



# Initial Assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Iran's Regional Activities

Dr. Raz Zimmt

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## Main Argument

► **The COVID-19 (Coronavirus) crisis finds Iran is one of the toughest points in its modern history.** The withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear agreement (the JCPOA) and re-imposition of economic sanctions exacerbated the economic troubles the country is facing, **pushing Iran's economy to an unprecedented crisis.** The sharp drop in the oil prices risks further exacerbating Iran's economic crisis. The closure of Iran's borders to neighboring countries due to the pandemic is also exacting a high economic cost on Iran, whose implications will likely persist even after the health crisis passes.

The economic hardship is compounded by the ramifications of the killing of the Commander of the Qods Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, Qasem Soleimani, in early January 2020. The assassination dealt a serious blow to Iran's ability to advance its strategic goals in the Middle East, at least in the short-term. The spread of the virus from Iran to other countries in the region may also bolster criticism against Iran, which is largely blamed for the outbreak of the virus, after it was late to take the necessary steps needed to stop the outbreak.



**Disinfection activities in Tehran against the Coronavirus (Fars, March 22, 2020)**

► **In Syria,** Iran has to contend with the COVID-19 crisis at a time characterized by growing Iranian involvement in Idlib and an Iranian effort to convey a message of “business as usual” after Qasem Soleimani's killing. In its activities in Syria, Iran is forced to deal with challenges

and constrains stemming from continued Israel and Turkish involvement in the arena. At this stage, it is too early to assess the effects of COVID-19 on Iranian patterns of deployment and action in Syria, but there are initial indications about a certain reduction in the pace of transfers of weaponry to Syria from Iran. The COVID-19 outbreak does not only pose additional challenges to Iranian activities in Syria but may endanger the lives of fighters in the ranks of the IRGC, Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias operating in Syria.

► **In Iraq**, the COVID-19 crisis occurs at a time when Iran is in the midst of an ongoing campaign to maintain its political, economic and military clout, following the killing of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, and increasing efforts by Iran and its proxies to compel the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country. These efforts are clearly evident **in the escalating military actions in recent weeks in Iraq between the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias and American forces stationed in the country**. The statement of the United States about redeploying its forces inside Iraq may encourage Tehran to continue and even intensify the military pressure on American forces in Iraq, via the Shi'ite militias operating under its guidance there, in an effort to accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Meanwhile, Tehran's fears are growing due to the possibility of the formation of a new government in Baghdad led by the former governor of Najaf, Adnan al-Zurufi, who is considered to be close to the United States and whose candidacy for the premiership is supported by Washington. Meanwhile, Iran is acting to ensure that as much of the trade between it and Iraq is not disrupted, in an effort to maintain its vital economic interests in Iraq, despite the outbreak of the pandemic.

► It is too early to assess whether the Iranian regime, which has proven its ability to withstand prior crises, will be able to contain the current emergency and how the COVID-19 outbreak will affect the national set of priorities of Iran's leadership. **At this stage, Iran is not giving up on its efforts to influence developments in the Middle East, and particularly in Iraq and Syria.** In addition, there is no sign that Iran is willing to give up on its strategic goals, including its regional policies, despite the intensifying crisis due to the COVID-19 outbreak. Similar to developments in crises Iran has faced in the past, the IRGC is exploiting the current crisis to bolster their involvement in the administration of civilian affairs in the country. The growing influence of the IRGC and radical circles in Iran at the expense of pragmatic elements led by President Rouhani, whose stature has been significantly diminished in recent years, may further bolster the influence of the hardliners in Iran's leadership.

► The longer the health and economic crisis persists, the **more likely that the COVID-19 pandemic and Iran's economic crisis may force the Iranian regime to conduct a new assessment of the situation and reexamine its national set of priorities.** In our assessment, while it is unlikely that Iran's strategic goals will change, **Iran may struggle, over time, to finance its ongoing intensive campaign across the Middle East,** which is already facing domestic criticism in Iran, particularly in light of the growing economic crisis.

## The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis and Iran's Economic Crisis on Its Strategic Position

► The COVID-19 crisis is one of the toughest challenges Iran has ever faced. The withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear agreement and re-imposition of sanctions exacerbated the difficulties the country is facing, pushing its economy to unprecedented depths of crisis. The economic impact of the pandemic is even graver, particularly because it impacts sectors that were less affected by the sanctions, such as tourism, domestic trade and export of non-oil products. Authorities are attempting to provide immediate solutions to citizens, such as an aid package to three million Iranians who lack a steady source of income, and providing loans with favorable conditions to business owners, but it is clear that they do not have long-term solution.

► For the first time since 1962, Iran's leadership was forced to ask for a five-billion-dollar loan from the Rapid Credit Facility established by the International Monetary Fund. The American administration already announced that despite the COVID-19 crisis, it does not intend to reduce the sanctions it has placed on Iran or alter its maximum pressure policy against it. The sharp drop in the prices of oil risks further exacerbating Iran's economic crisis. The closing of Iran's borders to neighboring countries is also exacting a high economic cost, **whose impact will likely be felt even after the passing of the health crisis, which has cost the lives of over 1,900 Iranians to date.**

► The economic hardship is compounded by the implications of the killing of the Commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani, in early January 2020. His killing dealt a significant blow to Iran's ability to promote its strategic goals in the Middle East, at least in the short-term, and forces it to reexamine its policies, particularly in light of the growing external and domestic challenges it has been facing in recent years.

► In addition, the spread of COVID-19 from Iran to other countries in the region may also increase criticism against it, as it is perceived to be largely responsible for the outbreak of the virus in the Middle East. Iranian authorities were slow in taking necessary steps, such as imposing lockdowns and halting flights between Iran and China, steps that may have stymied the spread of the pandemic. The failure of Iranian authorities to deal with the virus is bolstering voices in the Arab world against Iranian penetration and meddling in the Arab world, which were clearly heard in protests in recent months in Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Lebanon as well.

## Iranian Activities in Syria in Light of the COVID-19 Crisis

In Syria, Iran is forced to deal with the COVID-19 crisis at a time of increasing Iranian involvement in the fighting around Idlib, and an Iranian effort to convey a message of “business as usual” following Qasem Soleimani’s assassination. Starting in January, Iran reinforced its forces in the area, which included units of Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shi’ite militias operating under the guidance of the IRGC. The death of several IRGC members in the past two months in the area of Idlib provides further testament to the growing involvement of IRGC fighters and forces operating under their control in the campaign against the last rebel stronghold in Syria.

► In Syria, Iran is forced to content with challenges and limitations stemming from continued Israeli and Turkish activities in this arena. Israeli activities against Iranian entrenchment efforts have hit Iranian targets and managed to slow down Iran’s attempt to cement its military presence in the country, provide precision-guided missiles to Hezbollah, and challenged Iran’s ability to significantly retaliate against Israeli strikes. Turkey’s activities in Idlib are also posing a growing threat to Iranian activities in Syria. In light of the growing conformation between Turkey and the forces backing the Assad regime in Idlib, the Iranian Military Advisory Center in Syria published an extraordinary statement in early March, in which it threatened to retaliate against the ongoing Turkish attacks in the area, which killed an Iranian cleric and a number of fighters in the ranks of Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian Shi’ite militias (Tasnim, March 1, 2020).

► In an effort to display continuity following Soleimani’s assassination, the Commander of the IRGC’s Qods Force, Esmail Qa’ani, recently conducted his first visit to Syria since assuming his position. During the visit, which was likely held in late February 2020, Qa’ani toured the various

fighting fronts where IRGC, Hezbollah and pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias operate. Qa'ani visited the western Aleppo countryside, near the Shi'ite villages of Nubul and Zahraa', in the southern countryside near the town of Khan Tuman, and in the Iranian base in Jabal Azzan south of Aleppo. In addition, Qa'ani visited the frontlines in Idlib, Hama and Lattakia. In an interview to the Iranian news agency Mehr (March 10), Omar Rahmon, a member of Syria's National Reconciliation Committee, stated the Qa'ani's visit sent an important message to regional and international players and attests to Iran's continued support for the Syrian government and the "Resistance Front" and its determination to maintain its presence in the war on terror even after Soleimani's assassination.



**Esmail Qa'ani alongside the former Majlis member, Ali-Mohammad Bozorgvari, who left to the frontlines in Syria during February. The photograph was likely taken during Qa'ani's last visit to Syria in February 2020 (Telegram channel linked to Esmail Qa'ani, March 7, 2020)**

► At this stage, it is too early to assess the effect of the COVID-19 crisis on Iranian patterns of behavior in Syria, although there are initial indications about a drop in the volume of weaponry Iran is moving to Syria. In recent days, Iranian freighters that routinely transfer weaponry from Tehran to Damascus on behalf of the IRGC, were instead dispatched to collect medical equipment from Shenzhen in China to Iran (Twitter account @Gerjon\_ relying on flight trackers, March 21-22, 2020). The Mahan Air company, linked to the IRGC, has maintained its flights to Damascus, but using a smaller jet, model Avro RJ85 (Twitter account @ava\_today relying on flight trackers, March 18, 2020)



**Transport of medical equipment by the Mahan Air company  
(Fars, March 20, 2020)**

► The outbreak of the Coronavirus not only poses additional challenges to Iranian activities in Syria, but may also endanger the lives of fighters of the IRGC, Hezbollah and other pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias operating in Syria. Only on March 22, did Syrian authorities acknowledge the first case of COVID-19 in the country but five medical personnel in Damascus reported about patients displaying COVID-19 symptoms. Two doctors in the Tishreen military hospital reported that foreign Shi'ite fighters were treated at this closed military facilities after developing what appear to be COVID-19 symptoms. These testimonies join reporting of Syrian pro-opposition media about the spread of the virus among foreign Shi'ite militiamen in Syria (Syria in Context, March 17).

► It appears that the ongoing traffic of civilians and fighters from Iran, Iraq and Lebanon into Syria is increasing the likelihood to the virus outbreak in the country, especially in light of the poor state of Syria's health infrastructure after years of war. The Lebanese news website al-Modon reported (March 12, 2020) that according to local sources in Deir Ezzor, despite the decision of the Syrian cabinet to shutter the borders with Iraq and Jordan, the movement of Iranians and Iraqis through the Albu Kamal crossing between Syria and Iraq has not stopped. According to this report, convoys of Iranian and Iraqi "pilgrims" continue to move into Syria and move around the country, despite the concerns of the locals.

## Iranian Activities in Iraq in Lights of the COVID-19 Crisis

In Iraq, the COVID-19 crisis came at a time when Iran is waging an ongoing effort to maintain its political, economic and military influence in light of the fallout of the killing of Qasem

Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and growing efforts by Iran and its proxies to bring about the removal of American forces from the country.

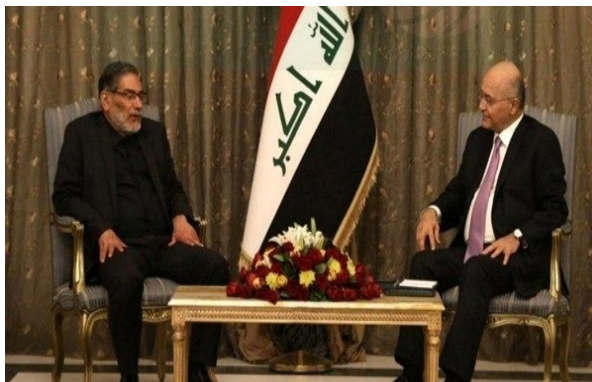
► In recent weeks, conflict escalated between the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias in Iraq and Western Coalition forces following a series of rocket attacks against bases hosting American forces. In an attack carried out on March 11 on the al-Taji military base north of Baghdad, resulted in the death of two American soldiers and one British servicewoman. On March 14, another attack was carried out against the al-Taji base, during which dozens of rockets were fired at the base, resulting in the injury of a number of Iraqi and American soldiers. On March 17, a third rocket attack was carried out in the span of a week, this time against the Basmaya military base south of Baghdad, where forces belonging to the International Counter-ISIS Coalition are stationed. The spokesman of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied any Iranian involvement in these attacks, declaring that the U.S. president should reexamine the presence of his forces in the region instead of engaging in “baseless” accusations (Fars, March 13, 2020).

► Meanwhile, the United States announced the redeployment of its forces in Iraq, including evacuating its forces from three smaller bases and concentrating forces in larger bases, whose security will be bolstered. As part of this process, the American forces transferred responsibility over the base in al-Qaim to the Iraqi Army. The spokesman of the Iraqi Army declared that this is the first stage in the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq (BBC, March 16, 2020; Rudaw, March 19, 2020). The reports about the shrinking footprint of U.S. presence in Iraq, as well as the agreement signed between the United States and the Taliban, which will result in the gradual reduction of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, **may encourage Tehran to continue ratcheting up pressure on American forces in Iraq via the Shi'ite militias operating under its guidance** in an effort to accelerate the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country. An Iranian assessment that the U.S. President, Donald Trump, is preoccupied with the COVID-19 crisis himself and will struggle to act militarily against Iran under these circumstances may contribute to Iran's decision to adopt a more confrontational approach.

► In the political arena, Iran maintains its efforts to influence the process of new government formation in Iraq, particularly in light of Tehran's concern about the prospect that the former governor of Najaf, Adnan al-Zurufi, who was appointed in mid-March as the incoming prime minister, will succeed in forming a new government. Al-Zurufi is considered to be close the

United States and supported by it, and thus his nomination is opposed by some Shi'ite groups in Iraq, chief among them the pro-Iranian Shi'ite militias.

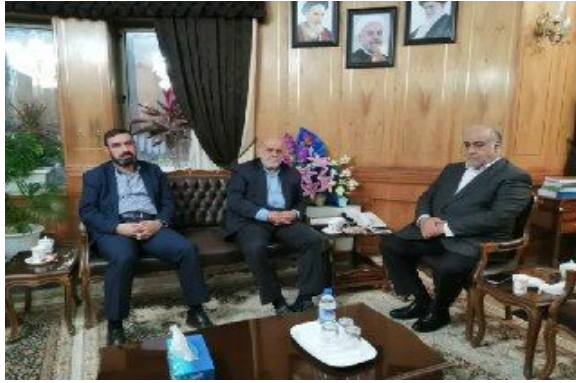
► Iran's efforts to influence political developments in Iraq can be seen in the visit recently conducted to Iraq by the Secretary of the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani. During the visit, Shamkhani met with senior Iraqi officials and the leaders of political currents in the country. Shamkhani stressed the need to continue the struggle to remove American forces from Iraq. His dispatch to Baghdad, as well as claims of former Iraqi Prime Minister, Ayad al-Allawi, that the Senior Adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader on International Affairs, Ali-Akbar Velayeti, recently meddled in efforts to establish a new government in Iraq (BulatNews.Com, March 3, 2020) may indicate that following Soleimani's assassination, some of his responsibilities, particularly in the political sphere, were delegated to other senior Iranian officials.



**A meeting between the Iraqi President, Barham Salih, and Ali Shamkhani  
(ILNA, March 9, 2020)**

► In addition, Iran seeks to secure its trade relations with Iraq, in an effort to preserve its vital economic interest in the country. In recent days, the Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad, Iraj Masjedi, visited two of the border crossings linking the two countries, the Iraqi border crossing Zurbatiyah and the Iranian border crossing Mehran, and discussed with officials managing both crossings measures to facilitate the movement of goods and travelers between Iran and Iraq, in light of the COVID-19 outbreak. In the visit, which was accompanied by the Iranian Military Attaché to Baghdad, Mostafa Moradian, the ambassador also met with the governors of the Kermanshah and Ilam provinces in western Iran and stressed the need to bolster economic cooperation between Iran and Iraq through the border crossings located in those provinces (IRNA, March 21, 2020).





**The Iranian Ambassador to Baghdad (center) and the Iranian military attaché (left) in a meeting with the governor of Kermanshah province (right) (IRNA, March 22, 2020)**