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A US-Iran Zero-sum Game on Covid-19 Could Threaten Global Health Security

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Abstract

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on some of the most sensitive questions surrounding international security. One of these is the US-Iran crisis, where the two countries have been on the brink of a full military confrontation since January. To date, both countries continue a zero-sum game, exploiting the pandemic as an opportunity to mount pressure on the adversary. Will the common threat caused by Covid-19 be able to divert Iran and the US from the collision course and push them towards more cooperative behaviour? This policy brief focuses on the cost that current confrontational strategies could have for both sides amid the Covid-19 outbreak, highlighting the threats and the political and strategic limitations that have emerged as a result of the pandemic. It also shows the potential gains at both the regional and the global levels that could arise for both actors if they were to adopt a new approach, based on health diplomacy and cooperation in health security.



1. Introduction

Covid-19 is spreading across the globe and it is increasingly unlikely that the global crises it is provoking will be resolved quickly. Reflection on its international consequences has already begun and a growing number of analysts are venturing out in an attempt to anticipate its systemic effects. Will it have a long-lasting impact on the international economy or international relations systems? What will be its eventual impact on globalisation and multilateralism? And on the evolution of geo-political rivalries?

Much will depend on the duration of the pandemic, its final toll in terms of human lives and economic disruption, as well as the capacity of the global order to absorb the shock. What can already be said is that Covid-19 poses common and similar challenges to people and governments worldwide, at an unprecedented scale compared to other pandemics experienced by the modern times. These challenges are already testing the capacity of societies, nation-states, and the international system.

Differences between rich and poor countries affect the timeliness and effectiveness of responses. In countries with under-resourced health systems and weak financial capacity, Covid-19 will strike more harshly. But, the resilience of countries and societies will not only depend on national wealth. Other factors will also be important, such as the level of state-society's trust and the degree of social compliance to national containment measures. Equally, it will be the culture of cooperative behaviour and the capacity to implement collective responses, as well as the state's strategic culture and the ability to mobilise resources for the common good.

The same is true at the international level. As viruses know no borders, national responses alone will not solve the crisis. The final defeat of Covid-19 will depend on timely and effective trans-national responses, close coordination of policies and actions, data and information sharing, and adequate cooperation in research. Short-sighted nationalist approaches, zero-sum games, profit-driven and advantage-seeking attitudes will most likely backfire, prolonging and deepening the crisis, perhaps through second or third waves of contagion and global economic meltdowns.

Nowhere more than in the Middle East and North Africa will all actors need to re-assess their positions and poli-

cies. The region is plagued by crises and conflicts and the pandemic will further stress governance weaknesses and structural problems in societies and economies, thus further complicating pre-existing crisis scenarios. While Covid-19 affects the warring parties' political will, military capabilities, and strategic calculations in conflict countries, it is not clear whether it will result in further encroaching negative conflict dynamics or whether it will eventually create new openings for de-escalation and conflict resolution.

Against this backdrop, this policy brief focuses on the impact of the pandemic on the US-Iran crisis. It aims to analyse whether the Covid-19 pandemic will further accelerate the ongoing escalatory dynamics between the two parties. Will the US and Iran consider the pandemic as yet another an opportunity to be taken advantage of, an unexpected factor that can result in more pronounced vulnerabilities in the adversary? Or will the tragedy it causes eventually provide an opportunity for de-escalation and cooperation?

Indeed, the challenges posed by Covid-19 could open new pathways to exit US-Iran tensions. However, much will depend on the strategic choices of the two parties. If the pandemic were to be politically weaponised by one or both sides, it could backfire on them, while also creating a major systemic threat for the MENA region and global health security in general.

2. The Worst Is Yet to Come

The Covid-19 crisis has hit Iran particularly hard. At the time of writing, Iran is the worst affected country in the MENA region. While it is realistic to assume that the number of Covid-19 fatalities in Iran is already higher than that officially reported, there are also reasons to believe that the peak in infected cases and casualties is still to come.

According to Iran's Minister of Health, Saeid Namaki, the country should experience a new peak in April.¹ The government's inadequate response coupled with Iranian citizens' non-compliance with preventive measures are among the causes of the looming catastrophic scenario. Furthermore, as a result of the persistence and intensification of stifling US sanctions, Iran lacks the financial

¹ Saeid Namaki, 'An Increased Number of Coronavirus Cases in Iran', Mashregh, March 23, 2020, [وشک-رد-انورک-هب-ناایالتب-م-ی-دوعص-ری-س-م-لی](#)



means to import and the capacity to access the international market for medical equipment and medicines.

Similarly to many other countries at the initial stage of the Covid-19 crisis, Iran underestimated the actual threat of the virus. It refrained from taking timely preventative measures, wary of the possible consequences of announcing a state of emergency, but also to protect its critical relations with China. In addition, the government encountered difficulties in establishing a balance between its religious priorities and public health protection. Under pressure from clerics, it did not initially take any action to restrict access to the holy city of Qum, where the contagion had started, and consequently closed the Shite shrines with a delay. This was compounded by President Rouhani's resistance to shut down non-essential government activities, despite requests from various parties.² Thus, the partial-lockdown was only announced on 25 March, thirty-five days after the first reported case of Covid-19.

The president also sent mixed messages to the people about the severity of the situation. Just a few days before Iran experienced its sharpest rise in infected cases, Rouhani stated that the country would already be back to normal from the following Saturday.³ At the same time, parts of Iranian society decided not to obey the government's instruction to avoid traveling during the Persian New Year holidays. Despite considerable decline in travels and some regional restrictions on entering tourists, in those days almost one million people left Tehran for holidays⁴, substantially increasing the spread of the infection throughout the country.

In the meantime, international organisations and NGOs, including Human Rights Watch⁵, issued reports on how

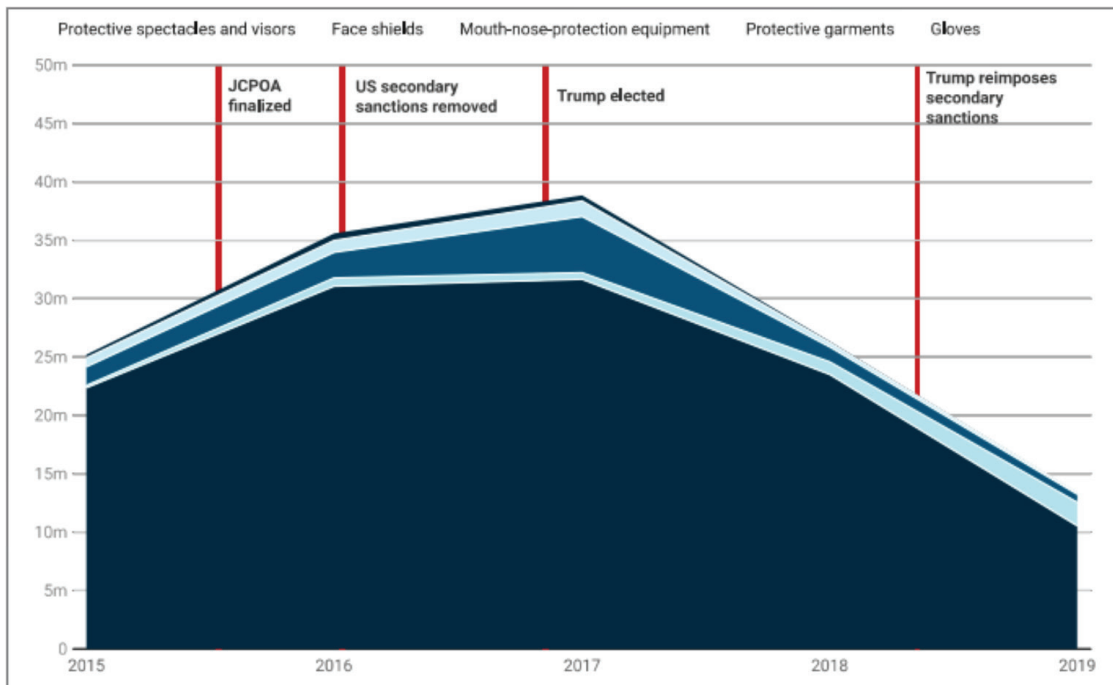
sanctions affected Iran's healthcare system and its ability to fight the virus.⁶ In spite of US officials' categorical denials, a growing body of independent reports shows that the US sanctions have resulted in an undeclared embargo on medical supplies. Sanctions prevent Iran from buying essential pharmaceutical and medical products on the global market, either by putting sellers in danger of being punished for breaking US regulations or due to the global fear of trading with Iran that the sanctions have created. A new report by Bourse & Bazar shows that, since the introduction of US sanctions, Europe's total exports of face masks, gloves, and other Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to Iran fell from 39 million euros to just 13 million euros in 2019. This happened while Iran's healthcare system was already struggling with limited inventories of this equipment before the Covid-19 outbreak.⁷

2. Including a request by members of the Parliament and the military. See: Fateme Hosseini M.p., 'Nowruz Travels and Opening of the Government offices Will Increase Infected cases', March 25, 2020, <https://www.isna.ir/news/99010502252/> و-و-ی زورون-ی اهرفس-ی نی سی ح
نای ال ت ب م-داد ع ت-ش ی از ف ا-ب ج و م-ت ار ا د ا-ی ی اش گ ز اب
3. Hassan Rouhani, 'From Saturday Things Will Back to Normal: Moving to Control the Outbreak', Tasnim News Agency, February 25, 2020, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1398/12/06/2211196/> ت-ت ر و ص-ه ب-ا ه-ل-ا و ر-ه م-ه ه ب-ن ش-ز و ر-ز ا-ی ن ا ح و ر
ت س ا ن و ر ک-س و ر ی و-ل ر ت ن ک-ت م-س-ه ب-ت ک ر ح-د و ب-د ه ا و خ-ی د ا ع
4. Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi, March 21, 2020 <https://twitter.com/azarijahromi/status/1241254627754065920>
5. Human Rights Watch, 'Maximum Pressure: US Economic Sanctions Harms Iranian Right to Health', October 29, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/10/29/maximum-pressure/us-economic-sanctions-harm-iranians-right-health>

6. Mehdi Hassan, 'The Sanctions are Killing Iranians, So the Trump's Brutal Sanctions', The Intercept, March 18, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/17/coronavirus-iran-sanctions/>
7. Efsandiyar Batmanghelij, 'New European Limits on Medical Gear Exports Put Iranians at Risk', March 22, 2020, <https://www.bourseandbazaar.com/articles/2020/3/20/new-european-limits-on-medical-gear-exports-put-iranians-at-risk>



Figure 1: European Exports of Personal Protective Equipment to Iran



(Source: Based on 8-digit CN codes as outlined in Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/402)

Furthermore, adopting costly measures to fight Covid-19 – such as nationwide quarantine and the complete shut-down of business – requires significant public funding to compensate workers and businesses for the losses they incur and to reactivate the economy during and after the crisis. This explains why Tehran was hesitant to adopt such measures. In view of the country’s desperate state of public finance, President Rouhani tried to balance the protection of health with the avoidance of an economic meltdown, and only applied tougher measures slowly and incrementally.

The government has delayed business taxes and loan repayments until May and announced that about 1.5 million lower-income families without permanent jobs would receive up to six million Rials (\$400) in four stages.⁸ The aid package barely scratches the surface of the economic damage, thus those whose livelihood depends

on earning a daily income might decide to continue to carry out their work rather than isolating. Maintaining this kind of normality will cause the virus to spread and create multiple waves of contagion, leading to the state’s growing incapacity to provide health services. One study by Tehran’s prestigious Sharif University of Technology⁹ forecasts that in extreme scenarios, Iran’s medical system could collapse despite it being one of the best in the MENA region. This could result in a death toll of over 3.5 million. The increase in the number of cases will also result in further damage to the economy, inflation and economic depression.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the number of cases in the US is rapidly mounting and much of the country has moved to a lockdown. The pattern of Covid-19 contagion in the US indicates that the country might also become one

8. Davide Barbuscia and Parisa Hafezi, ‘Iran Has Limited Scope for Coronavirus Economic Stimulus’, Reuters, March 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-iran-economy-analy/iran-has-limited-scope-for-coronavirus-economic-stimulus-idUSKBN21C2L7>

9. Naser Karimi and John Cambrell, ‘Iran Warns Virus Could Kill Millions’, Associated Press, March 17, 2020, <https://apnews.com/6e92d93551ee6c6ae51d0acaad9eb32>

10. Masoud Nili, ‘Corona on the Crossroad of Governance’, Donyaye Eghtesad, March 11, 2020, <https://donya-e-eqtesad.com/> شخ ب ینارمک ح-ه اگ ن ز ب-رد-ان ورک-28/3634552-ه لاق م رس



of the hardest hit. The US federal government plan to combat the virus warned policymakers that a pandemic “will last 18 months or longer” and could include “multiple waves”. The plan adds: “shortages of products may occur, impacting healthcare, emergency services, and other elements of critical infrastructure. This includes potentially critical shortages of diagnostics, medical supplies (including PPE and pharmaceuticals), and staffing in some locations.”¹¹ With a large percentage of the population lacking medical insurance, together with a shortage of hospital beds and the overwhelming profit-orientation that makes the US system particularly unprepared and inadequate to face such a public health crisis, and they are already exacerbating the catastrophe looming over New York. In addition to US systemic weaknesses in facing Covid-19, there is increasing concern over President Trump's inadequate responses, as shown during the critical months between January and March, when the crisis emerged in other parts of the world. At the time of writing, caseload has already reached 185,000 and the number of deaths near 4,000. With a White House projection of up to 240,000 casualties and the economy entering a recession, Trump is invoking war-powers to combat the pandemic. This grim picture implies that the US too will likely face more difficult times ahead.

3. The US-Iran Weaponisation of Covid-19

The pandemic's geopolitical impact has immediately become evident in the context of the US-Iran crisis. It is establishing a new, unexpected dimension to the long-standing conflict between the superpower and the Islamic Republic. It overlaps with a moment of heightened tension between the two countries, particularly after the US killed the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, General Qassem Soleimani, in January. While escalatory dynamics have been kept in check so far, the equilibrium is fragile and broken by both Washington's and Tehran's – and its proxies – continuous escalations and counter-escalations.

Normally, whenever adversaries are confronted with common transnational threats, their propensity to adopt

flexible and cooperative behaviours to protect themselves increases. Even staunch adversaries like the US and Iran have a history of cooperation against common threats in the post-1979 period. Historical cases include the early years of war in Afghanistan¹², the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the recent fight against ISIS. When these scenarios have taken place, both sides have temporarily de-escalated tensions, or at least, have refrained from embarking in major confrontations. In addition, the emergence of common threats creates new limits to the continuation of regular policies. For example, during the Iraqi war, the US military's operational need to safely escape Iraqi air defenses by traversing into western Iranian airspace forced politicians in Washington to tone down anti-Iranian stances.

However, not much has changed in the US-Iran conflict since the beginning of the pandemic. In spite of growing expert¹³ and international calls¹⁴, the US administration has refused¹⁵ to temporarily ease the sanction regime and facilitate Iran's purchase of much needed medical equipment on the international market. At the same time, Iran has not shown any intension to revisit its offensive strategy against the US forces in Iraq. Both the US and Iran appear to be continuing their die-hard conflictual course of action. If anything, both parties seem to view Covid-19 as an opportunity to force the other party to change policy or surrender. They seemingly have a worrying determination to use the pandemic to reinforce old strategies and narratives.

Why are these confrontational policies not being re-examined in the face of the common threat posed by the global Covid-19 pandemic? On the US side, advocates of 'maximum pressure' have rejoiced in the possibility of

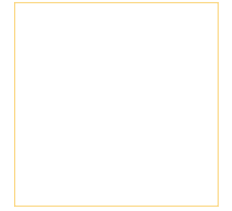
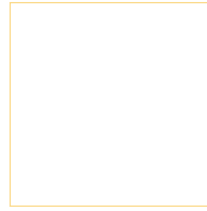
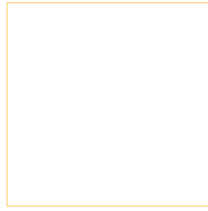
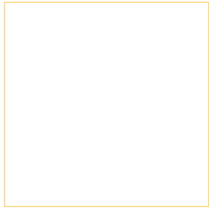
11. Department of Health and Human Services, US Government COVID-19 Response Plan, March 13, 2020, <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/6819-covid-19-response-plan/d367f758bec47cad361f/optimized/full.pdf?page=1>

12. For example see: Mir.H. Sadat and James Hughes, 'US-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan', Middle East Policy, Vol.17, No.1, 2006

13. Jeffrey Sachs, 'US Government Should Immediately Lift Economic Sanctions to Avoid Causing More Death from the Pandemic', Center for Policy and Economic Research, Columbia University, March 18, 2020, <https://cepr.net/press-release/us-government-should-immediately-lift-economic-sanctions-to-avoid-causing-more-deaths-from-pandemic-economists-say/>

14. Middle East Eye, 'China and Russia Call on US to Lift Sanctions on Iran', March 17, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/coronavirus-china-and-russia-call-us-lift-iran-sanctions>

15. Humeyra Pamuk and Arshad Mohammed, 'US Sanctions Iran, seeks Release of Americans Amid Coronavirus Outbreak', March 17, 2020, https://mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUSKBN2143EN?__twitter_impession=true



Iran's economic collapse. Within just two weeks of the virus outbreak, Iranian exports dropped by 34 per cent, while early estimates on the economic cost of the pandemic, published by the Iranian Ministry of Economy, indicate that the country will experience yet another year of negative growth, accompanied by massive budget deficit, record-high unemployment rate and deeper recession¹⁶. These economic costs coupled with the shrinking popular legitimacy of the regime, are seen by the supporters of 'maximum pressure' as a reward to Washington's policy. They argue that the recent string of crises will make the Islamic Republic's self-destruction more likely at some point¹⁷. Hawks warn Trump not to make the mistake of "bailing out the Mullahs,"¹⁸ urging major pharmaceutical companies to "end their Iran business,"¹⁹ while advocating for even more aggressive policies²⁰. The latter includes restoring the United Nations sanctions known as 'Snapback'.²¹ On 17 March, Mike Pompeo announced the imposition of fresh sanctions and rejected Mohammad Javad Zarif's appeal to ease sanctions.²² He later used the opportunity to accuse Iran's officials of "[stealing] 1 billion euros intended for medical supplies, and continuing

to hoard desperately needed masks, gloves, and equipment for sale on the black market"²³.

Amid the growing human cost of the sanctions and of the risks that may precipitate the already dire Covid-19 pandemic in Iran, the US seems to proceed under the assumption that multiple interlinked crises will eventually compel the leaders of the Islamic Republic to change policy to ensure their survival. However, these views do not seem supported by a profound knowledge of the country's inner working, nor are they based on the Islamic Republic's past behavioural patterns. Paradoxically, the Covid-19 crisis may result in Iran re-emerging more resilient.

Research on previous highly pathogenic pandemics with similar conditions of short incubation periods and unknown treatment, has shown that the social fear they produce alter the day-to-day power struggles in affected countries. Pandemics reduce civil unrest, and subversive activities, ultimately improving, rather than weakening, the political stability of incumbent regimes²⁴. For instance, in the case of the Ebola outbreak in 2014-2015 – and contrary to what the UN Security Council, WHO officials and major Western leaders had preconised – the pandemic did not lead to significant political unrest in the affected countries, which are some of Africa's most fragile states.

Similar dynamics are taking place in Iran. Last month, after the Covid-19 outbreak, the political debate inside the Islamic Republic seemed to shift away from factionalism and moved to convergence on policies to contain the infection. The government and the military, regardless of initial differences on how to respond, introduced a massive joint operation against the contagion. Despite continuing underlying political disagreements, this cooperative behaviour in a time of crisis is part of the regime's strategic culture, which always seeks to maximise the chances for its survival.

At the social level, influential intellectuals are calling on Iranians to use their "civilisational memories"²⁵ to self-

16. Habib Soheili, et.all, 'An Introduction to the Consequences of Coronavirus Outbreak for Iranian Economy', Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Economy, March 2020, https://www.mcsls.gov.ir/icm_content/media/image/2020/03/381820_orig.pdf

17. Mehdi Khalaj, 'The Coronavirus in Iran: Regime Culpability and Resiliency', The Washington Institute, March 12, 2020 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-coronavirus-in-iran-part-2-regime-culpability-and-resiliency>

18. Richard Goldberg, 'Don't Bail out now', March 17, 2020, https://twitter.com/rich_goldberg/status/1239931584117178369?s=20

19. Eli Clifton, ' Amid Coronavirus Outbreak, Trump-aligned Pressure Group Pushes to Stop Medicine Sales to Iran', Responsible Statecraft, March 5, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/03/05/amid-coronavirus-trump-uani-pushes-to-stop-medicine-sales-to-iran/>

20. Richard Goldberg, ' If Trump Hates Obama's Nuclear Deal, Why Is He Letting Up on Iran?', Foundation for Defense of Democracies, March 18, 2020, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/03/18/if-trump-hates-obamas-nuclear-deal-why-is-he-letting-up-on-iran/>

21. Snapback is part of a dispute resolution mechanism in the the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. According to the deal, if the complaining participant deems a 'significant non-performance,' the participant may notify the UN Security Council. If the Security Council fails to resolve the issue within 30 days all the sanction provisions lifted in accordance with the deal are to be reimposed.

22. Dith M Lederer, 'Iran Accuses US of Economic Terrorism urged Sanction End', Associated Press, March 12, 2020, <https://apnews.com/89d855a0ff8a68fce55dff128c8a90ef>

23. Mike Pompeo, March 23, 2020, <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1242048977450778624>

24. Celina Menzell, ' The Impact of Outbreak of Infection Disease on Political Stability', Fundación Konrad Adenauer, pp.56-60, 2017, https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_52294_1.pdf/95dc732e-2eda-2698-b01f-7ac77d060499?version=1.0&t=1539647543906

25. Maghsoud Ferasatkah, 'Iranians Will Defeat the Coronavirus



heal and to overcome the crisis. Recent explosions of popular discontent, such as that related to the shooting down of the Ukrainian flight or the November protest over the petrol-price hike, seems to have been sidelined by the contagion. Fear of the disease pushes Iranians to cling to the state as the only provider of medical care and essential services. As Stephan Walt observes²⁶, this emergency reminds people, including opponents to the regime, that the national government is still the main actor in the business of social protection.

At the same time, Islamic Republic propaganda is promoting securitised views of the international assistance that the country is being offered. Several voices have questioned the real intentions of those providing humanitarian aid.²⁷ Others point their finger at sanctions and stress their role in reducing the flow of international assistance in the Covid-19 crisis. The US is framed as an inhuman player that has caused the death of thousands of Iranians only to achieve some tactical gains. These views help the Islamic Republic to reinforce its image of a victim among the population and claim a kind of moral victory to be employed domestically to strengthen anti-American sentiments. The regime propaganda has also used Chinese allegations of possible US military's involvement in spreading the virus as a biological weapon.²⁸ Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, publicly mentioned the US's possible involvement in the Covid-19 outbreak by saying, "you [United States] are accused of having created the Coronavirus. I do not know how true it is. But when there is such an allegation, can a wise man trust you?"²⁹ The massive deployment of Army and IRGC

in public space carrying signs of "Anti-Biological Warfare", seems to reinforce this strategy. The attempt is to make the pandemic appear as yet another case of Western attack.

The scenarios highlighted above are not the only ones possible. Indeed, it is very likely that the pandemic will eventually end up weakening the government's legitimacy in the medium term, revealing its dysfunctional structure and posing huge economic problems, well beyond those caused by the US sanctions. Paradoxically, however, as it becomes weaker, the Islamic Republic might be more inclined to pursue an offensive brinkmanship.³⁰ It may even intensify opportunistic actions to force Trump's administration to abandon the 'maximum pressure' policy. It may decide to fight back against the US in the Middle East just when President Trump or his successor is busy at home dealing with the US's own effects of the pandemic and appear to be less willing to respond. On 12 March, Kenneth McKenzie, Head of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), sounded alarmed about this trend and said: "I think Coronavirus probably makes Iran, in terms of decision making, more dangerous rather than less dangerous."³¹

Iran might also count on the military constraints created by pandemic. The US military may be in a more difficult position to respond to Iran's attacks or provocations. First, any limited military confrontation with Iran, if it happens amid the virus outbreak, would put the US in a challenging position to decide whether it should carry out military operations on Iranian territory. Adding to the already well-known risks that war with Iran would entail³², any scenario that necessitates sending US troops inside Iran during the virus outbreak would risk their exposure to the infection and a subsequent dissemina-

With Their Civilizational Memories', IRNA News Agency, March 13, 2020, <https://www.irna.ir/news/83711412/> -ناری-ام-درم-ها-اوخت-س-ارف-دن-ک-ی-م-روب-ع-ان-ورک-دی-دهت-زا-دوخ-ی-ن-دمت-ه-ظ-ف-اح-اب

26. Stephan Walt, 'The Realists Guide to Coronavirus Outbreak', Foreign Policy, March 9, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/09/coronavirus-economy-globalization-virus-icu-realism/>

27. In the most high profile case Iran reject France-based medical charity, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), help to set up 50-bed hospital. See: Al Jazeera, 'Iran Rejects foreign help', March 24, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/iran-rejects-foreign-virus-death-toll-nears-2000-200324202829056.html>

28. Ankit Panda, 'Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Implies US Military Brought Coronavirus to Wuhan', The Diplomat, March 13, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/chinese-foreign-ministry-spokesperson-implies-us-military-brought-coronavirus-to-wuhan/>

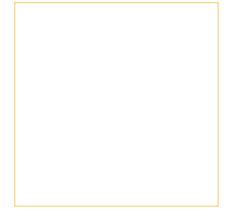
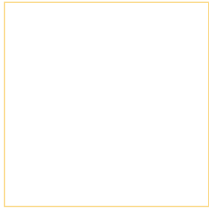
29. Seyed Ali Khamenei, 'Televised Speech for the Persian New

Year', March 22, 2020, https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/1241642515943620610

30. See: Abdolrasool Divsallar and Marc Otte, 'Reviving the Security Function: EU's Path to Save the JCPOA', Egmont Security Policy Brief, No. 113, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/reviving-the-security-function-eus-path-to-save-the-jcpoa/>

31. Reuters, 'Coronavirus Makes Iran More Dangerous', March 12, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-iran-usa/coronavirus-makes-iran-more-dangerous-us-general-idUSL1N2B50WP>

32. Emma Ashford and John Claser, 'Unforced Error: The Risks of Confrontation with Iran', CATO Institute, Policy Analysis Report no. 822, October 2017, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/unforced-error-risks-confrontation-iran>



tion of the virus to US military bases. In fact, US war plan scenarios with Iran amid the Covid-19 outbreak becomes significantly more limited and complicated.

Second, Covid-19 has already negatively affected the US military logistics and hampered its rapid response capabilities. So far, the pandemic has pushed the Pentagon to scale back routine deployments and suspend Iraq force training. On 13 March, the Pentagon approved new operational restrictions.³³ Then, CENTCOM ordered a stop to movements of all forces deploying in its areas of responsibility, including Iraq. CENTCOM ordered a mandatory fourteen-day quarantine to all troops at a home station prior to deployment.³⁴ In addition, the UK, France, Germany and Spain have brought their troops home from Iraq amid Covid-19 concerns.

Third, for the US, the pandemic clearly complicates the international dimension of any confrontation with Iran. After the attacks on US troops in Iraq on 11 March, President Trump told his top national security advisers that he did not think an aggressive response to Iran was the right move due to the Covid-19.³⁵ Tehran might be induced to take advantage of the possible international condemnation of a US military response to its attacks on Iraq, as well as of allies' foreseeable unwillingness to join any major US campaign against Iran while they face the covid-19 crisis at home. Iran could potentially incorporate these factors into its strategic calculations to adjust the timing and scale of its future attacks on US interests in Iraq and elsewhere in the region.

4. Policy Implications: A Growing Threat to Regional Stability and Global Health Security

Will the Covid-19 pandemic end up further exacerbating the US-Iran tensions? Is this the only possible scenario? Or could the tragedy provoked by the pandemic represent an opportunity for the US and Iran to explore a collective response to a shared threat?

As argued in this policy brief, both the US and Iran have so far tended to politically weaponise the pandemic. Consequently, the pandemic has so far increased the likelihood of escalation rather than fostering potential cooperation. In an even more extreme scenario, hawks in Washington and Tehran might see escalation in the conflict as a possible diversion to the crisis caused at home by the pandemic.

However, such views are based on shaky assumptions and could lead to dangerous outcomes. Obsessed with short-term political gains, Washington and Teheran are overlooking the longer-term direct and indirect impact of weaponising Covid-19 on regional stability and global health security. A broader strategic and longer-term view should push both parties to carefully re-evaluate their current strategies. There are at least three reasons for this:

1. Reassessing the costs: Both the US and Iran should be alarmed by the significant risks and unpredictability involved in using Covid-19 as a geopolitical weapon. A strategic reassessment of Coronavirus-related risks is essential for both sides to prevent miscalculations. Both capitals need to abandon the idea that they will be judged weak³⁶ if they adopt more flexible policies. Indeed, the immediate cost of keeping the pre-Covid-19 policy is much higher than the cost of changing policy.

Washington's unwillingness to adjust its sanctions to the new international realities imposed by the pandemic exposes the superpower to possible future offensives by Iran, as well as to future difficult dilemmas and costlier choices. Pursuing the current course of action might also endanger the broader US Middle East policy, including the Trump administration's declared intention to reduce

33. US Deputy Secretary of Defense, 'Stop Movement for All Domestic Travel For DOD Components in Response to Coronavirus Disease', March 13, 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Mar/13/2002264686/-1/-1/1/STOP-MOVEMENT-FOR-ALL-DOMESTIC-TRAVEL-FOR-DOD-COMPONENTS-IN-RESPONSE-TO-CORONAVIRUS-2019.PDF>

34. CENTCOM, 'U.S. Central Command Statement on Quarantine procedures into its Area of Responsibility', 20 March 2020, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/2119410/>

35. Courtney Kube and Carol E. Lee, 'Trump Nixed Aggressive Response to Attacks by Iranian Proxies Because of Coronavirus, officials say', NBC News, March 19, 2020, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/amp/ncna1163666?__twitter_impression=true

36. Barbara Salvin, 'Trump Administration Piles on Sanctions as the Rest of the World Helps Iran Confront COVID-19', Responsible Statecraft, March 19, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/03/19/trump-administration-piles-on-sanctions-as-the-rest-of-the-world-helps-iran-confront-covid-19/>



its military commitment in the region. Moreover, it could negatively affect more specific issues such as the peace agreements in Afghanistan and the fight against the ISIS. For example, given that three million Afghan migrants live in Iran and routinely visit their country, Iran's failure to contain the virus would increase the chances of a major outbreak in Afghanistan. Iraq is equally vulnerable if the infection continues to expand in Iran, and maintaining the travel ban between the two countries will inflict further economic and social costs.

These areas could potentially rise as emerging hotspots for new outbreaks around the world when the first wave of the infection is under control elsewhere. Furthermore, Afghanistan's and Iraq's continuous exposure to Covid-19 would affect the future revival of Jihadist groups in the Middle East. The contagion and the gradual repositioning of US troops could potentially provide an opportunity for ISIS in Iraq to regroup.

For Tehran, continuing the current brinkmanship might have unbearable costs in the long term, with many more innocent lives lost to the virus, along with the probable economic collapse and a new wave of public discontent after the pandemic.

2. Exploring the political benefits of cooperation: While the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign has weakened Iran, so far it has failed to produce changes to Iran's behaviour. Moves such as the assassination of Iranian top General Qasem Soleimani on 3 January lock the US in a dangerous game, which entails the risk of an all-out war with Iran. Washington and Tehran should explore the political benefits of engaging in cooperation to fight the pandemic.

Health diplomacy could create a much needed space for future openings. The US could for instance stop blocking Iran's loan request to the IMF to respond to Covid-19, or could temporarily lift sanctions to allow other countries to provide Iran with medical aid. These moves would represent an opening in the long-lasting confrontational approach in the US-Iran relationship and also improve the atmosphere between western allies, as well as facilitate a return to more constructive international cooperation and division of labour in the face of common challenges posed by Covid-19 and its consequences.

While health diplomacy may not translate into an immediate change to Iran's policies, it could produce more posi-

tive responses from the Islamic Republic, for instance in Iraq and Syria. It could also improve the US's image among Iranians. This is a path that Iran's regional rivals such as the UAE³⁷ seem to be following by sending medical aid to Tehran. Other international actors, including the European Union, are spurring humanitarian assistance to Tehran, in the hope that they will facilitate new diplomatic channels for the future. The European approach is confirmed by the E3's recent announcement that the INSTEX, after months of difficulties, has finally reached a successful conclusion to its first transaction, which facilitates the export of medical goods from Europe to Iran.

New flexibility in the US sanction and the use of health diplomacy would further reinforce this trend, increasing the chances of positive spin offs after the end of the pandemic.

3. Maintaining international pressure towards de-escalation: The US's and Iran's attitudes during the Covid-19 crisis recalls the dynamics seen during the 1918-1919 influenza, when zero-sum politics did not end³⁸ in the face of the epidemic. This tragically increased the impact of the flu on troops and civilians from countries involved in the First World War, and contributed to its worldwide spread causing five hundred million infection cases and a final death toll between fifty and one hundred million worldwide. Pursuing ill-advised policies on both the US's and Iran's side would put further pressure on an already stressed global health security system, and could pose longer-term geopolitical threats to the fight against the pandemic.

At the same time, the pandemic should not render the international community oblivious to the urgency of properly tending to the de-escalation of US-Iran tension. The dangers of unexpected escalation amid peak periods in the fight against Covid-19 would require the international community's consistent attention and diplomacy.

37. Laura Rozen, 'Coronavirus Spurs Regional Humanitarian Outreach to Iran', Al-Monitor, March 18, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/coronavirus-spur-humanitarian-outreach-iran.html>

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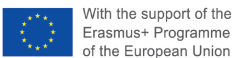
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