returned home, carrying the virus with them.

The coronavirus outbreak weakens not just individual Iranians who fall victim to its spread, but panics many others – their

families, their friends, their neighbors, those who work in the gas stations, grocery stores, and hospitals they visit, those who travel in the same buses or subways, in an ever-widening circle. It has also harmed the state of Iran, shaken the faith of the people for whom the regime is seen to be incompetent in its handling of the crisis. Iranians have only to compare their government's failure to impose a quarantine on Qom with what the Chinese did in quickly putting the 11 million people in Wuhan under strict lockdown, and another 24 million in Wuhan Province under partial lockdown. The government looks foolish in consistently putting out figures for the total number of cases that non-governmental sources inside Iran insist are untrue; it keeps having to greatly revise those figures upwards, though never up to what others claim is the true level. This reinforces the sense of mistrust among the Iranian populace. Especially worrisome has been the news about the many high officials, including senior members of the government, who were unable or unwilling to take the necessary precautions, and have themselves fallen victim to the coronavirus.. And to top it all off, the very links with Shi'ite communities that were supposed to be a source of geopolitical strength for Iran, the tentacles of its power reaching throughout the Middle East, have become a great liability, the vectors of the disease's spread; that recognition outside of Iran has caused many of those same Shi'a communities to cut off travel both to and from Iran.

As long as the coronavirus continues to spread throughout the Middle East from its regional epicenter in Iran, Iran's political star will continue to wane. If it refuses to impose its own quarantines on Qom and other population centers where more than a few cases have been found, the country may find itself shunned by the Shi'ites outside of Iran who were once the country's most steadfast supporters. The total isolation of the Tehran regime, which neither American sanctions nor Mossad acts of derring-do managed to accomplish, may come true thanks to a virus no one had ever heard of just a few months

ago.

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