

**The impact of Iran's structure of power and governance on the
management of the COVID-19 crisis in Iran**

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant crisis in human history due to its global impact, fast transmission, absence of a definitive cure, and simultaneous impact on various aspects of society. Evaluating the factors that have been effective in managing this crisis is crucial to improve the governments' preparedness for similar situations in the future.

Based on various articles, Iran has faced significant challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many of its decisions and policies have been subject to criticism by experts and the general public. To better understand Iran's response to the pandemic, this paper will focus on the concept of crisis management and analyze various sources, including scientific databases, newspapers, and scholarly articles. The study's results show that Iran's power and governance structure have affected the management of COVID-19. The country's complex and hierarchical government heavily relies on the Supreme Leader and informal connections. However, during a crisis, the country's governance structure can result in a delayed response, lack of public trust, securitization of the crisis, decision-making without integrity, lack of foresight, absence of executive bodies' independence, and participation of non-specialist members. This governance structure has been identified as a crucial factor contributing to the ineffective management of crises, such as the COVID-19 outbreak in Iran.

Key words: Crisis management, COVID-19 crisis, structure of power and governance, Iran

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, crisis management has aimed to mitigate the harmful impact of both natural and human-made disasters that mankind has encountered. Currently, humanity confronts one of its most challenging global crises with the COVID-19 pandemic, which began with the first cases reported in Wuhan, China in December 2019, and has since spread rapidly to other nations (Baharloeï & Nayehdar, 2020).

The first case of COVID-19 outside of China was reported in Thailand on January 13, 2020 (Habibzadeh et al., 2020, as cited in Raofî et al., 2020). In response to the rapid spread of the new corona virus, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a "Global Emergency" on January 30, 2020 (Raofî et al., 2020). The COVID-19 outbreak has had a profound impact on various aspects of society and the global economy, leading to a high death toll, significant economic losses, overwhelming pressure on healthcare systems, and a substantial disease burden. These effects serve as just a few examples of the widespread consequences of the pandemic on the global community (Khankeh et al., 2021).

Covid-19 was initially recognized as a threat to the health sector due to the potentially severe respiratory illness it causes. However, it quickly became apparent that it has affected every sector of society, including politics, the economy, and biology. It is considered a borderless crisis as it has impacted virtually every country in the world (Zhu et al., 2020, as cited in Bijani et al., 2021).

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the world responded differently in terms of their strategies, policies, and response measures. While some states and governments took swift action to contain and control the pandemic, others struggled to decide between prioritizing technocrats or popular opinion, science, or political ideologies, which led to delayed decision-making. The COVID-19 pandemic not only posed a significant threat to public health but also demonstrated that an epidemic disease could challenge governments and generate a new crisis in policymaking, affecting them in unforeseen ways (Barberia, 2020, Capano, 2020, as cited in Riley et al., 2021).

Iran faced significant challenges in managing the COVID-19 crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant psychological, social, political, and economic repercussions in Iran, exacerbating pre-existing challenges in the country. Iran was already grappling with a variety of issues. The pandemic has created additional pressure on the Iranian people, particularly in terms of their health and financial security. As per the data on December 1, 2022, Iran had a COVID-19 fatality rate of 1,633.35 per 1 million people, while Canada's corresponding figure was 1,251.69 per 1 million people (*Coronavirus*, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020). Amid the COVID-19 crisis, notable officials and authorities within Iran's healthcare system encountered various challenges and hurdles (Bijani et al., 2021). On February 19, 2020, Kianoosh Jahanpour, head of the Public Relations Center of the Ministry of Health, announced via the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) that

two suspected cases of Covid-19 in Qom¹ had tested positive for the virus. This marked the first official confirmation of the presence of the virus in Iran. Jahanpour's announcement served as a starting point for the Iranian government to take measures to prevent the spread of the virus (*Corona in Iran; Latest news and reports*, n.d.)

Some reports and speculation suggest that the COVID-19 virus may have entered Iran earlier than the country's first confirmed case was announced. It's been suggested that authorities delayed announcing it due to fears that it might discourage people from participating in the march on February 11 and the Islamic Council elections (Ebrahimi & Nazanin, 2020).

During the COVID-19 crisis, several studies have been conducted on the Iranian government's ineffectiveness in dealing with the pandemic. These include papers written by Sajadi et al. (2021), Raofi et al. (2020), Azarnoush (2020), and others, which will be reviewed in detail in the literature review section.

Therefore, when assessing the effectiveness of a government's response to a specific issue or crisis, it is crucial to take into account various factors that could have impacted its outcome. When the public sector is faced with unpredictable and uncertain scenarios that result from complex challenges, a rapidly changing social context, and insufficient understanding of the root cause of a problem, political leaders can offer direction and play a critical role in promoting accountability (Ansell et al., 2020, as cited in Martínez-Córdoba et al., 2021). The ability to adapt to changing circumstances and

¹ A city in Iran

government legitimacy are crucial factors that can impact the effectiveness of governance responses to pandemic crises (Hale, 2020, and Hartley, 2020, as cited in Martínez-Córdoba et al., 2021).

Some people believe that health is not just a biological issue but a concept that is deeply intertwined with political, economic, social, and cultural factors; with political factors being particularly emphasized (Verheul, 2010, as cited in Rassouli et al., 2020). The impact of sanctions imposed by the United States as a political and economic factor on the health system in Iran and the country's ability to manage the COVID-19 crisis has received more attention than other factors (Takian et al., 2020, as cited in Rassouli et al., 2020). In addition to the reasons already mentioned, other factors that have contributed to Iran's inability to manage and control crises and natural disasters include Iran's complicated structure of power and governance. This paper aims to analyze the impact of Iran's power and governance structure on crisis management, with a specific focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this goal, we will first analyze the factors that influence crisis management and then discuss Iran's power structure. Next, we will present a report about the situation of the COVID-19 in Iran and the government's responses to the pandemic. Finally, we will examine the role that the power and governance structure play in the decisions made by the government, focusing on the factors that affect crisis management.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Governments are responsible and accountable for managing crises as they have the power, policy tools, and decision-making authority. However, crisis management has not produced positive outcomes in many countries. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, numerous studies have been conducted on the disease's impact and the ability of governments, policy-making institutions, and decision-makers to handle the crisis effectively. This paper focuses on evaluating the effectiveness of Iran's response to the COVID-19 crisis and will delve into more significant detail.

This section presents a summary of the research conducted on Iran's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Several articles in this set analyze the challenges that Iran encountered while managing the COVID-19 pandemic. In Al-Dabbagh's (2020) study, special attention is focused on the importance of decision-makers in crisis management and the essential skills that they must possess. The research highlights key concepts associated with the theory of crisis decision-making, including its definition and required skills. The author's conclusion suggests that improving decision-makers' comprehension of the relevant variables and training them in proactive thinking can help to reduce both the time and money spent on managing crises and also alleviate the consequences of these situations. Therefore, it is worthwhile to investigate these strategies to enhance crisis management. In 2020, Baharloui et al., conducted a study on the challenges of crisis management at both the national and local levels. They identified various obstacles, such as the disempowerment of local managers, the ineffectiveness of laws, and

organizational weaknesses. Similarly, in 2020, Rasouli et al., evaluated the factors that influence crisis management in countries. They examined effective crisis management approaches utilized by other countries and also assessed Iran's strengths and weaknesses in managing the COVID-19 crisis. A study conducted by Khankeh and colleagues (2021) has identified multiple challenges that the Iranian healthcare system faces in managing COVID-19. The study found that social inequalities are just one of the factors contributing to these challenges. Other significant factors include mismanagement of resources, scientific disagreements, job burnout, task overload among healthcare professionals, and mental health issues within the community. The study authors argue that these findings underscore the need for a comprehensive risk assessment that addresses all aspects of the disease, including psychological and social aspects. They also emphasize the importance of providing assistance to at-risk populations and international cooperation in vaccine distribution.

A series of articles examines Iran's handling of the COVID-19 crisis through comparative studies with other nations. In one study, Vaezi et al., (2021) compare Iran's management of the crisis to that of South Korea and Vietnam, identifying effective management strategies such as information gathering and dissemination, transparency, and cultural preparation prior to the crisis. San et al. (2020), also employ a comparative approach in their research, highlighting similarities between Iran and Turkey in terms of political approach, population density, and inadequate crisis management in both countries. They reveal that Iran has had a higher number of fatalities. This essay also examines how different responses to crises by authoritarian regimes can influence crisis

management. In 2021, Nedaei employed a comparative method to assess the effectiveness of the Iranian government's policies towards the scientific community. The author conducted a critical analysis of Iran's policies, comparing them to those of China. Based on the research findings, Nedaei concludes that the Iranian government's response to the pandemic has been insufficient. Similarly, Heydari (2021) draws comparisons between Iran and a number of Asian countries, namely South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Heydari analyzes various political tools such as coercion, incentive, and propaganda, as well as resources such as income, human capital, and information. Through this examination, Heydari argues that the Iranian government's capacity is inferior to that of these other governments, resulting in varied policy outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other studies investigate Iran's inadequate and ineffective response to the COVID-19 outbreak and the political challenges it faced. Sajadi et al. (2021) focused on the Iranian government's response to the pandemic during its early months, considering the government's previous experience with managing crises. The researchers identified several factors that contributed to Iran's ineffective response, including prioritizing treatment over prevention, inadequate public participation, insufficient healthcare infrastructure, and weaknesses in economic policies. Azarnoush (2020) suggests that a reason for the failure of the Iranian people to comply with health recommendations is the lack of equipment and test kits in Iran, as well as a low level of trust. The author also points out that the people's mistrust of the authoritarian regime's statements, along with the absence of sufficient and trustworthy information, are contributing factors. In 2022,

Bakhtiari Aliabad and their colleagues published a paper in which they criticized the effectiveness of the government and the NHCC's (National Headquarters to Combat Corona) decision-making. The paper attributed this inefficiency to several factors, including untimely and indecisive decision-making, delays in closing the country's borders, incomplete decision-making within the NHCC, as well as contradictions and inconsistencies among officials. However, the paper also offers solutions to remedy these flaws. The authors call for prompt decision-making, improved communication and coordination among officials, and a more comprehensive approach to decision-making within the NHCC. In 2021, Mazinani and Mayeli conducted a study to evaluate the performance of the government during the epidemic by analyzing its policies and their impact on the political and economic aspects of society. The study identified several critical factors that influencing public opinion, such as the negligence and irresponsibility of vital institutions, as well as the lack of integration in crisis management. The findings of the study emphasize the significance of addressing these factors to enhance government performance and better serve society. According to Raoofi and colleagues (2020), Iran's efforts to combat the pandemic have been hampered by several significant challenges. These include delayed and indecisive governance, insufficient availability of lifesaving and protective equipment, and "whole insufficient government" in managing the epidemic. These obstacles have posed significant difficulties for policymakers in responding effectively to the COVID-19 crisis. In their 2022 study, Mohamadian and his colleagues conducted a study on the participation of different stakeholders in managing COVID-19 in Iran. The authors contend that excessive political and partisan conflicts

among certain institutions and organizations have led to insufficient coordination and inefficiencies in managing the pandemic. In particular, the authors observed that the Ministry of Health in Iran lacked the requisite power and authority to influence other stakeholders effectively. According to Calabrese's (2021) review of the Iranian government's policies during COVID-19 epidemic, inadequate management of the pandemic was influenced by securitization and public discontent. Calabrese argues that the government's securitization of COVID-19 and adoption of a resistance strategy were contributing factors to its deficiencies.

While several scholars have examined the COVID-19 crisis from different perspectives, this paper focuses specifically on the impact of Iran's power and governance structure on crisis management. This paper diverges from other studies by highlighting this significant factor. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to analyze how Iran's power and governance structure presented challenges in managing the COVID-19 crisis within the country.

METHODOLOGY

This paper used a qualitative method to analyze various theoretical viewpoints and comprehend the outcomes of the Iranian government's performance in managing the COVID-19 crisis during the pandemic. As stated in the introduction, the aim of this paper

is to examine and analyze how the structure of governance and power in Iran affects the factors that influence the management of the COVID-19 crisis.

This paper utilized a range of methods to gather data on the response of governments, particularly the Iranian government, to the COVID-19 pandemic. These methods included reviewing research literature in scientific databases, newspaper articles, reports from various agencies and think tanks, as well as media accounts of the government's response. Additionally, data was collected from published surveys, news interviews, decisions made, and policies implemented. Furthermore, the website "Our World in Data" was used as a source to gather data specifically related to COVID-19.

It should be noted that the lack of accurate reporting of statistics and information by countries, the lack of complete and comprehensive information about the virus, the potential undetermined long-term effects of responses and policies at the time of this paper, and the lack of openness and transparency in some made decisions are some examples of the constraints of data collection in this paper.

THEORY

Crisis management is an administrative strategy that focuses on preparing for and dealing with crises. It involves the ability to anticipate potential crises, as well as develop plans to address them when they do occur. The process of identifying weak points in the administrative organization, closely monitoring, and preparedness for the possibility of

those weaknesses causing problems is what leads to the development of crisis management plans. By drawing upon theoretical concepts from social sciences such as sociology and psychology, the field of crisis management has been able to achieve a similar result in its field of study, establish its own theoretical foundation, and emerge as a distinct scientific discipline (Al-Helou, 2011, as cited in Al-Dabbagh, 2020). Decision-makers must consider several factors when identifying threats to their community, including the urgency of the situation, determining the most effective response during a crisis, preparing the necessary infrastructure, and integrating the procedures for data collection as part of the overall response plan (Robson, 2020, as cited in Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

The strength of political institutions, administrative processes, and policy instruments are key determinants of governance robustness. The ability of decision-makers to maintain public agendas, functions, or values despite disruptions caused by turbulent events or processes is a defining feature of robust governance strategies. Such strategies require "flexible adaptation, agile modification, and pragmatic redirection of governance solutions". Fundamentally, the goal of robust governance strategies is to attain dynamic resilience by enabling social and political actors to abandon the pursuit of reinstating a previous state of equilibrium. Rather than attempting to reinstate a previous state of equilibrium, these strategies promote an adaptable search for a new and emerging order (Simonovic et al., 2016; Ansell et al., 2018, as cited in Ansell et al., 2021).

The erosion of citizens' trust in government and its institutions is one of the most critical issues facing the world today. This erosion has been caused by various circumstances, resulting in increased suspicions among citizens regarding governments and related institutions (Alvani et al., 2001, as cited in Ghiasvand, 2020). Along with promoting efficient cooperation, citizens' trust in governments and related institutions can result in their support for policies (Gordon, 2000, as cited in Ghiasvand, 2020). The significance of trust is immense, and it is considered a fundamental pillar of any political system. It serves as the basis for the system's legitimacy, and a breach of trust can lead to the long-term deterioration of its foundation (Zahedi et al., 2011, as cited in Ghiasvand, 2020). Al-Dabbagh refers to Bowen, who suggests that people's confidence in their government is linked to the substance of official announcements and other public statements made by decision-makers through communication platforms like television. According to the author, providing correct and effective solutions to crises is not sufficient. Competent authorities must also present a cohesive perspective to their citizens, provide detailed explanations of the issues, and foster unity among them, often referred to as voluntary consensus. Such a consensus can pave the way for improved policies and decisions (Robson, 2020, as cited in Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

A crisis differs from an emergency in that a crisis becomes meaningful when a threat jeopardizes the integrity of the entire system, whereas an emergency occurs when human life and property are at risk due to physical events. From a systemic perspective, although an emergency is a threat, it is not severe enough to cause the system to collapse as a crisis would. However, it is important to note that during an emergency, the lack of

proper management of the situation can result in the erosion of people's trust and belief in authorities and transform the emergency into a crisis. The rapid and extensive flow of information, including governments' performance, the press's ability to shape "master narratives," and the increase in public mistrust of governments, has made crisis management more critical than ever before. Its impact on the advancement and implementation of public policy is highly significant (Pal, 2014, as cited in *Crisis Management*, 2017).

Due to the need for prompt and focused action by governments, policymaking and crisis management during times of crisis can be challenging (Nedaei, 2020). Today, the importance of preparing in advance for future crises, studying effective methods to deal with crises before they occur, and establishing pre-determined strategies that require swift action is emphasized in policymaking and crisis management. This can lead to better and more efficient management of crises (Alvani et al., 2018, as cited in Nedaei, 2020). The unpredictability of crises and the inadequacy of current strategies and policies for their management have always posed a challenge for governments (Pal, 2014, as cited in *Crisis Management*, 2017). The COVID-19 crisis was particularly challenging due to the unknown nature of the virus and the lack of knowledge about it (Takian et al., 2020, as cited in Nedaei, 2020). To minimize harm, prompt responses and pragmatic decisions by governments, based on established priorities, can be beneficial in crisis management. Thus, it is crucial to identify the crisis in the initial phase of policymaking and prioritize accordingly (Nedaei, 2020). The development of response teams should support this

prioritizing, including suspending the regular duties of those responsible, and fully committing to resolving the crisis (Pal, 2014, as cited in *Crisis Management*, 2017).

Effective crisis management involves several essential elements. These include mental preparedness for a crisis, the ability to respond quickly, coordination of the response, how the media covers the situation, clear assignment of responsibilities and accountability, proper training of team members for their assigned roles, adequate knowledge of duties and how well they are defined, and the coordination of efforts using past experiences. Additionally, an effective communication strategy is crucial, including the use of credible spokespeople, equipping them with the necessary skills to handle the press and respond to external media, and informing the public (Pal, 2014, as cited in *Crisis Management*, 2017).

Due to the numerous risks that arise during crises and unstable conditions, it is essential to promote cooperation between public and private actors. By fostering collaboration during normal conditions and daily governance matters, actors can develop the necessary relationships and trust to work together effectively in times of crisis (Ansell et al., 2021).

The concept of securitization arose in response to the failure of conventional political norms, the emergence of acute emergencies, and the need for exceptional actions, involving not just the government, but also individuals and society. Treating non-security issues as security concerns can be just as dangerous as neglecting a real security threat (Buzan et.al., 1997, as cited in Sajadi, 2020).

One of the challenges that can affect data shared by other countries is the lack of transparency in government and the concealment of facts during a crisis (Ho and Tahirali, 2020, as cited in San et al., 2020). This problem is particularly pronounced in authoritarian regimes that prioritize projecting an image of success in managing the crisis over transparency (San et al., 2020).

In the social and political context, several indicators were crucial for successful management of the COVID-19 crisis. These included a prompt and effective response, integrity, coherence, and correctness in decision-making, the independence of related institutions, public trust in authorities, transparency, and avoiding the securitization of the crisis (*Good governance from the perspective of essential indicators in the crisis with the focus on the COVID-19 crisis, 2022*).

The upcoming sections will analyze Iran's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a focus on the factors that impacted its crisis management efforts. Additionally, we will provide an overview of Iran's power and governance structure and discuss how it posed challenges in managing the COVID-19 crisis.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COVID-19 CRISIS IN IRAN

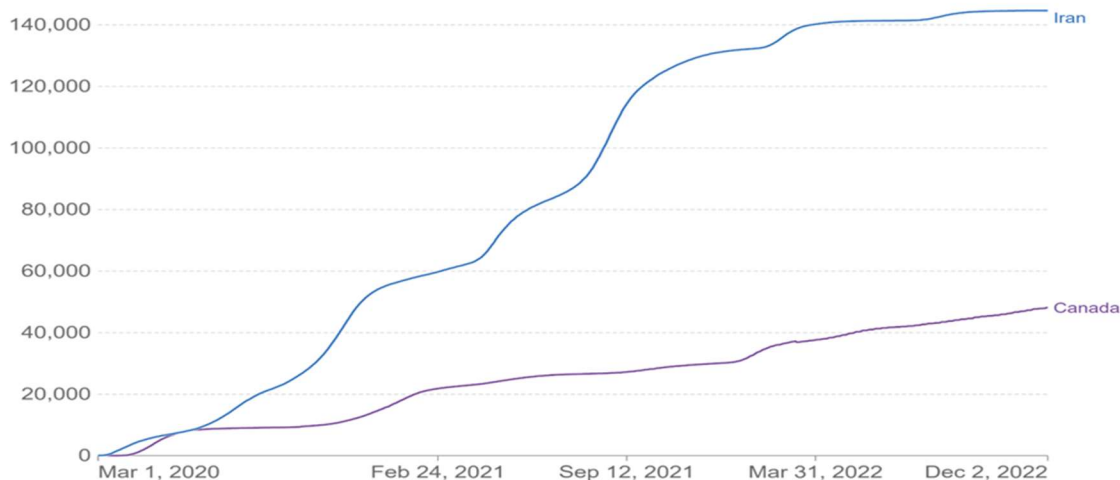
The emergence of the COVID-19 virus in Iran in early February 2020 and its rapid spread across the country led to significant economic, financial, and human losses,

placing Iran among the countries most severely affected by the pandemic (Mozafari & Mirzaeimoghadam, 2020).

Iran's COVID-19 mortality

Adjusting the number of deaths attributable to COVID-19 based on population size leads to significant variations. As is shown in figure 1, as of December 1, 2022, Our World in Data reported 144,634 confirmed deaths due to COVID-19 in Iran, while Canada reported 48,133, indicating that the number of people who died in Iran due to the virus is almost three times higher than in Canada. On the same day, Iran's death rate per million people was 1,251.69, which places it at #65 in comparison to the global average of 832,425 fatalities per 1,000,000 people (Coronavirus, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020).

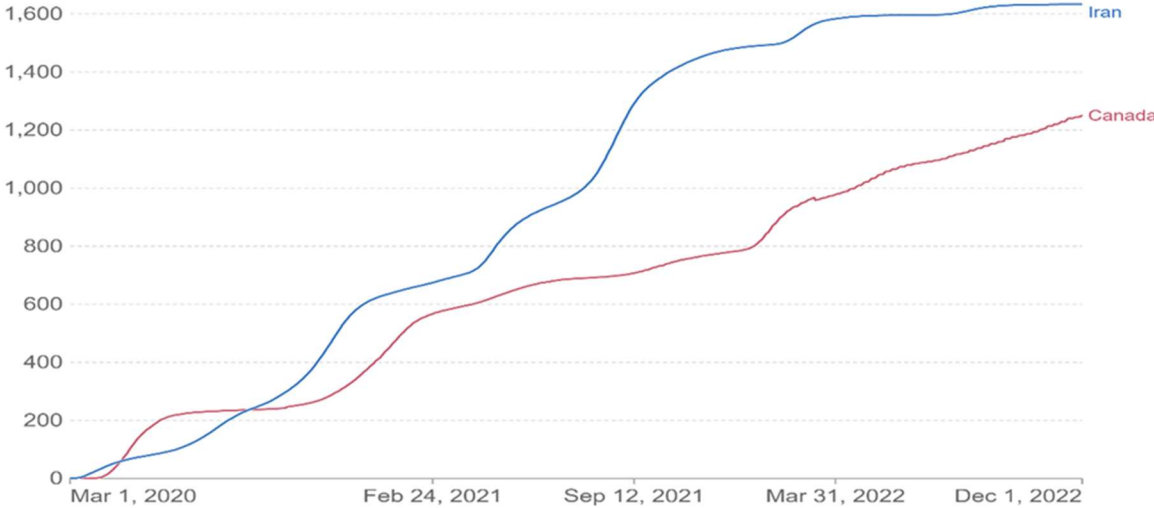
Figure 1
Cumulative proven fatalities caused by COVID-19



Note: The graph presented here has been derived from the "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Deaths" page on "ourworldindata.org". To create this specific graph, data for Iran and Canada has been filtered from the original dataset. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths>)

Based on data from Figure 2, on December 1, 2022, the total number of COVID-19-related fatalities per 1 million people was 1,633.35 in Iran, while in Canada, the corresponding figure was 1,251.69 per 1 million people. The graph shows that Iran had a higher cumulative death rate than Canada. Furthermore, the graph indicates that the number of fatalities in Iran has been decreasing since September 2021, while, in Canada the number of deaths began decreasing in February 2021 (*Coronavirus*, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020).

Figure 2
Cumulative proven fatalities caused by COVID-19 per million people

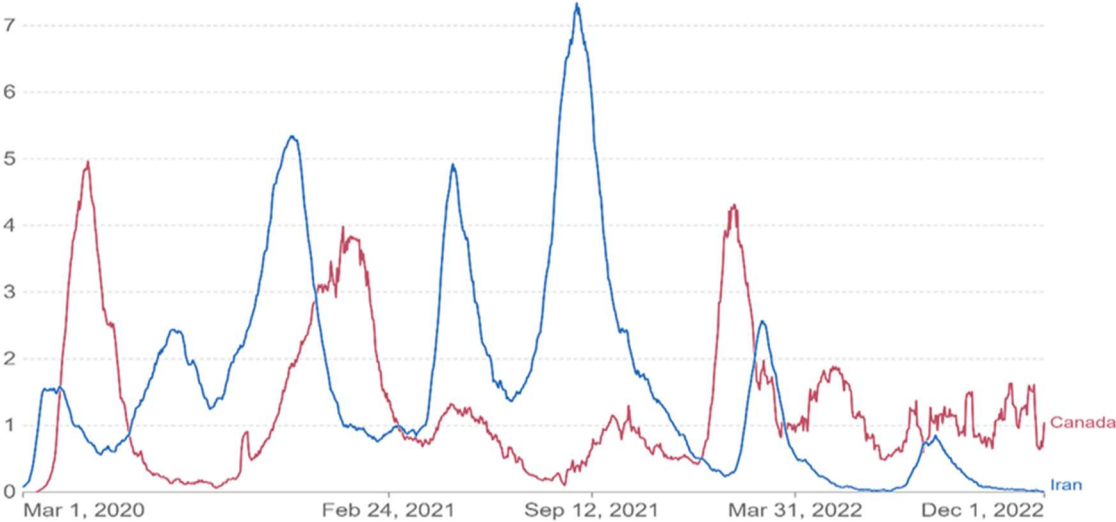


Note: The graph presented here has been derived from the "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Deaths" page on "ourworldindata.org". To create this specific graph, data for Iran and Canada has been filtered from the original dataset. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths>)

Figure 3 shows the average daily fatalities due to COVID-19, with a seven-day average. Iran has recorded about seven peaks, while Canada has reported nearly three peaks. In contrast, three of the seven peaks in Iran have a higher average daily fatality

rate than the most significant peak in Canada. Iran's highest average daily death rate was 7.39 per 1 million on August 28, 2021, 5.36 per 1 million on November 19, 2020, and 4.96 per 1 million in April 2021. In contrast, Canada's highest figure was 4.9 per 1 million on May 3, 2020. The graph below illustrates this statistic (*Coronavirus*, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020).

Figure 3
Daily proved fatalities caused by COVID-19 per million people



Note: The graph presented here has been derived from the "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Deaths" page on "ourworldindata.org". To create this specific graph, data for Iran and Canada has been filtered from the original dataset. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-deaths>)

The Iranian government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Countries had several policy options available during the epidemic, and each nation chose and implemented a unique set of measures. Iran, like many other countries, adopted a specific set of policies, which we will outline in the following paragraphs.

Formation of various headquarters and organizations to participate in curbing COVID-19

The government and the Ministry of Health launched the first set of initiatives, but shortly afterward, the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) intervened. The SNSC established a specialized command center called the NHCC, which was granted the authority to oversee all matters related to the disease(*Read more about the National Headquarters to Combat Corona (NHCC) on TABNAK, n.d.*).

On Sunday, February 23, 2020, Iran's President Hassan Rouhani tasked Saeed Namaki with establishing the NHCC. Subsequently, the Minister of Health appointed Iraj Harirchi and Kianoosh Jahanpour as the NHCC's secretary and organization's spokesperson, respectively. However, later on, Sima Sadat Lari assumed the role of the spokesperson after Kianoush Jahanpour was reportedly dismissed for allegedly failing to coordinate with the Ministry and align with political viewpoints (*Read more about the National Headquarters to Combat Corona (NHCC) on TABNAK, n.d.*).

To assist the Ministry of Health and relevant authorities in swiftly resolving the issue and better serving the people, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei issued an order on March 3, 2020, demanding collaboration and help from all subordinate institutions. As a result of this directive, institutions such as the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO), Mostazafan Foundation, Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation, and Astan Quds Razavi were tasked with employing their resources and capabilities to find a solution to the crisis of COVID-19. On March 12, 2020, the Supreme Leader issued an order to the General Staff of the Armed Forces, directing them to establish a central headquarters to efficiently

coordinate, direct, and utilize all the resources and capabilities of the Armed Forces to confront the challenge posed by the COVID-19 crisis (*15 Key Actions of Revolution Leader to Fight against Corona*, 2020).

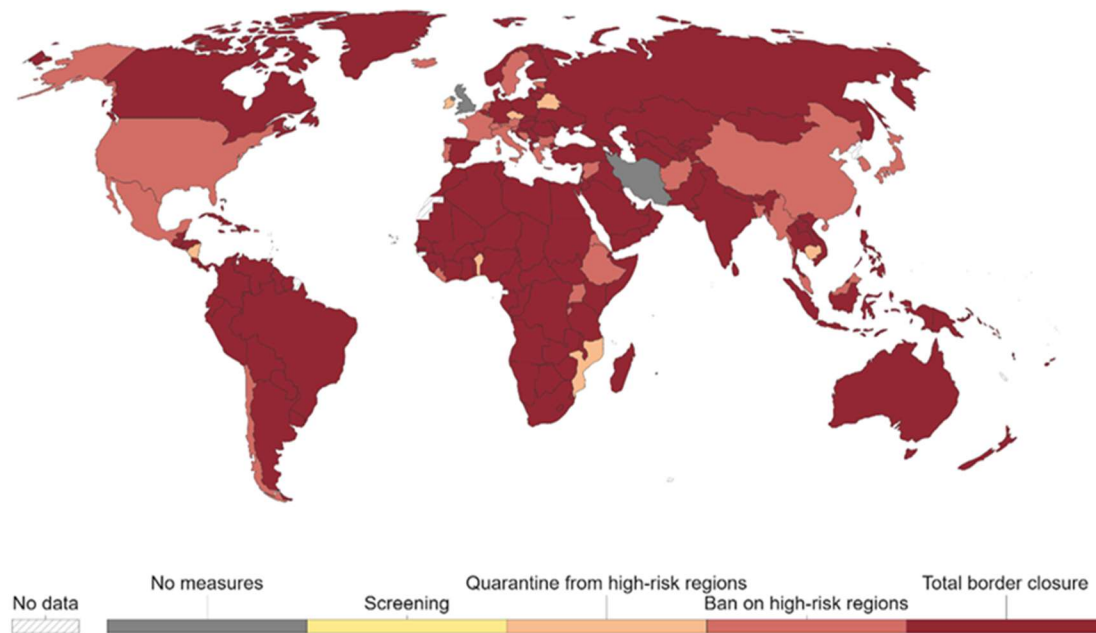
EIKO is one of the organizations that operate under the supervision of the Supreme Leader. It assumed the responsibility of manufacturing certain health products and producing the COVIran Barekat vaccine. However, despite significant funding and extensive advertising over the course of more than three years since the COVID-19 pandemic began, this vaccine has failed to gain the trust of the public, even within Iran, resulting in some criticism. Some individuals hold the view that the decision to entrust the production of the domestic vaccine to institutions with a history and appropriate expertise, such as the Razi Vaccine and Serum Research Institute, was a more appropriate choice than a political one (*The Washington Post's Report on the Development of the Barekat Vaccine; Empty Promises*, 2022).

International travel controls

According to Figure 4, on April 22, 2020, nearly all countries had banned international travel, except for Iran (*Coronavirus*, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020).

Figure 4

State of International Travel Restrictions around the World as of April 22, 2020

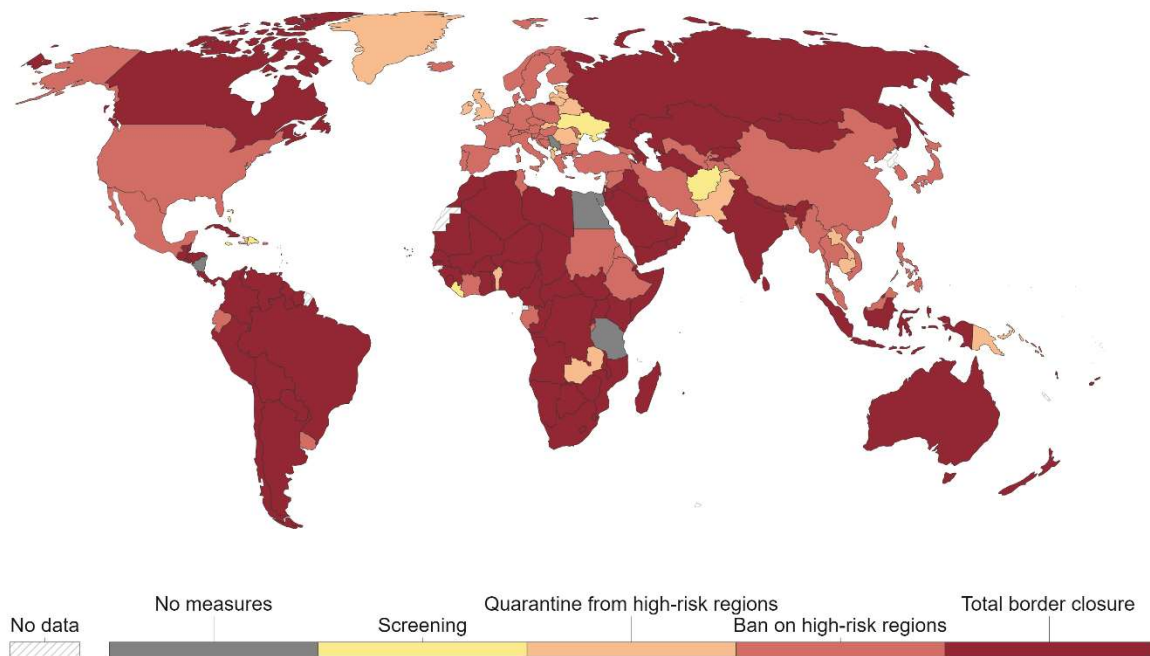


Note: The graph presented here has been derived from the "COVID-19: international domestic travel" page on "ourworldindata.org". To create this specific graph, data for April 22, 2020 has been filtered from the original dataset. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-international-domestic-travel>)

As is shown in Figure 5, Our World in Data reports that Iran began restricting international travel to high-risk zones in July 2020, nearly seven months after the emergence of COVID-19. However, Iran has not completely prohibited international travel throughout the COVID-19 crisis (Coronavirus, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020).

Figure 5

State of International Travel Restrictions Around the World as July 11, 2020



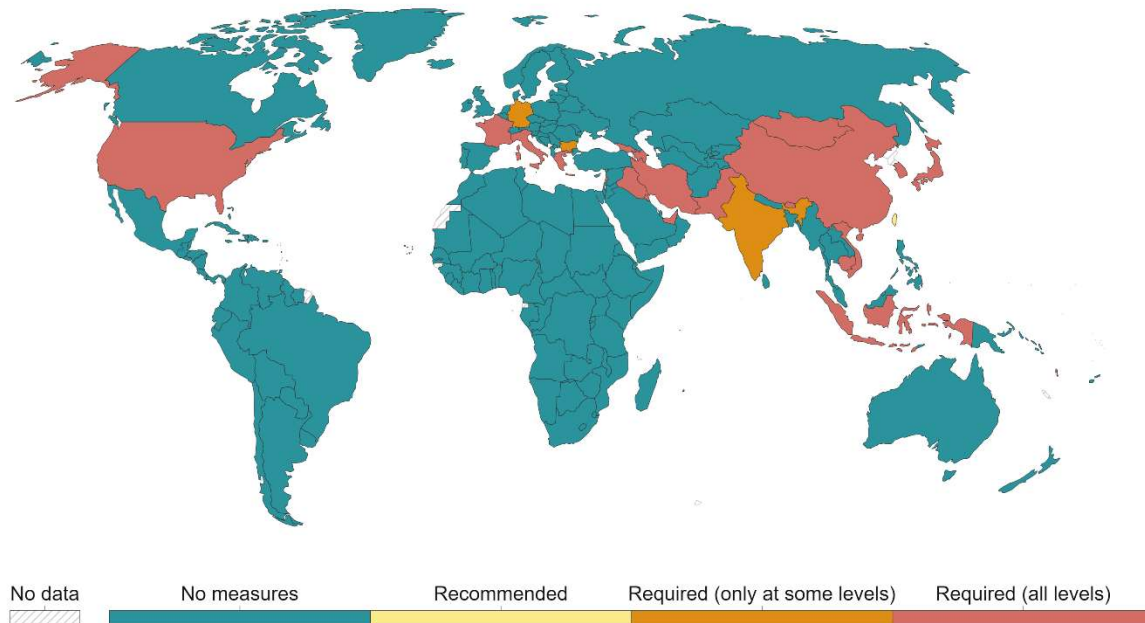
Note: The graph presented here has been derived from the "COVID-19: international domestic travel" page on "ourworldindata.org". To create this specific graph, data for July 11, 2020 has been filtered from the original dataset. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-international-domestic-travel>)

School closures

Following the identification of the COVID-19 outbreak in Iran, schools were closed almost immediately. Although healthcare experts endorsed this decision, it received criticism due to Iran's inadequate infrastructure for online education (*Coronavirus*, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020).

Figure 6

School closures in various countries coincide with the outbreak of COVID-19 on March 8, 2020



Note: The graph presented here has been derived from the "COVID-19: School and Workplace Closure" page on "ourworldindata.org". To create this specific graph, data for March 8, 2020 has been filtered from the original dataset. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-school-workplace-closures>)

Public events and gatherings

The statistics indicate that one of the initial measures implemented in Iran was the restriction of public events and gatherings. This policy was adopted at roughly the same time as similar policies in other countries. However, what is not apparent from the data is that religious ceremonies are often exempted from these types of decisions due to pressure from the clergy.

The closure of mosques and limitations on other religious gatherings was one of the actions that came under criticism from religious activists. In response to this, the Supreme Leader highlighted the importance of prayer and worship during the month of Ramadan in his speech to the officials of the NHCC on May 10, 2020. In his speech to the officials of the NHCC officials on May 10, 2020, the Supreme Leader emphasized the importance of prayer and worship during Ramadan and Qadr nights. He regarded worship as one of the fundamental necessities of the people, which was above material demands. Additionally, he recommended that individuals with knowledge about the significance of prayer and spiritual concepts should review the issues in this field (*Mr. Corona Headquarters! Say early what you want to say on the first night of Muharram, 2022*)

Testing

Among the critical measures taken during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran were the expansion of COVID-19 virus diagnostic tests, medical equipment, and the creation of an online screening program, telephone help lines, and test centers. Initially, these measures were implemented only in a few locations, including the Faculty of Public Health at Tehran University of Medical Sciences in the country's capital. However, by March 28, 2020, they were rolled out to all 30 provinces in the country. The Ministry of Health and Medical Education also established fever clinics for the diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 and created virtual and telephone call centers to address people's questions and concerns about the disease and its diagnosis. These decisive actions were taken during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran (90 corona diagnostic laboratory in the country, 2020, as cited in Raofii et al., 2020).

Developments in healthcare equipment

One of the most effective measures to control the spread of the disease was the preparation and distribution of hygiene items such as masks and disinfectant gels. However, despite the overall effectiveness of this response, difficulties arose during its implementation due to insufficient supervision. The successive directives issued to monitor the production and distribution of these hygienic items caused confusion among their manufacturers. Furthermore, inadequate supervision of certain hygiene products, including masks, resulted in the production and distribution of low-quality, non-sterile masks without a valid brand to the public (*Indifference of regulatory bodies against the sale of non-standard masks, 2021*).

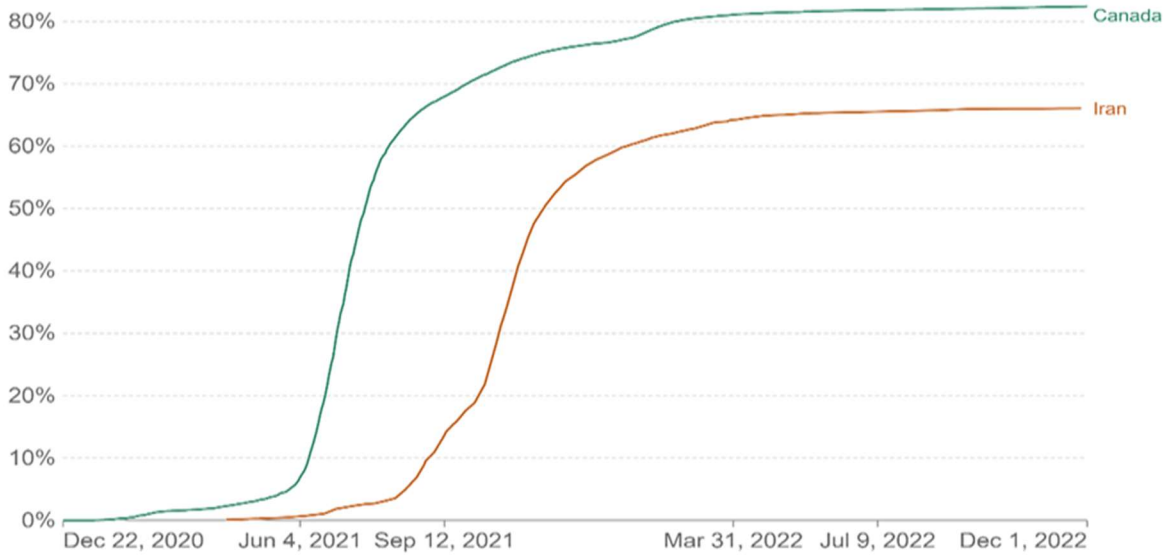
During a specific time period, the import of medical equipment into Iran was allowed without taxes. However, in practice, some companies took advantage of economic rent to obtain currency at a lower government rate for the purpose of importing equipment, but did not follow through on importing the equipment. Instead, they sold the currency at a higher rate on the free market. Additionally, despite the export restrictions on masks and due to the fragile economic conditions in Iran, several organizations exported high-quality sanitary products (*Rouhani's order to import masks and medical supplies to deal with Corona, 2020*).

Vaccination

As of December 1, 2022, the percentage of Iran's fully vaccinated population was 66.07, whereas in Canada, the percentage of fully vaccinated population was 82.40 on the same date. The graph depicting the percentage of vaccinated individuals indicates

that Iran started its vaccination program later and a lower proportion of its population has been immunized (*Coronavirus*, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020).

Figure 7
Percentage of fully vaccinated people (two doses)

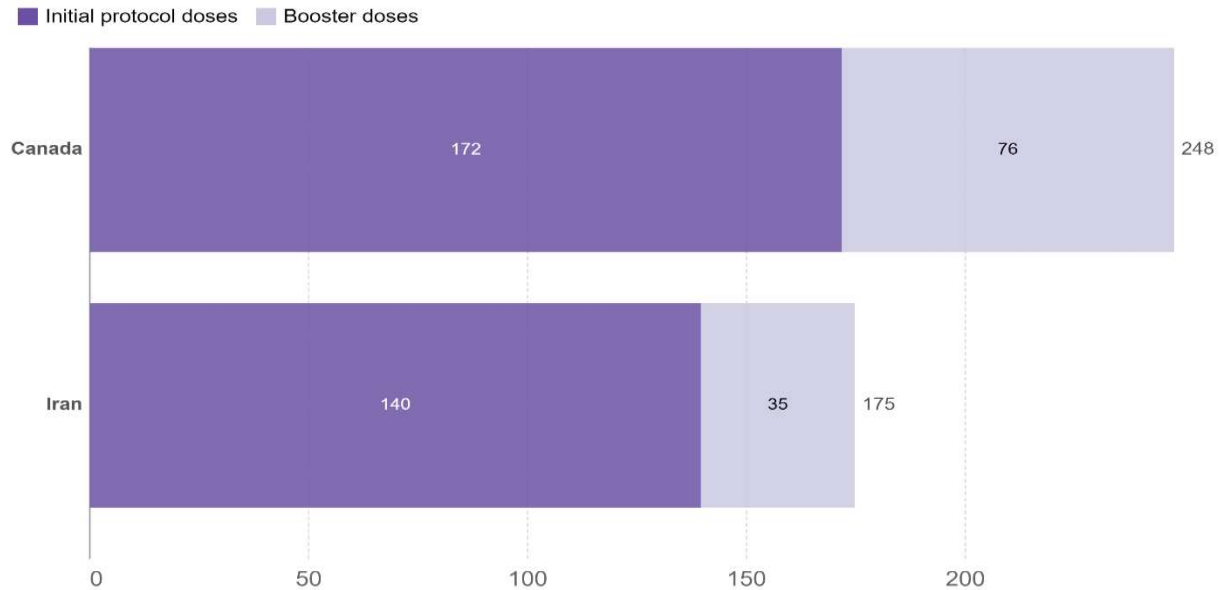


Note: The graph presented here has been derived from the "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations" page on "ourworldindata.org". To create this specific graph, data has been filtered for Iran and Canada from the original dataset. (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>)

Furthermore, data from Figure 8 indicates that as of December 1, 2022, only 35 booster doses were administered per 100 people in Iran, compared to Canada, where 76 booster doses were administered per 100 people. This figure is noteworthy because the administration of booster doses has been shown to reduce the number of deaths caused by the virus (*Coronavirus*, 2022; Mathieu et al., 2020).

Figure 8

Initial and booster doses injected per 100 persons on December 1, 2022



Note: The chart presented here has been derived from the "Coronavirus (COVID-19) Vaccinations" page on "ourworldindata.org". To create this specific graph, data for Iran and Canada has been filtered from the original dataset as of December 1, 2022. Additionally, the METRIC field has been set to "vaccine doses (by type)". (<https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>)

Despite opposition from numerous health specialists and individuals at the NHCC, the Iranian government declined to import and use vaccines developed by other nations. This decision was made even though effective vaccines had been discovered and developed by other countries (Tofighi Darian, 2021). Following the refusal, the government's next course of action was to attempt the domestic production of vaccines on a national scale. This policy was emphasized from the beginning, but unfortunately, it failed. The leader reinforced this attempt with a ban on vaccine imports from the U.S. and

the U.K., citing a lack of trust. Additionally, the government publicly announced the cancellation of the receipt vaccine doses donated by an American charity. Several politicians, including Ebrahim Raisi, the previous head of the Judiciary and current president, confirmed the issue and emphasized the need for domestic vaccine production (Khosravi, 2017, as cited in Schwartz & Gözl, 2022).

There is a scarcity of information about the quantity and variety of vaccines produced in Iran, and a significant portion of the information remains undisclosed. Meanwhile, it has been explicitly acknowledged that a significant budget of \$40 million has been allocated to three Iranian companies for this purpose. This announcement was made by Hassan Jalili, the director of the COVIran Barekat vaccine project (*Iran and COVID-19: Hold Authorities Accountable for Violating Human Rights*, n.d.). Despite the allocation of substantial budgets for the domestic production of vaccines, the development of some vaccines was halted due to insufficient volunteers for testing. As a result, these vaccine programs remained unfinished (Schwartz & Gözl, 2022).

After the unsuccessful attempt to produce domestically-made vaccines and the Supreme Leader's announcement to prohibit the use of U.S. and U.K. vaccines, authorities replaced several pre-orders of vaccines from these countries with vaccines from Russia and China. This decision resulted in protests (Tofighi Darian, 2021).

Prohibiting the import of vaccines, endorsing the Supreme Leader's declaration by certain authorities, and allocating funds to domestic enterprises for the production of vaccines did not yield any results except for an increase in the number of deaths. It is

noteworthy that after the fifth wave of COVID-19 in the country and the significant number of deaths, the Supreme Leader and other officials denied the situation, despite emphasizing the importance of public health and the development of vaccines in any form (Schwartz & Gölz, 2022).

Classification of cities

The government implemented restrictions based on a city classification system, which categorized cities across the country by color. White represented safe cities, red represented cities with a very high risk of disease, and orange indicated the potential danger of turning that city into a red zone. At one point, all non-essential businesses in red cities were shut down, and only one-third of employees were expected to go to work. The National Corona Headquarters also imposed a national traffic ban from 9:00 PM to 4:00 AM, monetary fines for violators in red cities, a ban on cars with non-local number plates entering orange and red cities, and a prohibition on residents of these cities leaving. The president declared these actions legal and mandatory (Motamedi, 2020).

Quarantine

Unlike several other countries, including China, Italy, and the United States, Iran did not initially respond to the confirmation of cases in Qom by implementing quarantine measures, which are one of the first actions taken in response to a pandemic (Abdi & Mirzaei, 2020). Despite the increasing death toll, the government persisted in its stance. Iraj Harirchi, the Deputy Minister of Health and spokesman for the Ministry of Health, did not view quarantine as appropriate and suggested alternative measures, such as stay-at-

home restrictions and social isolation. He stated that quarantine measures were related to the First World War, the plague, and cholera. The Minister of Health, Saeed Namaki, also claimed that the issue indicated a lack of scientific understanding of quarantine. Other experts believed that U.S. sanctions hindered the government's ability to enforce quarantine measures (Khosravi, 2020, as cited in Mazinani & Mayeli, 2021).

In this section, we examined Iran's responses to the management of the COVID-19 crisis. It appears that many of Iran's responses were similar to those of other countries, but certain issues, such as delayed decision-making, lack of trust in authorities, securitization of the COVID-19 crisis, lack of experts, and lack of independence among decision-makers, posed challenges to effective crisis management. These challenges prevented the responses from yielding acceptable results.

STRUCTURE OF THE POWER AND GOVERNANCE IN IRAN

To assess the impact of Iran's power structure and governance on their management of the COVID-19 crisis, it is necessary to conduct an analysis of Iran's power structure.

Iran's history and culture prior to the Islamic era were built on philosophical, moral, and religious principles. After the introduction of Islam, Iran stood apart from other Muslim nations due to its intricate and cosmological beliefs regarding the philosophy of world creation, which have continued to shape its culture for over 1500 years. The merger of pre-Islamic Iranian culture and civilization with the process of Islamization resulted in a

duality that produced clashes between the two civilizations. However, this did not lead to the eradication of the pre-Islamic language and culture (Alexandros, 2015).

Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran's governance structure adopted a political-religious form founded on religious principles. Under this structure, religious authorities govern the population according to Islamic precepts (Ghobadzadeh & Rahim, 2016). Although non-religious individuals can occupy certain positions, such as the presidency and legislative representation, membership in specific institutions or holding the post of Supreme Leader is limited to clerics (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015).

As a result of the prominent position of clerics in Iran's political system, some perceive it as a theocratic regime in which clerics possess substantial power (Posch, 2008). Under this political-religious structure, the Supreme Leader has been endowed with expansive administrative powers by the Constitution (Tofighi Darian, 2021). One could argue that the legitimacy of the Judiciary and executive branches are contingent upon their alignment with the Velayat-e-Faqih² principle and their relationship with the Supreme Leader (*Iran Country Report 2022*, 2022). Put differently, the Supreme Leader and the principle of Velayat-e-Faqih possess the ultimate veto power and wield absolute authority, and the Supreme Leader himself serves as a crucial component of the Iranian government's structure (Rubin, 2008). Some subscribe to a dual political system in which legitimacy is rooted in Velayat-e-Faqih, but power derives from electoral processes. Iran's

² Khomeini's method, the first leader of post-revolutionary Iran, gives political leadership—in the absence of the divinely inspired imam—to the faqīh, or jurist in Islamic canon law, whose characteristics best qualify him to lead the community (<https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran/Justice>).

political system stands apart from other systems worldwide due to the extensive authority granted to Velayat-e-Faqih by the Constitution. Within this structure, the Supreme Leader holds sway, and his actions are seldom challenged by other institutions because of his vast power (Hammoud, 2020). Further analysis will delve into the governing bodies that are currently effective.

The Supreme Leader

As stipulated in Article 110 of the Iranian Constitution, "the Supreme Leader is responsible for devising the overall policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, following consultation with the members of the Expediency Council that he designates" [Our translation]. Article 110 also outlines additional responsibilities assigned to the Supreme Leader, such as approving the presidential decree subsequent to the people's election, the dismissal of the president, the declaration of war and peace, and the appointment and removal of the commander of the armed forces. It is noteworthy that the Supreme Leader is also accountable for the final validation of the president elected by the people (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015; *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 1989)..

The executive authorities

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Executive branch is composed of the Presidency and the Council of Ministers.

The President and the Cabinet of Ministers

According to articles 113 and 114 of the Iranian Constitution, the President holds the highest administrative position in the country after the Supreme Leader. The President is elected by the people every four years through an absolute majority vote. The President is responsible for upholding the Constitution and serves as the head of the Executive, except for matters that fall under the Supreme Leader's jurisdiction. Ensuring the implementation of the Constitution is arguably one of the most critical duties of the presidency (*Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 1989). The President serves as the head of the government and is accountable to the Supreme Leader (CFR.org Editors, 2022). While the President is in charge of the Executive, the Supreme Leader has the authority to override the President's decisions if they are deemed to be in conflict with Islamic principles and the Islamic Republic (Billini, 2017). As per the Constitution, the President is responsible for signing parliamentary resolutions and referendum results, as well as negotiating and finalizing international treaties and agreements, subject to the approval of the Parliament. The President is also responsible for appointing and leading the Cabinet. The President and the Cabinet are accountable to the Supreme Leader, the Parliament, and the Judiciary (*Iran Country Report 2022*, 2022). According to the Iranian Constitution, the President's decisions must align with the objectives and ideals of the Islamic Republic. If they do not meet this criterion, they may be rejected by the Supreme Leader (Billini, 2017). To clarify, the Executive branch in Iran comprises two central authorities: the President and the Supreme Leader. Even if the President resigns, he is obligated to fulfill his responsibilities until his resignation is formally accepted by the

Supreme Leader. The President or his deputy oversees the Cabinet of Ministers, and only the President has the power to dismiss ministers (Hammoud, 2020). Similar to the President, the Cabinet is responsible to the Supreme Leader, Parliament, and the Judiciary (*Iran Country Report 2022, 2022*).

The legislative authority

The Islamic Consultative Assembly, also known as the Majlis, and the Guardian Council are the two legislative bodies in Iran.

The Islamic Consultative Assembly³

In Iran, legislation is passed through public votes and by the Parliament, whose members represents the people and play a significant role in shaping the nation's future. Legislative decisions can be divided into two categories: direct and indirect. Matters that are directly voted on by the nation refer to direct decisions and may include significant economic, political, cultural, and social issues that result in legislative decisions being made through referendums. A referendum in Iran requires the endorsement of two-thirds of the representatives, and the Parliament and the people participate in passing legislation. However, it is noteworthy that legislation in Iran has not always aligned with public opinion since the establishment of the Islamic republic. This is due to the prevailing authority of the Parliament over all matters, which has made it difficult to hold a referendum. The Constitution mentions the possibility of a referendum only as a political

³ Parliament or Majlis

solution. Two essential factors demonstrate the non-interference of the people in Iran's legislative process. Firstly, the right to hold a referendum is limited to two options, "yes" or "no." Secondly, a referendum can only be executed with the endorsement of two-thirds of the representatives, effectively eliminating direct public involvement in legislation. As a result, elected legislators are responsible for making all indirect decisions, which are then sent to the Executive branch for implementation. In addition to the Majlis, which is considered the primary component of the Legislative branch, the Guardian Council is a crucial and fundamental element of the Parliament that is subject to discussion. Legislation in the Islamic Republic is the outcome of the joint efforts of these two institutions. The Parliament plays a significant role in shaping the Executive branch by giving a vote of confidence to the Cabinet nominees put forward by the President (Seyahooei & Emadzadeh, 2016).

The Guardian Council

The Guardian Council, as a legislative body, consists of 12 experts in Islamic law. Six members are designated by the Supreme Leader, and the remaining six are appointed by the head of the Judiciary, who is chosen by the Supreme Leader (Billini, 2017). The Guardian Council's primary responsibility is to ensure that legislation adheres to Islamic law and the Constitution. If the Parliament enacts regulations that the Guardian Council does not authorize, they will not be implemented. Additionally, the Parliament is responsible for reviewing and amending the laws. Therefore, if the Guardian Council does not approve the legislation, it will be returned to the Parliament for further modification (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015). The Guardian Council plays a crucial role in

preserving the legitimacy of the Islamic-based system (Hammoud, 2020). As the Guardian Council is responsible for evaluating the qualifications of candidates and ensuring compliance of the Parliament's decisions with Sharia law, it can be argued that the council holds the power to reject individuals and regulations (*Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 1989).

The Guardian Council is tasked with verifying that presidential candidates satisfy the constitutional criteria, and it can be argued that the council selects and endorses candidates before the official elections. The Guardian Council also oversees the Presidential, Parliamentary, Assembly of Leadership Experts, and Referendum elections and retains the power to invalidate them in the event of election fraud (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015).

The opaque and intricate role of the Guardian Council has been the subject of criticism for a long time. This criticism is particularly intense during elections and when many candidates are disqualified. The Guardian Council comprises six members appointed directly by the Supreme Leader and another six individuals recommended to the Islamic Council by the Head of the Judiciary, as per its structure. As the Supreme Leader chooses the Head of the Judiciary, it is presumed that all 12 members of the Guardian Council are effectively chosen by the Supreme Leader. The Judiciary recommends six individuals to the Parliament, which is reviewed and approved by the members of Parliament. Supporters of this structure argue that since the members of Parliament are approved by the Guardian Council and elected by the people, the people effectively elect these six members. On the contrary, people have consistently opposed

the Guardian Council's disqualification of their chosen representatives, and they do not view the legislators as their true representatives.

The Judicial Authority

Following the clarification and emphasis of the Constitution, Iran's Judiciary has been acknowledged as an autonomous component. This independence has resulted in the Judiciary being exempt from having to answer to other authorities, particularly concerning employment issues. As a result, the Executive branch does not have the authority to interfere in the appointment of judges (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran; 1998, as cited in Rahmani & Mirzadeh Koohshahi, 2016). As per the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Supreme Leader has the authority to select the head of the Judiciary, who, in turn, chooses the head of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General. The President nominates the Minister of Justice to the Parliament and selects the Minister of Justice from the candidates recommended by the head of the Judiciary (*Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989*).

Although the Supreme Leader appoints the head of the Judiciary, the Judiciary can only exercise its power to hold the leader accountable with the Supreme Leader's consent (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran; 1998, as cited in Rahmani & Mirzadeh Koohshahi, 2016).

Expediency Council

The Expediency Council was established as an intermediary during the 1989 amendment of the Constitution. Its members, appointed by the Supreme Leader, are

responsible for resolving conflicts between the Parliament and the Guardian Council in the event of disagreements over the enactment of regulations. The appointment of members by the Supreme Leader and the allocation of governmental oversight to this Council are further instances of the Supreme Leader's power and influence over the government (CFR.org Editors, 2022).

The members of the Expediency Council are all chosen by the Supreme Leader. The position of this assembly within the government structure has been uncertain and subject to scrutiny. Dr. Mohammad Hossein Zarei, in an article titled "Legislative System in Iran and the Position of the Expediency Council," argues that the formation of concepts and responsibilities outlined in the Constitution without the necessary mechanisms for oversight has led to a lack of accountability, lawlessness, and transparency in institutions such as the Expediency Council and the Leadership (Zarei, 2004). The lack of accountability and transparency in institutions like the Expediency Council, which struggle to address internal conflicts, is perplexing and leads to a loss of trust in the organization's objectives and mandates.

The duties of this institution are so unclear that the ambiguity has led to disagreements among the members of the assembly over the years. During his presidency and his time as a permanent member of the assembly, Ahmadinejad was expected to attend assembly meetings, but he refused to do so because he had a strained relationship with Hashemi Rafsanjani (*Ahmadinejad next to Hashemi after three years of absence in the Expediency Council*, 2012). Another instance involves President Hassan

Rouhani, who has been critical of the assembly due to his disagreement with its decisions (*Rouhani's disagreement with the "Expediency Council" increased, 2022*).

Assembly of Experts

The members of the Assembly of Experts are Islamic jurists who are elected by the people. They are responsible for the Supreme Leader, monitoring his performance, and dismissing him from office if he cannot carry out his duties. The Guardian Council must authorize the qualifications of candidates for the Assembly of Experts, which may involve the involvement of the Supreme Leader (Abdolmohammadi & Cama, 2015).

Supreme National Security Council

The Supreme National Security Council, made up of appointees of the Supreme Leader and the President, was established to address internal and external threats and oversee security-related policies (CFR.org Editors, 2022).

According to the Constitution, "Super National Council consists of:

- 1) The heads of the Executive, Judiciary, and Legislature
- 2) Chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces
- 3) Expert in planning and budgeting
- 4) Two representatives are chosen by the Supreme Leader
- 5) Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Interior, Intelligence

6) The relevant ministers, the highest officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Army, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), according to the case” [Our translation] (*Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 1989).

Governors and Friday Prayer Imams

Governors serve as the government's provincial representatives and are responsible to the President and the Cabinet for their actions and decisions. Friday Prayer Imams, the representatives of the Velayat-e-Faqih in each city and province, hold a similar level of power and authority to governors and can intervene in almost all matters (*Iran Country Report 2022*, 2022).

IRGC

According to Article 150 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "the IRGC, which was established in the early days of this revolution's victory, continues to serve as the guardian of the revolution and its achievements. The duties and responsibilities of this corps in respect to the duties and responsibilities of other armed forces, with an emphasis on collaboration and fraternal harmony between them, is determined by the law" [Our translation] (*Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 1989).

This principle does not specify the type of guard, and the constitutional authority and power granted to the Islamic IRGC are self-explanatory.

The methods for safeguarding the Islamic revolution as a non-physical concept are determined by the specific time, place, and nature of the threat facing the revolution. As a result, the notion of guarding has become considerably broader and is no longer limited to a specific location, area, or type of threat (Azimi, 2011).

Hassan Rouhani's description of the IRGC as a "government with a gun" approximately a month after the 2016 elections sparked uproar in Iran's political environment, leading to the ire of the authoritarian and stern reaction of senior military leaders. The fact that Rouhani publicly acknowledged the existence of two undefined governments in Iran's political framework contributed to the hostile reactions. Furthermore, accepting and promoting this idea could undermine the foundation of religious democracy, which has been advocated by various government factions and currents. In a paraphrase of the President's statement, he indicated that the IRGC wields significantly more power than the executive branch, as it has "everything" besides guns and media. "Everything" denotes a parallel security and intelligence structure, along with assistance provided to the court and broadcasting facilities. The leaders of these entities are designated by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who holds the position of the supreme leader in the Islamic Republic of Iran. our translation (*The inability of the government to control the economic power of the IRGC*, 2017).

The EIKO

The Executive of Imam Khomeini's Order was established by Imam Khomeini's decree and is now an autonomous organization that is directly managed by the

leadership. Since 1989, the headquarters has been responsible for managing and holding property and inheritance that lacks a clear owner, implementing Article 49 of the Constitution, and other laws under the leadership's jurisdiction. EIKO's primary areas of emphasis are economic activities and philanthropic endeavors. The EIKO's economic influence is reflected in its oversight of the Supreme Leader's financial dealings and involvement in the country's business sector. This organization's power stems from its close connections with the Judiciary and the IRGC, as well as the leadership's explicit support, and its intersection with the Judiciary and government is evident in both the judicial and executive domains (*Executive of Imam Khomeini's Order*, 2023).

A study of Iran's system of governance indicates that the majority of organizations operate under the direct control of the Supreme Leader. An examination of Iran's political system and decision-making processes uncovers a complex framework. Several factors, such as the intricate political structure, lack of cohesion in Iran's governance, and inconsistencies and conflicting interests among authorities and institutions, have impacted the response to and management of the COVID-19 crisis in Iran (Rezaei Samarin, 2021).

Some critics argue that the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be considered a democratic regime due to the limited participation and influence of the people in political events and the approval of authorities' legitimacy. For instance, in his book "An Introduction to the Political Sociology of Iran," Mr. Bashiriyeh highlights the complex political structure in Iran, the supreme power of the leadership, and the significant

presence of clerics in the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts, and the Judiciary as obstacles to achieving democracy in Iran. He believes that the clergy, due to its influence in the revolution's victory, attempts to substitute its own will for the will of Islam in the law (Akhtarshahr, 2008).

Contrary to the features of an effective political structure, which includes decentralized decision-making authority for quick decisions, large and diverse representation for balancing conflicting interests and access to information, and a flat and vertical structure to prevent suppression, the structure of Iran's political system is highly centralized and complex, leading to delayed and inconsistent decision-making (Pustjens, 2020).

It is a topic of debate whether the complex, somewhat confusing and opaque structure of Iran's political system had a negative impact on the effective functioning of the crisis management system, particularly during the COVID-19 crisis. If it did, the question arises: how exactly did it affect the system's performance? The following section will outline several factors for effective crisis management discussed in the theory section. We will classify Iran's responses according to these characteristics and then assess how Iran's structure of power and governance affects each of these characteristics.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IRAN'S STRUCTURE OF POWER AND GOVERNANCE AND THE COVID-19 CRISIS

In the previous section, we studied that Iran's crisis management was poor for various reasons. In this section, we will examine the challenges of crisis management in Iran and analyze the responses made by the government to deal with them. Then, we will study how the structure of power and governance has created these challenges.

Decision-making delay and a lack of agility

Recognition and assessment, followed by an appropriate response at the right time and place, are crucial for effective crisis management. The COVID-19 crisis raised some questions among the public regarding the management of this situation. These questions include the recognition of the appropriate time and place, as well as the lack of quick and adequate response by authorities. Meanwhile, some individuals are referring to the late assignment of responsibilities, the lack of timely responsiveness and decision-making, and the delay in coordination between public healthcare services, the public sector, and military forces as the cause of missed opportunities. Recognizing the beginning and ending times of a crisis and announcing the return to customary conditions are all equally vital in crisis management. They are critical components of any effective crisis management plan (Mazinani & Mayeli, 2021).

The first cases of the virus were reported in Qom and Guilan provinces. The government's response to prevent the spread of the virus was not swift, which surprised

the public community. This delayed response included failing to inform the community about the disease, not implementing social distancing measures, not controlling the country's entrances and exits, not banning travel to China, not adequately preparing and distributing masks and other sanitizing products, lacking preparedness in various health sectors, failing to respond efficiently to violators of the regulations, and not banning travel during the new year holiday. As a result of these shortcomings, the government faced many critical reactions to its performance (Sajadi, 2020).

In Iran, the absence of effective quarantine measures, particularly in the cities where the first COVID-19 cases were discovered, combined with ongoing flights to China and provincial travels during the New Year's vacation, caused the virus to rapidly spread to all 31 provinces within two weeks. This situation put an immense strain on the country's healthcare system, leading to the deaths of several physicians and nurses who were at the frontlines of the battle against the virus. In the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak in Iran, the government did not implement a quarantine policy promptly; instead, they only urged individuals to stay home. Furthermore, the Iranian government continued interacting with China and even repatriated Iranian students from China (Nedaei, 2020). Despite concerns about the spread of the virus, flights between Iran and China continued. This decision contributed to the spread of the virus and an increase in fatalities in Iran (Mazinani & Mayeli, 2021).

Flat organizational structures can be more efficient during a crisis as they facilitate quick decision-making and offer greater flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.

However, in the case of Iran, the country's political structure is centralized and hierarchical, with the Supreme Leader holding ultimate authority. Even the President and Ministers must consult and coordinate with the Supreme Leader before taking any significant actions or making policy decisions. This hierarchical structure can create problems in situations that require prompt action to prevent a crisis from escalating or mitigate its impact.

Distrust

Trust is an essential element of effective governance. Without trust, governments may struggle to maintain the legitimacy necessary to govern and enforce laws successfully. When citizens have confidence in their government, they are more likely to comply with laws. Therefore, public administration must enhance its interactions with citizens to improve effectiveness and responsiveness to the public's needs and expectations. Governments must make an effort to engage and empower their citizens and invite them to participate in the development of public governance (Stoker, 2006; Rosanvallon, 2011, as cited in Ansell et al., 2021).

Research examining the correlation between public trust and the effectiveness of anti-coronavirus policies suggests that a greater degree of trust within a society can significantly contribute to the adoption and success of measures such as social distancing and the containment of the virus (Wu, 2020; as cited in Ghiasvand, 2020). It is supported by evidence that democracies with a higher degree of political rights and civil liberties generally experience more public support and political trust (Zahedi & Khanbashi, 2011).

Building trust in the government is critical, and accountability to citizens plays a significant role in achieving this. Additionally, ensuring freedom of speech, supporting political parties, promoting free and independent media, and encouraging citizen participation in the selection of government officials and the political structure are all examples of accountability (Heshmatzadeh et al., 2017).

The absence of trust in the government has been a major impediment to managing the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. The COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges related to public trust and had negative consequences for controlling the spread of the virus. This was evident when people disobeyed regulations that prohibited entry and exit to high-risk cities, thereby contributing to the spread of the virus. Another issue was the lack of acceptance of domestically manufactured vaccines by many Iranians. Evidence for the lack of trust can be found in several indicators, such as low voter turnout in the presidential elections, widespread protests in Iran in recent months, and previous protests in 2009 and 2019. These events illustrate that a significant proportion of the population has lost faith in the political system.

The issue at hand is how power structures can play a significant role in fostering distrust among individuals. For instance, the Guardian Council's decision to reject a substantial portion of citizens' candidates could have negative consequences for the Iranian people, leading to distrust and hopelessness among the populace. This decision resulted in disqualifying even former presidents, such as Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, at some point. Upon examining the organizational structure

of the Guardian Council, it becomes clear that the Council takes into consideration the views and directives of the Supreme Leader when making decisions.

Securitization

During the COVID-19 crisis, it is crucial to address sensitive issues through social and political management, particularly when societies are facing several challenges. Some security theorists highlight the importance of desecuritizing and depoliticizing such issues and resolving them in the political and social realms. By desensitizing these issues, they can be better managed and tackled (Sajadi, 2020).

Despite previous claims, it is not uncommon for crises in Iran to begin as security issues. The creation of the NHCC under the leadership of the Supreme National Security Council, as well as the participation of the IRGC in the COVID-19 response and the securitization of the problem, may have played a role in the inadequate handling of the pandemic in Iran. By establishing the NHCC on February 25, 2020, and aligning its decisions with the SNSC, it recognized the COVID-19 crisis as a threat to the country's national security, which was previously labeled as bioterrorism (Tofighi Darian, 2021). The belief in a US-led biological attack plan by some IRGC supporters resulted in Doctors without Borders withdrawing from Iran (San et al., 2020).

The Constitution explicitly permits the government to implement essential restrictions during times of war or emergencies, which must first receive approval from parliament and subsequently be extended every thirty days. However, the establishment of the NHCC by the SNSC to handle the COVID-19 crisis has transferred this authority

from the aforementioned bodies to the NHCC, with the final approval of the Supreme Leader (Tofighi Darian, 2021). Despite the Interior Minister's declaration of the NHCC's decisions' legal validity, even more than the legislation, the NHCC did not achieve much success in crisis management before November 2020 (Tofighi Darian, 2021).

The lack of Integration in decisions and facility mobilization

The unsuccessful and ineffective management of the Covid-19 pandemic in Iran can be partly attributed to conflicts of interest between various organizations, particularly in the sectors of vaccine procurement and pharmaceutical imports (Mohamadian et al., 2022). Although the "Law on the Establishment of the Crisis Management Organization" was drafted to promote coordination, there remains a lack of coordination among the various bodies and organizations responsible for crisis control and management in Iran. This lack of internal coordination, coherence, and alignment of approaches can be considered the most significant weakness in Iran's crisis management system (Bijani et al., 2021).

After examining the prepared strategies and objectives for managing the crisis, it becomes apparent that the management structure has some flaws. Specifically, the administrative structure of the NHCC, with the Ministry of Health at its core, has proven ineffective in managing the country's resources. Additionally, the crisis management structure has failed to give adequate attention to the importance of cooperation with other existing institutions, further confirming the aforementioned flaws (Ardalan et al., 2011; as cited in Sajadi, 2020). The lack of a comprehensive national strategy to address the

COVID-19 pandemic in Iran resulted in confusion within the management system. This confusion was further amplified by conflicting priorities and concerns. For instance, the president's announcement of an early return to normalcy was later retracted, permission for holiday travel during the New Year was granted before severe restrictions were put in place, and the strict closure of businesses was later relaxed. These policy changes highlight the conflicting interests that contributed to the confusion in managing the pandemic in Iran (Sajadi, 2020).

Different countries adopt various approaches to crisis management, which are shaped by the type of crises and the level of crisis management significance. Despite the existence of a crisis management organization under the supervision of the Ministry of the Interior with confirmed duties to create integrity and high efficiency in crisis management, the NHCC was formed under the chairmanship of the President, specifically to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the armed forces created the Imam Reza Health and Treatment Camp, which provided aid and support to the government. Insufficient coordination among organizations, failure to learn and apply network functions, lack of belief in common interests, and absence of guidelines for inter-organizational cooperation can exacerbate challenges during times of crisis and hinder the development of accountability and responsibility in organizations. In Iran, organizational disorders and deficiencies often arise from assigning duties based on attributed characteristics without scientific support and explicit executive guarantees (Baharloeii & Nayehdar, 2020). Although collaboration can enhance output quality, crisis management has long been a challenge in Iran due to several reasons, including

organizational performance that prioritizes individual interests over the collective good, weaknesses in coordination, cooperation, and responsibility, and a failure to adhere to an integrated system (Baharloeï & Nayehdar, 2020).

The issue of taking responsibility for the management of Covid-19 has become a significant controversy. The Passive Defense Organization was another responsible body fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, which ultimately was not very successful in doing so. According to a political expert, Amirreza Taghipourian, the Passive Defense Organization is a clear example of an organization that was founded outside of the government's authority. He believes this is a part of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's aim to form a parallel institution. Taghipourian argues that government's institutions are incompatible with Ali Khamenei and he attempts to extend his authority through the formation of parallel organizations, like IRGC. Ali Khamenei's efforts in support of parallel institutions such as the Expediency Council and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution are among measures that are comparable to his other efforts to consolidate power and maintain control over the Iranian government. According to Taghipourian, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, has expressed confidence in the institutions under his supervision. These institutions include those established through the IRGC and the Passive Defense Organization, which is also monitored by the IRGC. Ali Zanjani, the political activist, believes that the Passive Defense Organization's decision to declare a white situation despite the reported deaths in Qom could be seen as a failure on their part to protect the lives and interests of citizens. This announcement not only demonstrated the incompetence of this organization but also suggested that, contrary to its charter, it

does not care about the security of people's lives and only seeks to focus on protecting the interests of the ruling authorities. Zanjani stated that the Passive Defense organization's handling of the COVID-19 crisis has been unprofessional and has resulted in disagreements with health institutions over power. Additionally, they have refused to follow the orders of doctors and are actively working to remove the Ministry of Health from the COVID-19 crisis management team. It's important to note that Jalali, the Commander of the Passive Defense Organization, criticized the transfer of COVID-19 crisis management to the Ministry of Health in his message to President Rouhani. He also stated that he cannot accept orders from the director of the Medical School (Farhadi, 2020).

Lack of sufficient foresight by policymakers

Major challenges for crisis management in Iran include a lack of foresight, preparation, and neglect of the possibility of repeating crises. When officials fail to anticipate and prepare for potential crises, they may be caught off guard when the crises occur, which can result in impulsive decisions and the need for constant modifications to crisis management strategies. Examples of such responses include measures such as converting city entrances to exits, constructing homes, and designating them for home isolation (Baharloeï & Nayehdar, 2020). Some of the decisions made during the COVID-19 pandemic have been highly unusual. For example, even though the government believed it was impossible to close schools, the Islamic Council, which is a central legislative pillar, was closed for a period of time. Meanwhile, ordinary citizens were forced to travel by subway and bus within cities.

Given the way the Islamic Republic of Iran was formed and considering the many opponents it faces in the world, it appears that security and defense have always been a top priority in terms of foresight for the Iranian government.

Lack of independence

In their study, Mohammadian and colleagues discovered that despite holding significant power and authority, the Ministry of Health was unable to efficiently coordinate and organize other stakeholders involved in the management of COVID-19. To address this issue, the government must bolster the Ministry of Health's position as a critical institution, providing it with the necessary resources, authority, and capacity to offer leadership, direction, and coordination. This will allow the Ministry to carry out its executive responsibilities, including disease prevention, detection, and treatment, particularly during health crises. At the onset of the pandemic, the President and other officials were at odds with the enforcement of health protocols and restrictions, such as quarantine (Başar, 2020; Yacoubian, 2020, as cited in Mohamadian et al., 2022). The disagreements resulted in mounting pressure on the Ministry of Health to revoke the decisions and repeal the restrictive policies of the organization (Başar, 2020, as cited in Mohamadian et al., 2022).

The Ministry of Health has failed to make effective decisions due to inconsistencies caused by conflicting interests of various institutions. These conflicting interests have hindered the execution of integrated measures. The inability to agree on a coordinated policy or to execute one can occur due to a lack of consensus on a particular policy or

course of action, often as a result of competing political ideologies or conflicting interests (Lester and Krejci, 2007, as cited in Mohamadian et al., 2022). This lack of consensus can lead to non-cooperation, resulting in a failure to implement effective measures to address important public health issues.

According to Mohamadian and colleagues, the absence of an integrated and coherent management structure for coordinating institutions, the existence of multiple decision-making and policy-making centers, and the resulting lack of coordination led to inefficient use of resources and reduced the effectiveness of the NHCC and the Ministry of Health, which are the primary decision-making bodies in the health sector. The NHCC was established to coordinate an integrated leadership structure that includes the president and a majority of other institutions. The NHCC is responsible for policy-making and supervising the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite having some high level of involvement, NHCC lacked power and executive authority. Studies have shown that countries with a well-organized crisis management system, including defined roles, coordinated institutions, and extensive cooperation among stakeholders, experienced easier COVID-19 pandemic management. The ineffective management of COVID-19 in Iran is tied to conflicting interests. This problem has evolved due to the enormous influence of specific individuals on the country's political structure and decision-making, particularly with the import of medications and vaccines. Due to the absence of binding regulations and structural flaws, personal interests took precedence over collective interests, resulting in conflicts over profitability and revenue generation, replacement of related drugs, and prioritizing domestic vaccine distribution over imports.

However, the outcome was limited to the disruption of vaccine imports, delayed vaccination, and increased mortality. The situation worsened due to the lack of transparency in individual responsibilities and inadequate power of the Ministry of Health. Additionally, the presence of multiple decision-makers and lack of unity of command resulted in inefficiencies, hindering the Ministry of Health's policy implementation and weakening its political and executive powers (Mohamadian et al., 2022).

Despite the fact that experts and managers are typically the decision-makers in each province and city, adapting to local conditions, a study conducted by Baharloeï and Nayehdar (2020) revealed that local managers actually had more limited authority and were not consulted during the COVID-19 crisis (Baharloeï & Nayehdar, 2020). This is surprising given that most crisis management systems are based on the concept of delegation.

The power structure in Iran is complex, peculiar, and often illogical. During times of crisis, not only are middle and local managers excluded from the decision-making process, but the president and his ministers can also be excluded. For instance, during Rouhani's government, there were several instances where the government was on the verge of signing a new nuclear agreement, but the power structure in Iran did not allow it to re-sign the JCPOA. Similarly, when it came to COVID-19, despite Rouhani's government purchasing a significant amount of Chinese vaccinations, the public was not permitted to receive them as the new government, led by Raisi, wanted to take credit for it (*Zarif's answer to Raisi's claim about the Corona vaccine*, 2022).

Non-specialist members

The gap between the elites and the government, the lack of a comprehensive explanation of responsibilities, the scarcity of experts in the field of epidemics, and inadequate forecasting are among the factors that necessitate the participation of specialized members in the crisis management team. One issue that has gained recognition is the competency of managers, which includes both individual and managerial competencies. According to survey results, participants who advocate for collective wisdom as a means to control the COVID-19 crisis believe that a fundamental understanding of teamwork principles is essential for effective management (Bijani et al., 2021).

One example of the challenge in managing the COVID-19 crisis is the involvement of non-specialized organizations and institutions, such as the EIKO and the IRGC, who were directed by the Supreme Leader. Despite allocating a large amount of funds for vaccine development, the EIKO's lack of a specialized team resulted in the waste of financial and human resources without any tangible outcomes.

In fact, one critique of the power and governance structure in Iran is that the Supreme Leader, through trusted organizations and bodies, has provided opportunities for non-specialists to wield influence in the political structure without considering their expertise. This is due to the close relationship of these organizations with the leadership, which has led to the appointment of individuals based on personal connections rather than merit.

CONCLUSION

The management of the COVID-19 crisis in Iran has revealed various challenges, including delayed responsiveness, lack of integrity, trust, and independence, impulsive decision-making, hasty actions, insufficient specialized decision-makers, and securitization. While external factors such as the unknown nature of the virus, lack of a vaccine, different virus variants, and sanctions have impacted Iran's response to the pandemic, the country's power and governance structure has also played a role in managing the crisis.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a complex system of power and governance that is highly centralized and hierarchical. Informal relationships hold significant power, but ultimate authority rests with the Supreme Leader, who holds the highest-ranking political and religious position in the country. The Supreme Leader's role is crucial in the regime's decision-making process. Even the President lacks sufficient autonomy to make actual decisions and effectively govern. Various examples can be used to analyze this issue. For instance, one can consider Bashar Assad's journey to Iran without informing Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmadinejad's one-week outburst during his administration, and Rouhani's interviews about the opposition and those who stand in its way. The structure of governance in Iran appears to be designed in a way to be more worried about the possibility of a coup. This is evidenced by the existence of multiple military forces in the country, including the army, police force, IRGC, and Basij, as well as the presence of individuals known as "plainclothesmen" or Lebas-Shakhsi in Persian. The structure of

power and governance in Iran has exacerbated some of the crisis management challenges. Examples of these challenges include delayed decision-making, a lack of trust, a lack of independence, and the securitization of government.

The significance of the clergy in Iran's power structure and governance is worth considering. It is widely known that the clergy holds a great deal of authority in Iran. Decision-makers in the country often approach interactions with the clergy cautiously, even though the latter may not hold a formal position of power. At times, Friday imams may publicly criticize the government and its institutions. This issue is particularly complex in religious cities such as Qom and Mashhad, where clerics and Friday imams wield significant influence over the city's affairs. For example, despite the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's approval of music performances in Mashhad, some bands were still banned from performing there. The first case of COVID-19 in Iran was discovered in the province of Qom. It is possible that the quarantine of Qom to prevent the spread of the disease to other cities had political repercussions for the authorities, which may have been deemed more important than human lives. It is worth noting that statements made by Iranian authorities to justify their decisions are somewhat perplexing. For example, Deputy Minister of Health Iraj Harirchi opposed the quarantine of cities and referenced the use of this solution prior to the First World War in the case of cholera and plague. Similarly, the then-Minister of Health Saeed Namaki referred to quarantine as unscientific (Mazinani & Mayeli, 2021).

One of the foreign researchers believes that insecurity, pessimism, suspicion, and opportunism are among the most prominent characteristics of Iran's political elite (Zonis, 2016, as cited in Ghorbanpoor, 2008). To cope with a crisis like COVID-19, which has broad human, social, cultural, and economic elements, a reliable and agile governance structure as well as an expert who has also learned from prior experiences, are required.

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