

## Reports

# Coronavirus: An Ethical Question in the US-Iran Showdown

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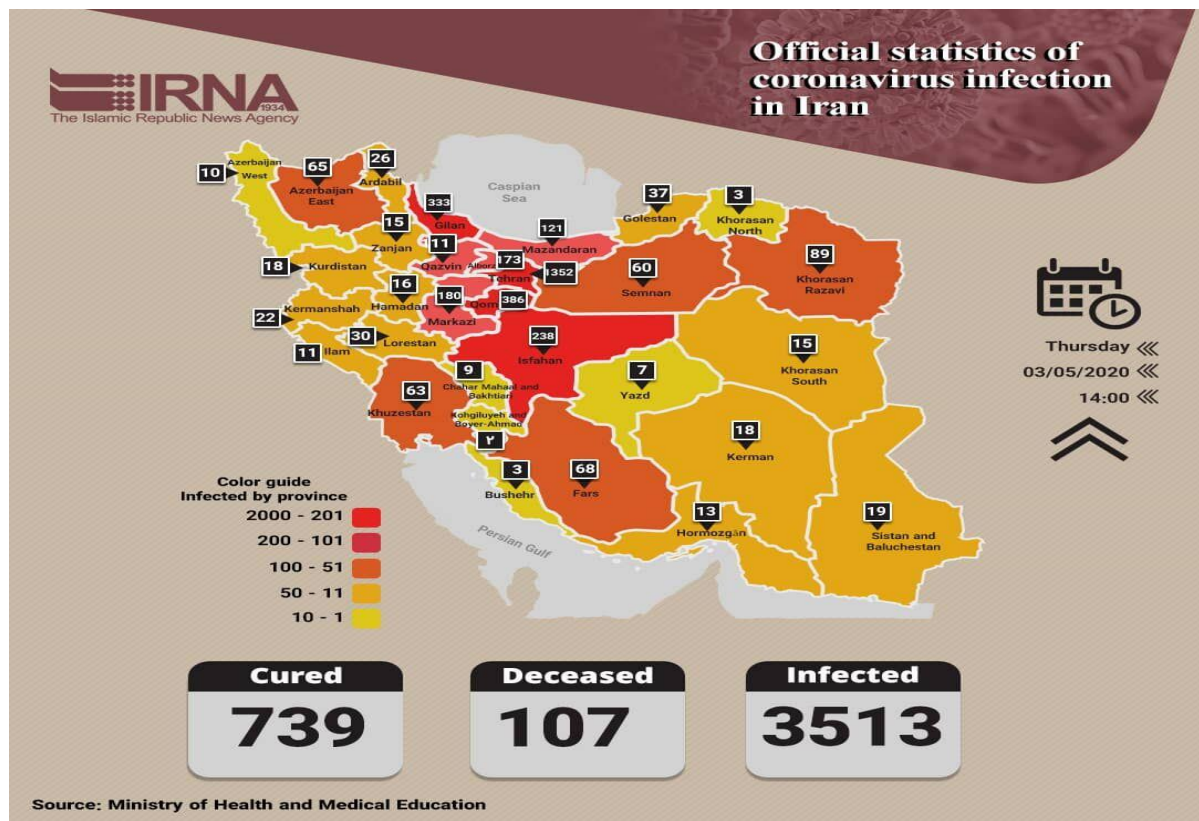
Iranian doctors struggle with the Coronavirus infection cases [Getty]

An Iranian Mahan Air plane carrying five Chinese experts and tons of medical supplies, including 50,000 testing kits, arrived in Tehran from Guangzhou on 29 February 2020 to help Iran combat the outbreak of coronavirus.<sup>(1)</sup> It was just 10 days after Iran had reported its first confirmed cases of infections on 19 February in Qom, a holy city 130 kilometers south of capital Tehran. China was the first country in the world to provide medical support to Iran after the World Health Organization had sent batches of testing kits earlier.

Within three weeks, China sent 18 planeloads of humanitarian and medical equipment to Iran \_ counted until March 21, as the country was struggling to mitigate the spread of the deadly virus. But the United States did exactly the opposite, expanding its cruel sanctions to prevent the Islamic Republic from buying medical equipment. <sup>(2)</sup> Iran is the most affected country in the Middle East with the highest rate of infections and deaths in the region and its efforts to fight coronavirus has been “severely hampered” by unilateral U.S. sanctions. <sup>(3)</sup> The Trump administration is using medicine as a weapon to achieve its foreign policy goals and Iranian patients are paying the price.

The United States has exempted humanitarian and medical imports from its sanctions in name but banking sanctions in practice have blocked Iran’s ability to buy medical equipment from abroad. Iran produces 95 percent of its medicine; but, it “has to import ingredients that are difficult to access under the sanctions”. <sup>(4)</sup> Very few banks are willing to risk incurring American sanctions by trading with Iran, thus severely limiting availability of medical supplies and impairing the right of Iranians to health.

In letters to global leaders, President Hassan Rouhani has called on the international community not to comply with the sanctions as the death toll due to the outbreak of coronavirus rose. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif warned: “It is immoral to let a bully kill innocents.” Zarif told U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres it was imperative that the U.N. and its member states demand that the U.S. abandon its malign approach against Iran and end its “campaign of economic terrorism” against 83 million Iranians. (5) Deaths from the coronavirus disease, or COVID-19, in Iran 2020 soared to 1,812 with the number of confirmed cases reaching 23,049 on March 23.



[Iran's Health Ministry]

## U.S. Losing Moral High Ground

China, Russia, most Iranian neighbors and even several states in Europe and elsewhere have called on the U.S. to lift its callous sanctions on Iran. Russia's Foreign Ministry has slammed the U.S. sanctions “anti-human”, saying “Illegal unilateral U.S. sanctions, imposed since May 2018 as part of the ‘maximum pressure’ campaign, are a powerful obstacle to effective fight against the infection. The reason for the many victims, caused by it, lies not only in the disease itself, but also in the fact that the U.S, purposefully hinder the resistance (to the coronavirus). Millions of Iranian citizens were cut off from the possibility of purchasing necessary medical supplies ... The anti-human policy of the U.S. provokes deep regret, alarm and serious concern.”



It has urged the U.S. to lift its coercive economic measures “hitting the human rights in Iran”, adding “The global pandemic is not a time for settling geopolitical accounts, especially those that have no basis, invented in Washington for the purpose of satisfying their own ambitions.”

(6)

China’s foreign minister has called for the U.S. to “immediately lift unilateral sanction on Iran” that have prohibited Tehran from importing medical devices. (7)



More Coronavirus infected deaths [Getty]

After a massive earthquake killed over 26,000 Iranians in the southeastern city of Bam in December 2003, the George W. Bush administration temporarily suspended its sanctions and sent planeloads of humanitarian supplies to Iran, the first since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. But the Trump administration has been “both so cruel and so unreasonable” that make warmonger Bush “look compassionate and reasonable in comparison.”

“The U.S. government is run by sociopaths,” writes Mehdi Hasan in *The Intercept*. “How else to explain the Trump administration’s callous disregard for the lives of ordinary Iranians in the midst of this global coronavirus crisis? How else to make sense of U.S. officials doubling down in their support for crippling economic sanctions on the Islamic Republic, despite the sheer scale of the suffering? ... As ordinary Americans line up at grocery stores and pharmacies

across the United States to stock up on prescription medications, do they have any clue that their Iranian counterparts are being denied medicines and basic goods because of U.S. government policy?"(8)

The infamous "maximum pressure" campaign has been turned into a foreign policy tool violating basic human rights. "Trump has divorced human values and uses medicine as a weapon to achieve his foreign policy goals. He has lost the moral ground. Now, Russia and China are teaching Washington how to respect human rights," Ali Adami, an associate professor of international relations, told the writer.

Trump has not only discredited America in the eyes of the world, many Americans admit "Trump doesn't represent decent American values" (9) Coronavirus put the Trump administration to a new test. The virus created an opportunity for the U.S. to lift its inhuman sanctions. But as the death toll from coronavirus increased in Iran, the U.S. added new sanctions. U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced further sanctions on Iran on 18 March, citing the recent rocket attack in Taji military camp north of Baghdad that killed two U.S. soldiers, without any evidence of Iranian involvement or support. The U.S. also launched air raids against Kata'ib Hezbollah facilities in Iraq, killing three Iraqi soldiers, two policemen and one civilian.

The new sanctions target "nine entities and three individuals" mostly from Iran's petrochemical industry that "provide revenue to the regime." (10)

The Trump administration's heightened animosity towards the Islamic Republic has left no room for optimism. Big steps make no sense in an atmosphere of belligerency. Thus, any move to reduce tensions between Washington and Tehran has to include small steps such as providing humanitarian assistance in time of need. Iran's appeal earlier this month to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for \$5 billion in emergency funding to cope with coronavirus was another opportunity. These opportunities have so far been lost by the White House and there is no indication that they will be seized in the future as long as Trump is in charge.

"Callous US disregard for Iran's Covid-19 emergency - it is effectively blocking bilateral medical aid and a request for a \$5bn loan from the International Monetary Fund - suggests that

Washington is not interested in confidence-building measures ... (U.S.) animosity dashed hopes the health crisis could encourage a rapprochement of sorts.” (11) The Trump administration has added salt to Iranian wounds by imposing new sanctions and trying to incite Iranians against their government.



Cabinet members wearing face masks and gloves attend their meeting in Tehran [March 18 2020 AP]

## Coronavirus Geopolitics

COVID-19 is a major global geopolitical shock that, once the dust is settled, is going to reset the international system, accelerate de-globalization, expedite de-regionalization, and create new political alignments or strengthen some of the existing ones.

The Russia-China-Iran partnership is the outcome of their shared interests and strong opposition to American hegemony. All of them believe that the Trump administration's unilateralism has disrupted the international system and poses a grave and growing danger to their sovereignty and interests. They seek a more balanced international order. They look for a multipolar world.

The new coronavirus is widely expected to redefine global chains of production and consumption. The global economy is expected to go into recession this year due to the pandemic. However, the confidence of Chinese leaders in their rise and their success in containing coronavirus are evidence of their determination to portray China as leader of the global fight against the virus, and march towards becoming a global power.





Chinese medical workers arrive at Tehran airport to help Iran with its coronavirus response [Feb. 29 IRNA]

But the geopolitical impact of coronavirus is not yet fully known and “much depends on how successful efforts to mitigate its damage and find treatments and ultimately a vaccine for it will be.” (12) “Coronavirus has now become a big actor in international relations. It’s going to reshape global political alignments,” Mohammad Tabatabaei, an associate professor of international relations, told the writer. Adami called the outbreak of coronavirus “a major shock”, saying it will “cause a deep surgery in the structure of the international system. In the post-coronavirus era, international relations among global actors will be measured on the basis of their response to this virus.”

## Iran’s Pivot to Asia

The virus has already strengthened political solidarity between Iran and China and is expected to expedite Tehran’s “pivot to Asia” policy. “As Beijing and Moscow seek to advance their respective strategic objectives while cooperating within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization framework, Iran’s integration (into the China–Russia Eurasian architecture) carries the potential to shift the strategic balance between the two ... Iran’s strategic position at the heart of Eurasia’s southern rim also makes it the geographic pivot in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ... With Iran’s newly constructed deep-sea port at Chabahar and rail links extending into Central Asia, Iran is also poised to become the hub of the International North–South Transit Corridor (INSTC),” writes Micha’el Tanchum, a researcher at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Studies (AIES). (13)

It's for some time that Iran has been carrying out its "rebalancing" toward the East. Widening U.S. unilateral sanctions and Europe's failure to preserve the nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), have only encouraged Tehran to expedite its reorientation and seek partners beyond its immediate periphery in the East. That explains why Asia has emerged as a key economic lifeline for Iran and China is now its biggest trading partner. Strategic partnership with China and other Asian powers such as Malaysia is now a fundamental strategy for Tehran. America's expanding presence in East Asia with a view to balance China has only strengthened Tehran-Beijing partnership.

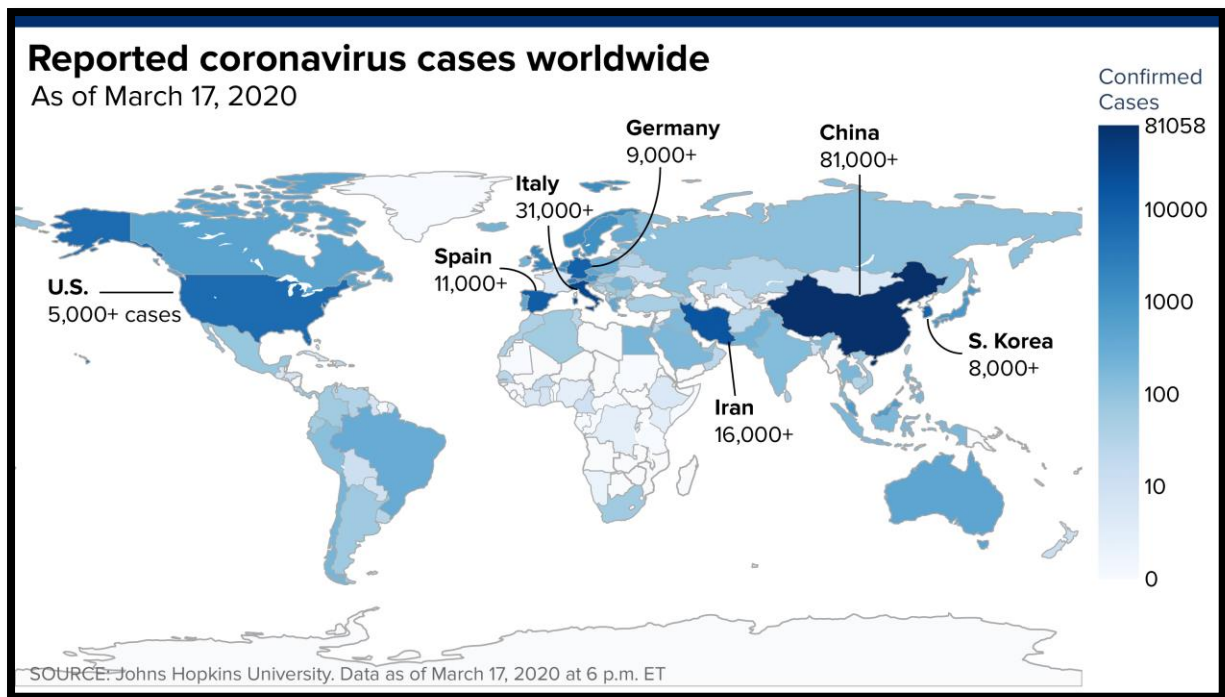
## **Novel Coronavirus: A U.S. Bio-Weapon?**

Narratives on the origins and nature of coronavirus have increasingly shifted in recent weeks from a natural phenomenon to a man-made infection. Science Magazine said on 26 January 2020 that the seafood market in Wuhan may not be the source of the deadly virus. It wrote: "Now it seems clear that (the) seafood market is not the only origin of the virus. But to be honest, we still do not know where the virus came from." (14)

Chinese officials raised the idea that coronavirus could have originated outside of China. On 27 February, Zhong Nanshan, China's foremost medical adviser on the outbreak, said: "Though the COVID-19 was first discovered in China, it does not mean that it originated from China." But on 12 March, Lijian Zhao, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, suggested that coronavirus might have been bioengineered by the United States. Zhao tweeted "it might be U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan." He added: "Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe us an explanation." (15)

Zhao was apparently referring to the Military World Games held in Wuhan 18-27 October 2019, when the Pentagon sent 17 teams with more than 280 athletes and other staff members there, weeks before the outbreak. On the other hand, American officials have tried to introduce coronavirus as a Chinese disease. Pompeo has called it the "Wuhan virus," while Kevin McCarthy, a Republican in the House of Representatives, has named it the "Chinese coronavirus." (16) Trump himself has blamed China for the pandemic and provoked anti-Asian sentiment by labeling the illness a "Chinese virus." (17)





[Johns Hopkins University]

Republican Senator Tom Cotton has suggested that the virus is the work of Chinese scientists at a secret Wuhan lab for biological warfare. (18) Later, he warned: “China will pay for this.” (19)

Blaming the U.S. military for unleashing the contagion may be seen as a false conspiracy theory in the West but it may turn into a major sore point between the U.S. and China if Beijing really believes in the U.S. government’s culpability. The idea has many buyers around the world, including in Russia and Iran.

Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has suggested that coronavirus outbreak could be part of a “biological attack” on Iran, calling on the armed forces to bolster the country’s fight against the disease. “Given that there’s evidence that raises the possibility of this event being a biological attack, this initiative can also be an exercise in biological defense,” Khamenei said in a decree to the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, General Mohammad Baqeri. (20)

## Conflict Heating Up

From his first day in office, Trump abandoned Barack Obama’s policy of “interaction” and instead followed an aggressive policy of “confrontation” with Iran. He unilaterally pulled out of the multilateral JCPOA on 8 May 2018, calling it “disastrous” and “a horrible one-sided deal” that should have never been achieved. His administration launched a “maximum

pressure” campaign aimed at squeezing the Iranian economy to force Tehran to re-negotiate the JCPOA. It issued a list of 12 demands that were tantamount to demanding Iran’s surrender. Eliminating Iran’s uranium enrichment program, rolling back its ballistic missile industry and countering its regional influence were just three of the 12 arrogant demands.

Trump seeks an unrealistic deal that makes him a winner and Iran a loser. And he has resorted to coercion and economic terrorism to achieve his goals. His strategy is based on the assumption that Iran will eventually give in under continuous tremendous pressure. About three and a half years into his presidency, Trump has succeeded in damaging Iran’s economy and hurting the Iranian people but has not achieved any of his three declared goals. “Trump’s campaign of coercion and ostracism has failed disastrously. His three-pronged aim was to ensure Iran could never acquire a nuclear weapon, to curb its ballistic missile capabilities, and to halt its ‘destabilizing regional behavior’. It has backfired on all fronts ... Iran has continued to develop missile, drone and satellite guidance programs capable of hitting Israel and US bases in the Middle East.

These capabilities were on show when it struck US forces in Iraq in retaliation for Trump’s illegal assassination in January of a top general, Qassem Suleimani ... Iran has shown no sign of changing its regional strategy. Its proxies remain actively engaged in the Syrian war. Its influence in Lebanon and Iraq remains strong ... Yet analysts say desperation in Tehran, coupled with deep anger over US policy and Europe’s inability to mitigate it, is so pervasive that the regime may soon decide to raise the stakes by quitting the NPT to increase its leverage, even at the risk of US and Israeli military retaliation.” (21)

Military escalation, according to American defense analyst David Wallsh, is the logical outcome of the U.S. “maximum pressure” campaign that, by steadily squeezing the Iranian economy and providing no viable diplomatic off-ramps, incentivizes Tehran to fight back. The cycle of escalation is counterproductive to Trump’s own National Defense Strategy (NDS) of prioritizing great power competition with China and Russia.

“Research has shown that sanctions against a target that expects continued conflict are unlikely to produce significant concessions. Under such conditions, a target is likely to fear that giving in today will lead to more pressure tomorrow and therefore resist at almost any cost. The flaw in the logic of the maximum pressure campaign then is ... that an exclusively

punitive policy unaccompanied by diplomatic off-ramps incentivizes Tehran to fight fire with fire by imposing costs on its perceived aggressors. This is precisely what we have seen to date,” he wrote. (22)



Donald Trump at the National Institutes of Health's Vaccine Research Center in Maryland [March 3 – Reuters]

Now, coronavirus has added a new element to the rising tensions. The conflict between Tehran and Washington is “escalating in a pattern similar to the one that brought the two sides to the brink of war” in January. As Iran combats coronavirus, the U.S. military is arguing that may prompt Iran take a more confrontational approach as it looks outward to distract from its coronavirus crisis. But others contend the situation could make Tehran less likely to lash out at the U.S. as its attention is consumed by fighting the virus.” (23)

## Trump's Iran Strategy: Reagan Doctrine

The Trump administration's direction has been to discredit and undermine Iran's ruling system through a multi-layered strategy. The goal: to change Iran's behavior. In practice, that's a prescription for “regime change” without an all-out military confrontation. The Trump administration is following the Reagan Doctrine towards Iran. The doctrine was a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy in the 1980s. It was a strategy pursued by the Ronald Reagan administration to confront the global influence of the Soviet Union and defeat it without war.

Under the Reagan Doctrine, the U.S. provided overt and covert assistance to anti-communist forces to weaken and overthrow Soviet-backed governments around the globe. It also sought to weaken the Soviet Union from within by denying it modern technology, taking away its

financial resources and discrediting it in the eyes of its own people. In January 1977, Reagan, during a conversation with his would-be chief foreign policy advisor Richard Allen, said: "My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic. It is this: We win and they lose." (24) Prior to Reagan, the U.S. policy was to manage its relationship with the Soviet Union and contain communism. The Reagan Doctrine was a major shift in the U.S. foreign policy. "Confrontation" and "Rollback" replaced "containment".

That's what Trump is doing with Iran by his "maximum pressure" policy. It's aimed at choking off Iran's revenues, calling it an evil power and a malign actor, seeking to discredit it internally and globally, inciting its people against the government, and frustrating it. Pompeo praised the Reagan Doctrine while laying out the strategy of the Trump administration towards Iran in 2018.

"Reagan understood the power of exposure when he cast the Soviet Union as 'an evil empire.' By throwing a spotlight on the regime's abuses, he was pledging solidarity with a people who had long suffered under communism. It is likewise for the sake of the Iranian people that the Trump administration has not been afraid to expose the regime's merciless domestic repression ... President Reagan's combination of moral clarity and diplomatic acuity laid the groundwork for the 1986 talks in Reykjavik and, later, the downfall of Soviet communism itself," Pompeo said. (25)

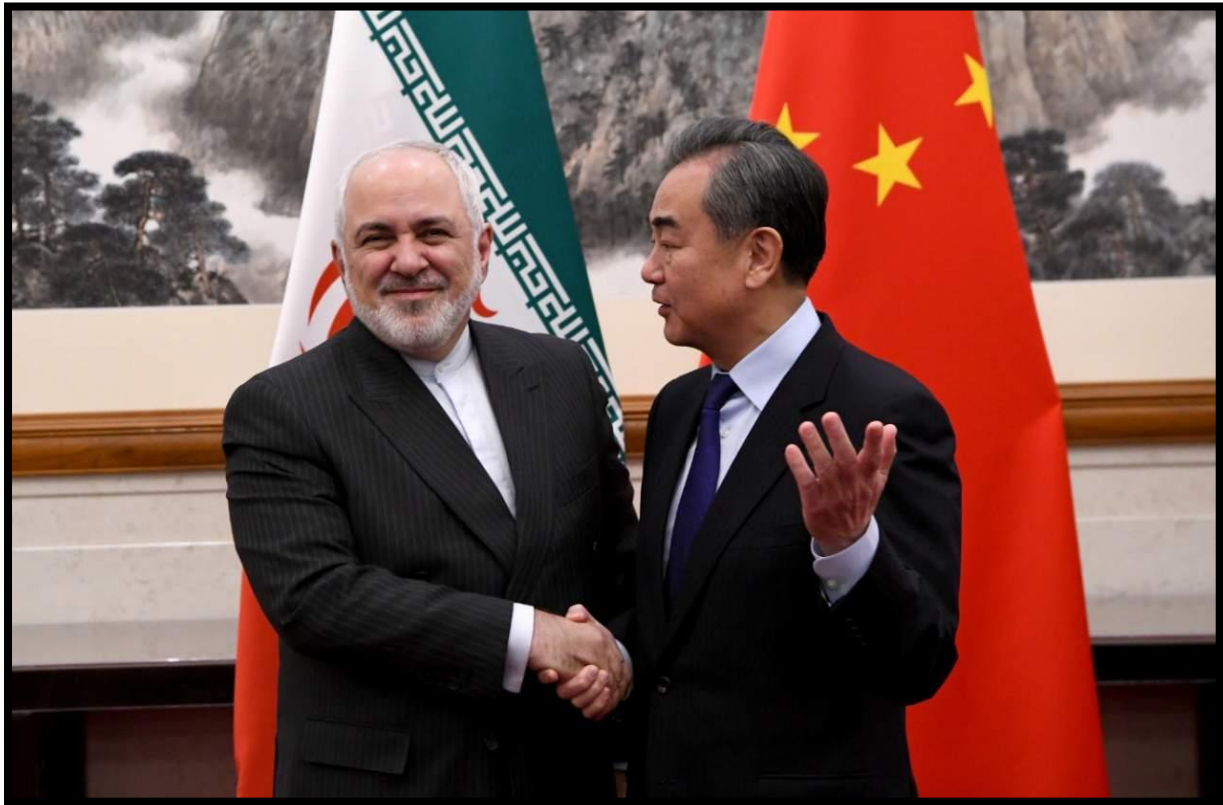
That's why Pompeo and other neoconservatives in the Trump administration appear to be delighted with the spread of coronavirus in Iran and look at the disease as an opportunity to bring more pressure on Iran and yet blaming Iran's government over the virus at the same time.

The U.S. State Department is currently using social media to encourage Iranians to share information with the Trump administration about the coronavirus pandemic. "The goal is to collect information from Iranians, find ways to share that information when it is determined to be accurate and leverage the coronavirus in an effort to fortify a relationship with the Iranian people ... We are getting the unfiltered facts," CNN quoted Trump administration officials, adding "some of the tips from Iranians have been highlighted in Pompeo's speeches" and "some of the information is shared with the intelligence community." (26)

No one would see this as a humanitarian gesture but using social media as a tool to achieve



foreign policy goals. Coronavirus has not resulted in a shift in U.S. policy toward Iran. It has only encouraged sociopaths in the White House to use medicine as a weapon to fuel Iranian frustration. Iran will overcome this hardship, probably sooner rather than later, but Trump animosity will remain in memories, further pushing Iran to redefine its foreign policy.



Iran-China relations (Getty)

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