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A New Mode of Jihad and Martyrdom in Iran: The Battle against COVID-19



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Introduction

Half of the year 2020 has already passed, and two major topics on Iran have attracted attention in the world. The first was the turmoil following the assassination of Qasem Soleymani, commander of the Revolutionary Guard Corps and others by the United States in the beginning of this year. The assassination caused Iran's retaliatory attack against a U.S. military base in Iraq and the tragic missile attack against Ukraine airline passenger plane. The second was the first

pandemic case of COVID-19 in the Middle East, which became a hot topic in late February and early March.

This essay explores the development of COVID-19, describing the general situation in the country up to the time of writing and the relevance of my recent research.

Jihad Against COVID-19 in Iran

With the spread of COVID-19 in China, the WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30. Iran also took measures to prevent the spread of the infection on the next day by temporarily suspending flights from China¹ and initiating a rescue plan for Iranian nationals in Wuhan. However, these only registered as foreign events for the Iranian electorate and the government proceeded with legislative elections for the 11th term of the Islamic Council. Although the government announced on February 19, just two days before the vote, that two elderly patients had passed away from COVID-19 in the religious city of Qom, located about 150 kilometers south of the capital city Tehran, the parliamentary elections went ahead as planned.

Four days after the first confirmed case, the total number of positive cases had reached 43 and deaths had reached to 8.¹¹ Officials concerned at the spread of the disease and the “Ministry of Health, Medical Treatment and Education” (hereinafter referred to as the “Ministry of Health”) announced plans to close schools, universities, cinemas and theatres, and initiated a disinfection plan for public transportation in 14 cities including Tehran (Aoki 2020). Despite this attempt, the spread of the infection continued and reached 3,186 newly infected cases on March 30. By March 5, infected cases were confirmed

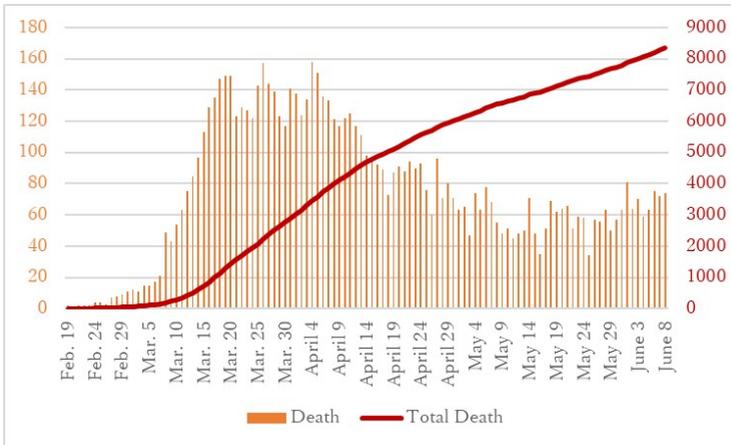
in all Iranian provinces and the number of new positives exceeded 1,234. In short, the daily number of positives exceeded 1,000 cases on March 6 (see Figures 1 and 2)ⁱⁱⁱ. Eventually from the 22nd to the 30th of March around Nowrouz (March 21), the beginning of the New Year in the Iranian calendar, there was an explosion in the number of new positive cases and the death toll rose sharply between March 7 and April 4.

The spread of the disease reached to the political core, exemplified by the positive case of Iraj Harirchi-Tabrizi, deputy minister of Health, who sweated and coughed at a press conference on February 24, and positive cases emerged among bureaucrats, ministers, and members of the Islamic Council. Even a number of senior officials passed away from COVID-19 including newly elected legislators such as Mohammad-Ali Ramezani and Mohammad Mohammadi, advisor of the Supreme Leader.



**Figure 1 . Positive Cases of SARS-CoV-2 in Iran
(From February 19 to June 8, 2020)**

In Fig. 1, the blue bars graph and the blue numbers in the left column show the number of positive cases per day, and the green line graph and the green numbers in the right column show the cumulative number of positive cases.



**Figure 2. Deaths from COVID-19 in Iran
(From February 19 to June 8, 2020)**

In Fig. 2, the orange bars graph and the numbers in the left column show the number of deaths per day, and the red line graph and the numbers in the right column show the cumulative death number.

Despite the explosive spread of the infection, the government seemingly hesitated to take steps to close the city. The city authorities of Tehran, where the spread of the disease was continuing, revealed a plan to set up a control center on the main road in and out of the city on March 14. In addition, the city authorities forced the closure of commercial facilities including traditional bazars except for daily necessities from

March 22. Prior to this closure plan, General Mohammad Baqeri, Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces, announced and warned of a lockdown of cities including surveillance within 24 hours (*Taşnīm* March 13, 2020).

However, President Rowhani denied the government's plan to implement a whole-scale lockdown on March 11. On March 19, a volunteer group of experts and five former ministers of Health issued an open letter demanding travel restrictions and other measures, but the government remained hesitant (*Hamshahrī online* March 19, 2020). In the meantime, a partial increase in inter-city travel in the forthcoming Nowruz and further expansion were expected. The government still continued to take a negative view on the complete closure of the city (*IRNA* March 22, 2020). Finally, a government spokesman announced an inter-city travel ban on March 25 and the Ministry of Health announced travel restrictions and city closures on the next day.

Contrary to the hesitation on the city closures, the government proceeded with preparations for the resumption of economic activities relatively quickly. On 6 April, President Rowhani revealed plans to implement the gradual resumption of economic activities and revealed a resumption plan for economic activities with a low risk of spreading the infection from April 11 in cities except for Tehran, and then on April 18 even in Tehran. As the President requested, the range of economic activities and activities in civilian life were gradually expanded. The situation seemed to be under control, with a return to normalcy and even a decrease in the number of people wearing masks. In addition, the bustle of people in the bazaars and other places was also revived. On May 25, the religious

facilities including Holy shrines that had been closed since mid-March were reopened.

While civilian life was returning to normal, the number of new positive cases began to rise again after May. Towards the end of May, an upward trend was noted in certain provinces, and by June, the number of new positive cases again increased to the same level as the peak in March. On June 4, 3,574 positive cases were confirmed and the new highest figure on record. The situation was once again unpredictable. The Department of Health's Bureau of Infectious Disease Treatment argued that this was not just a second wave, but a continuation of the first wave [ISNA 6 June 2020]. Iran has been the fastest case in lifting city closures among the countries where COVID-19 was spreading with the exception of China and it can be seen as a model case for other countries to predict what will happen after the lifting of the restrictions. The fact that the number of positive cases in Iran is increasing again should make other countries including Japan, more cautious.

By the way, when the countermeasures against the SARS-CoV-2 began to be taken in earnest in Iran, the countermeasure actions were regarded as jihad. *Basij* or martyrdom discourse was "mobilized". Jihad is often translated as Holy War, a term known to refer to the fight against the infidels, but originally it also means "effort". The late Imam Khomeini, the leader of the Iranian revolution, also referred to the "Great Jihad Theory" as the outward jihad as a holy war and advocated inner jihad as a form of spiritual self-cultivation. This internal and external Jihad discourse emerged in the countermeasures against the expansion of COVID-19, even to the manufacture of masks (ISNA March 17, 2020). Being an external jihad, the Revolutionary Guards have joined in the prevention of

infection and the *Basij*^{IV}, a para-military organization of the Revolutionary Guards, was mobilized. They disinfected all the cities in Iran at breakneck speed. The government was also proactive from the beginning in mobilizing the *Basijis* such as the announcement by the Minister of Health on March 4 (*Tābnak* March 5, 2020).

In addition to mobilization of the para-military group, “Martyr” discourse was also mobilized. Those who died while tackling COVID-19 as jihadis were treated as *Shahīd* (martyrs). Martyrdom, where people lose their lives for their faith, has a special religious significance in general in Islam^V. Among the Shia, the majority religious group in Iran, Martyrdom has a more important position in shaping the religious worldview. Among them, successive leaders known as Imams fought against enemy for the sake of justice. They have risen up against injustice and achieved martyrdom. In Iranian society, the concept of martyrdom is associated with the fight against injustice and revered along with righteousness. Through religious rituals and other means, the idea and notion are broadly shared.

Under the post-revolutionary Islamic regime, the religious concept of martyrdom has been expanded and gradually meant sacrifice to a consequence of faith, in other words, the Islamic regime itself. In the case of the new corona, the martyrs have included those who lost their lives in responding against it. It was not only the *Basijis* who went around disinfecting all the part of the country, but also ordinary medical workers such as doctors, nurses and so on (*IRNA* March 20, 2020; *ISNA* March 30, 2020; *Khabargozārī Dāneshjū* April 29, 2020)

For My Research Activities

At the time of writing, the number of deaths since the closure was lifted has not yet reached the number of deaths in late March and early April. This may be due in part to the progress made in securing the number of hospital beds and other measures for the treatment of patients. Of course, there is no doubt that the situation remains unpredictable.

The development of these new coronas has had no small effect on the research I have been conducting in recent years. In recent years, I have researched on the preservation of the memory of the Iran-Iraq War heroes (1980-1988). These war dead make up the majority of what we call martyrs in Iran today. Forty years have passed since the outbreak of the war and more than 30 years have passed since the ceasefire. Bereaved families and the returning soldiers have gotten older. It is not uncommon for the parents of the war martyrs to have already passed away. In the course of my research over the past five years, several bereaved family members have also passed away. In other words, it is gradually becoming more and more difficult for Iranian society to talk directly about the martyrs. The COVID-19 pushed back the situation and it is not uncommon for the affected families to disappear. (*Taşnīm* April 29, 2020)

Endnotes

¹In spite of this suspension plan, flights continued, and they had 53 flights until February 23 (Aoki 2020).

- ^{II} The Number of new infection cases and death cases is based on official press release by the Ministry of Health.
- ^{III} There was clear number of positive cases in each province until March 22 but since that day it became unclear in the official release.
- ^{IV} Basij is normally translated “para militia organization of IRGC”. As the term originally means “mobilization”, they tend to be pro-state voluntary association in various professions such as civil servants, peer guilds, college students, athletes, etc. It has a strong aspect as a service group to the state formed within an organization. About the development of the Basij, see Golkar (2016).
- ^V About development of concept of martyr in the early Islam, See Cook (2007). About contemporary development especially Muslim political activities, see Hatina and Litvak (2017).

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