

Trump Administration Shuns Leadership Role in Responding to Coronavirus Crisis

By [Michael Jansen](#)

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Instead of rushing to the rescue of peoples around the globe from the coronavirus, the Trump administration is shunning friendly governments and stepping up punishment of unfriendly ones. As Iran reported 38,900 infections and more than 2,600 deaths from the virus, President Hassan Rouhani dismissed criticisms of the government's tardy response to the outbreak in the Shia holy city of Qom in early February. He said Tehran had to consider the negative impact of mass quarantine on the country's sanctions-wrecked economy. Although criticism is justified as Iran delayed tackling the virus, Rouhani rightly condemned the Trump administration for waging "political war" against Iran.

This is a very short-sighted policy because if the virus is not contained and, eventually, conquered in Iran, that country will continue to threaten with contagion this region and the wider world. Aware of this danger, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said "solidarity not exclusion" is needed. Europe, humanitarian agencies and US Democratic party lawmakers have called for easing sanctions on Iran.

Urgent medical supplies have been sent to Iran by the World Health Organisation and other UN specialised agencies as well as China, Turkey, the Emirates, Kuwait, Japan and several European countries which are sharing scarce personal protection equipment for medics and other items with Iran because they understand the danger Iran will pose if the virus remains active and spreading.

Nevertheless, the State Department dismissed media reports that due to the coronavirus the US could grant waivers permitting some governments to release frozen Iranian funds in their countries' banks. Instead of responding positively to calls for relaxation, an unidentified State Department official claimed that Iran has the money to provide for the humanitarian needs of its population but chooses to spend on "terrorism and proxy groups." Adding injury to insult, the US Treasury imposed new sanctions on individuals and companies said to be trading with Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, which has been deployed to fight the virus and this week has opened a 2,000-bed field hospital at an exhibition centre in Tehran to serve recovering coronavirus victims.

Little wonder that the State Department has taken this line. Its chief Mike Pompeo has cheer-led Donald Trump's policy of exerting "maximum pressure" on Iran by waging sanctions war on the country's economy after withdrawing from the 2015 agreement for dismantling Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for lifting sanctions. Pompeo has made it clear the US should exploit the virus to boost pressure on Iran to meet his demands.

Facing international disapproval over the US stand, Pompeo stated,

“The whole world should know that humanitarian assistance into Iran is wide open. It’s not sanctioned, we’re doing everything we can to facilitate both the humanitarian assistance moving in and to make sure the financial transactions connected to that can take place as well.”

He lied! US sanctions apply to all stages of trade and prevent Iran from accessing international banking so it can make payments for goods it purchases.

As infections in Iran rose last week, Pompeo called on the Pentagon to take military action on Kataeb Hizbollah, a pro-Iranian Iraqi Shia militia accused of firing rockets into Iraqi military bases hosting US troops. So far, the generals have demurred, arguing that there is no evidence that Iran is behind these attacks. The top US military commander in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Robert White warned that additional US troops would be required and an offensive would be deadly and counterproductive. He reminded Pompeo and other administration hawks that the US role in Iraq was training the country’s army and battling Daesh.

But White did not mention that, like other factions of the Popular Mobilisation Units deployed against Daesh, Kataeb Hizbollah has been formally merged with the Iraqi army. Therefore, a campaign against this group would force the army and other Shia armed factions to defend the Kataeb, while the government would demand instant withdrawal of all US and foreign forces from Iraq.

Pompeo also used a teleconference of the Group of Seven foreign ministers to call on colleagues to ramp up sanctions on Iran. Pompeo was always unlikely to achieve this end. While Canada and Britain have followed the US sanctions lead, France, Germany, Italy have tried to retain ties with Iran by working out means to evade sanctions. This split between the US and Europe could stoke tensions when the International Monetary Fund takes up the Iranian request for \$5 billion in aid to help battle the virus.

Writing in The Washington Post on March 29, Jackson Diehl put Pompeo among the “worst US secretaries of state ever” due to his performance during the pandemic. After describing Pompeo’s destructive behaviour, Diehl accused him of pursuing “pet causes as if nothing else was happening,” mentioning, in particular, “the ‘maximum pressure’ campaign against Iran, which he, more than any other official, has promoted.” His goal: regime change. This policy, wrote Diehl, could produce the “wholesale death of innocent people, and the further discrediting of America’s claim to humanitarianism.” Which has always been false.

Diehl pointed out that Pompeo is not only determined to both blame China for the pandemic but also to rubbish Beijing’s aid to countries like Italy and Spain, which have been massively affected by the scourge. Diehl is not alone in making such a harsh assessment of Pompeo, other commentators had done so as early as last October. Nevertheless, Trump kept him on in the post. A man who sheds taking responsibility for his words and actions, Trump is to blame for the appointments he makes.

Many of Trump’s appointees have been disastrous, like Pompeo, who is an evangelical Christian whose attitude toward Iran is determined by his commitment to Israel. Late last year, Pompeo became a central figure in the US-Israeli relationship as, according to Israeli reports, Trump appeared to be cooling toward Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, perhaps because he is under indictment for bribery and breach of trust, failed to form a government after two elections, and, at that time, appeared to be on his way out of office. Trump hates “losers.”

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Articles by: [Michael Jansen](#)

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