

Iran orders troops to fight coronavirus outbreak as 77 dead

March 3 2020, by Amir Vahdat and Jon Gambrell



In this photo released by the office of the Iranian supreme leader, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei speaks during a tree planting ceremony in Tehran, Iran, Tuesday, March 3, 2020. Iran's supreme leader put the Islamic Republic on war footing Tuesday against the new coronavirus by ordering its armed forces to assist health officials in combating the outbreak—the deadliest outside of China—that authorities say has killed 77 people. (Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader via AP)

Iran's supreme leader put the Islamic Republic's armed forces on alert Tuesday to assist health officials in combating the outbreak of the new coronavirus—the deadliest outside of China—that authorities say has killed 77 people.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's decision was announced after state media broadcast images of the 80-year-old leader planting a tree wearing disposable gloves ahead of Iran's upcoming arbor day, showing how concern about the virus now reaches up to the top of the country's Shiite theocracy. Iranian media reported that 23 members of parliament now had the virus, as did the head of the country's emergency services.

"Whatever helps [public health](#) and prevents the spread of the disease is good and what helps to spread it is sin," Khamenei said, who has not worn gloves at past arbor day plantings.

After downplaying the coronavirus as recently as last week, Iranian authorities said Tuesday they had plans to potentially mobilize 300,000 soldiers and volunteers to confront the virus. It wasn't clear if Khamenei's order would set them in motion helping sanitize streets, direct traffic and track possible contacts those ill with the virus had with others, as initially suggested.

There are now over 2,530 cases of the new coronavirus across the Mideast. Of those outside Iran in the region, most link back to the Islamic Republic.



In this photo released by an official website of the office of the Iranian supreme leader, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei participates in a tree planting ceremony in Tehran, Iran, Tuesday, March 3, 2020. Iran's supreme leader put the Islamic Republic on war footing Tuesday against the new coronavirus by ordering its armed forces to assist health officials in combating the outbreak—the deadliest outside of China—that authorities say has killed 77 people. (Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader via AP)

Yet experts worry Iran's percentage of deaths to infections, now around 3.3%, is much higher than other countries, suggesting the number of infections in Iran may be far greater than current figures show.

Iran stands alone in how the virus has affected its government, even compared to hard-hit China, the epicenter of the outbreak.

The death of Expediency Council member Mohammad Mirmohammadi on Monday makes him the highest-ranking official within Iran's leadership to be killed by the virus. State media referred to him as a confidant of Khamenei.

The virus earlier killed Hadi Khosroshahi, Iran's former ambassador to the Vatican, as well as a recently elected member of parliament.

Those sick include Vice President Masoumeh Ebtekar, better known as "Sister Mary," the English-speaking spokeswoman for the students who seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and sparked the 444-day hostage crisis, state media reported. Also sick is Iraj Harirchi, the head of an Iranian government task force on the coronavirus who tried to downplay the virus before falling ill.



In this Sunday, March 1, 2020 photo, a paramedic tests a sample taken from a patient suspected of being infected with the new coronavirus, at a hospital in Tehran, Iran. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (Ali Shirband/Mizan News Agency via AP)

On Tuesday, lawmaker Abdolreza Mesri told Iranian state television's Young Journalists Club program that 23 members of parliament had the coronavirus. He urged all lawmakers to avoid the public.

"These people have a close relationship with the people and they carry different viruses from different parts of the country, which may create a new virus, so we recommend the lawmakers to cut off their relationship with the public for now," Mesri said.

The semiofficial ILNA and Tasnim news agencies in Iran also reported that Pirhossein Koulivand, the head of the country's emergency services, had come down with the new illness. They offered no other immediate details.

An activist group also said Tuesday that Wikipedia's Farsi-language website appeared to be disrupted in Iran after a close confidant to the supreme leader died of the new coronavirus.



In this Sunday, March 1, 2020 photo, a medic treats a patient infected with coronavirus, at a hospital in Tehran, Iran. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (Ali Shirband/Mizan News Agency via AP)

The advocacy group NetBlocks linked Mirmohammadi's death to the disruption, though Iranian officials and its [state media](#) did not immediately acknowledge it. Authorities face increasing criticism from the Iranian public over the outbreak amid concerns the number of cases from the virus may be higher than currently reported.

NetBlocks described the disruption to accessing Farsi Wikipedia as being nationwide, saying its technical testing suggests the online

encyclopedia is being blocked by the same mechanism used to block Twitter and Facebook. Those social media websites have been banned since Iran's disputed 2009 presidential election and Green Movement protests.

Some Iranians said they couldn't access Wikipedia's Farsi website since Monday night. Others said they could, including through the site's mobile-friendly pages.



In this Sunday, March 1, 2020 photo, a medic treats a patient infected with coronavirus, at a hospital in Tehran, Iran. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (Ali Shirband/Mizan News Agency via AP)

"The new restrictions come as Iran faces a growing crisis following the loss of senior state figures to [coronavirus](#) and a spate of criticism and misinformation have spread through social media," NetBlocks said in its analysis.

The Wikimedia Foundation, which oversees the volunteer-edited encyclopedia, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. NetBlocks previously reported internet disruptions affecting Iran in recent days and users across the Islamic Republic have reported problems.

The disruption raises fears of Iran potentially shutting off the internet entirely again, as it did for a week during economic protests in November. Iran separately has created its own so-called "halal" net of government-approved websites.

Meanwhile Tuesday, the Middle East's largest airline, Emirates, said it had to reduce or ground flights due to the new virus. Because of the slowdown, the government-owned carrier has asked its employees to take paid and even unpaid leave for up to a month at a time. Emirates' operates out of Dubai, the world's busiest for international travel.



In this Sunday, March 1, 2020 a medic disinfects hands of colleague against coronavirus, at a hospital in Tehran, Iran. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (Koosha Mahshid Falahi/Mizan News Agency via AP)



In this Sunday, March 1, 2020 medics wearing protective gear work in a quarantined ward for coronavirus infected patients, at a hospital in Tehran, Iran. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (Koosha Mahshid Falahi/Mizan News Agency via AP)



People wearing face masks walk on a sidewalk, in downtown Tehran, Iran, Monday, March 2, 2020. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (AP Photo Vahid Salemi)



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In this Sunday, March 1, 2020 photo, a paramedic works with a centrifuge to test blood samples taken from patients suspected of being infected with the new coronavirus, at a hospital in Tehran, Iran. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (Ali Shirband/Mizan News Agency via AP)



Some women wear face masks as they walk in downtown Tehran, Iran, Monday, March 2, 2020. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died

Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (AP Photo Vahid Salemi)



A woman rides her bicycle covering her face with a scarf depicting the U.S. flag, in downtown Tehran, Iran, Monday, March 2, 2020. A member of a council that advises Iran's supreme leader died Monday after falling sick from the new coronavirus, becoming the first top official to succumb to the illness striking both citizens and leaders of the Islamic Republic. (AP Photo Vahid Salemi)

**"We have been tested before and Emirates will come out stronger,"
Chief Operating Officer Adel Al-Redha said.**

The world's largest airline trade association, IATA, says Mideast carriers have already lost around \$100 million in revenue due to a drop in ticket sales because of disruptions caused by the [virus](#).

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