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POLITICIZING THE VIRUS. SECTARIAN TENSIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AT THE TIME OF COVID-19

Introduction. –Interpreting the words of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss (mentioned in Barbera, 2020), Covid-19 has entered the global system as a "total social fact"[1], i.e. something capable of influencing and determining a set of phenomena, involving most of the operating mechanisms of the community of reference. In this sense, the "total social fact" therefore makes it possible to interpret apparently distant and different "pieces" of the same society and to reflect on the political, cultural, economic and symbolic dynamics of each State. Health and public hygiene measures, for example, are now political issues (but perhaps they were already but with more media discretion); the same individual freedom has been trapped in emergency political dynamics, as the division between friends and enemies within the same nation overlaps the boundaries between groups competing for power and influence. Where there is no shared context (the Constitution, the Nation, the Homeland, the Republic, etc.) which allows groups to compete, even an epidemic or a pandemic such as the current one (May 2020) can become a pretext to validate not only economic, political, social, but also religious divisions. From the assault on supermarkets, to speculation on the prices of masks, to the statements of politicians, to the export, logistics and tourism crisis, to the economic policies of embargoes, which persist despite the health crises of these times, to the political arm wrestling between states on oil, nuclear or other issues, Covid-19 is our best mirror and we should have

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[*] Although the result of common reflections, the contribution is due to Monica Morazzoni for the paragraphs *Introduction* and *Mapping Covid-19* incidence in Iran and to Giovanna Giulia Zavettieri for the paragraphs Pandemic and geopolitics in Iran: sectarian issues and Conclusion.

[1] According to Mauss, the total social fact par excellence is a gift, as it is capable of uniting the practices and the frames of meaning referable to mythopoieic, economic, political, expressive and religious aspects (in Barbera, 2020).

the courage to look at it without lowering our gaze.

In short, Covid-19 allows the interpretation of apparently distant and different "pieces" of the same society, like the Islamic one, which we deal with in this essay with particular attention to sectarian tensions in the Middle East that Covid-19 is exacerbating. From February 24th, Iraq, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia began to announce their first cases of infection. In all six countries, the earliest coronavirus patients had recently traveled to Iran. Iranian officials have given conflicting accounts of how the virus first arrived in Qom, a city of about 1.2 million people, part of a Shiite pilgrimage circuit. The virus spread quickly in Qom, from which it moved to other cities in Iran, and then to the Gulf. The not unpredictable consequence was that many Middle Eastern countries then began using the Covid-19 crisis as a pretext to track the movement of Shiite citizens, requiring them to report recent travel to Iran. The Covid-19 crisis now appears to be amplifying anti-Shia prejudice and discrimination.

The present essay aims to be an overview of the main geopolitical and geo-economic consequences of Covid-19 in Iran in the Middle East, particularly focused on the aforementioned discrimination towards Shiites and the alteration of numbers referring to the infected.

The methodology adopted involved finding an updated bibliography on the topic Covid-19 and comparing statistical sources on the number of cases and deaths in Iran. Of particular value was the consultation, on GIS maps, of data processed in real time by John Hopkins University relating to the status of Covid-19 in Iran and of the WHO datasets and epidemiological maps developed by Iranian doctors. Sources of media information on the topic of sectarian issues of Islam have been joined by semi-structured interviews administered to a sample of Shiites who are not necessarily Iranian. The studies carried out have allowed reflection on the relationship between the spread of the virus and the mobility of Shiite pilgrims and businesspeople in Iran as well as in the Middle East region.

Pandemic and geopolitics in Iran: sectarian issues. – In February, Iran emerged in the Middle Eastern context as the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, putting the government in trouble on several fronts and demonstrating its inability to manage the epidemic (Tabatabai, 2020). Of-

ficials downplayed the seriousness of the crisis even as reports surfaced of Iranians dying by the hundreds. The death toll soon surpassed 1,000 and reached more than 5,000 by mid-April, according to official figures, which no doubt underestimated the body count.

The outbreak of Covid-19 coincided with two important milestones: the anniversary of the Iranian revolution on February 11 and parliamentary elections on February 21[2]. On the occasion of these events, the government did not make public the already present outbreak of Covid-19 in the country, as it feared that it would have an impact on participation in these two events. Although less than 43% of Iranian electors came to the elections (the lowest participation rate since the 1979 revolution), the gathering of people/voters certainly did not favor the containment of the virus (Wright, 2020). However, the government, which did not postpone the parliamentary elections despite evidence of the contagion, released images of people/voters wearing masks, as if to demonstrate sensitivity towards the virus and the public's sense of responsibility towards the epidemic. The opposition party, instead, denounced the action of the government and interior ministry to hold parliamentary elections with the virus already in place, politicizing Covid-19[3]. In particular, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) [4], an influential branch of the armed forces (often aligned with the conservative religious establishment), taking note of mounting public anger at the government, has rushed to present itself as the actor more capable of containing the outbreak (Tabatabai, 2020). Whatever public health merits of the Revolutionary Guards'

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[2] During the parliamentary elections, the victory of the most radical fringe of the Iranian establishment was recorded. These results guarantee a future conservative government (presidential elections are scheduled for 2021).

[3] The exploitation of the virus for political purposes was also confirmed by another contrast between Iran and the United States: after the elections, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused Iran's enemies of exaggerating Covid-19's threat to scare voters. Also, according to Khamenei, negative propaganda about the virus grew before the elections to dissuade Iranian voters. At the same time, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo denounced the Iranian government for misinforming the public about the numbers affected or killed by the virus.

[4] Volunteers from the Iranian paramilitary corps engaged for defending the order established with the 1979 Islamic revolution. They are the guardians of the Khomeinist Islamic revolution, better known as IRGC or Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The name in Farsi is Pasdaran.

actions exists, the public relations strategy is clear: the IRGC hopes to gain from this crisis at the expense of Hassan Rouhani government and his allies. In this sense, the Revolutionary Guards could further undermine the government and help conservatives eliminate moderates in next year's presidential election. The epidemic also reopened the issue of U.S. sanctions on the Iranian economy which limit its ability to obtain the supplies needed to fight Covid-19. In this situation, Iran urged the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to approve a 5 billion dollars loan to combat Covid-19. This request, strongly desired by the moderate fringe of the Iranian government, would result in the loss of control by the theocratic government and perhaps also the defeat of the conservatives[5] (Rossi, 2020). However, the IMF issue is connected to the internal political crisis in Iran. In fact, there are "moderate" political formations in the government, but the parliamentary majority is made up of conservatives who follow the Supreme Leader and, above all, some fringes of the Pasdaran. In order to survive, the moderates need popular support and therefore the Covid-19 crisis becomes an opportunity for them to assert themselves: the moderates lead the country to surrender financial independence as a final move to defeat the conservatives, and in Covid-19 they find their opportunity. In fact, this attempt to politicize Covid-19 led to nothing since Trump denied the loan[6].

With regard to the politicization of Covid-19 for sectarian religious issues, it should be remembered that the first epidemic cases were traced to the holy city of Qom (Salehi-Isfahani, 2020), whose Shiite seminaries and Sayyidah Fatima al-Ma'suma Shrine draw aspiring clerics and devout pilgrims from across the Shiite world. According to the Iranian government, the first deaths from Covid-19 in Qom (a city of about 1.2 million people) were registered on February 19, 2020, but by February 27 cases

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[5]The request for help to the IMF would provide for the presence of inspectors in Tehran to monitor spending items and therefore government revenues should be used to restore the commitment and everything that is considered superfluous should be eliminated (Rossi, 2020).

[6]According to the national newspaper Arman (in Lesani, 2020), «[i]t is not possible to stay at home because hunger is more deadly than Coronavirus and you cannot remain in quarantine on an empty stomach [...] It is time for all governmental and non-governmental institutions, large and large state-owned companies, to lend a hand. We shouldn't politicize Coronavirus. Now is not the time to try to settle the accounts between factions […]».

had been reported in 24 of Iran's 31 provinces. On March 16, Rouhani ordered many of the country's most important shrines to close, a decision unprecedented as shrines are typically open 24 hours a day, and the decision was denounced by clerics, sparking demonstrations by conservative Iranians (Marizad, 2020). Meanwhile, the virus continued to infect the population and, according to published data on March 23 more than 23,000 people had been infected and more than 1,800 died, including at least a dozen government officials (Al Jazeera, 2020).

The Covid-19 crisis amplified anti-Shiite prejudice and discrimination especially after the presence of the virus has been detected in Saudi Arabia, in the predominantly Shiite eastern region of Qatif. The Saudi Health Ministry immediately called on people who had traveled to Iran to declare themselves to authorities. Dozens of Saudi Shiites responded to the health ministry's request by admitting that they had traveled to Iran. Though travel to Iran is a crime in Saudi Arabia, some Saudis travel there via countries of transit. As Covid-19 cases in the kingdom have risen, some of their countrymen have taken to Twitter to blast them as traitors and call for their execution (Matthiesen, 2020). Meanwhile, Bahrain has begun using the coronavirus crisis as a pretext to track the movements of its Shiite citizens and has asked those who have traveled to Iran to identify themselves by calling a hotline (Al Arabiya, 2020). For the government of Bahrain, travel to Iran is not a crime as it is in Saudi Arabia, however also here Shiites fear repercussions[7]. Covid-19 becomes an excuse to demonize Shiites: the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia, on his official Twitter account for Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, condemned Iran for «creating a health threat which endangers mankind»[8].

Bahrain's interior minister accused Iran of «biological aggression that is criminalized by international law» for covering up the outbreak and failing to stamp Bahraini travelers' passports (MEE, 2020). Even in the United Arab Emirates, was claimed that all coronavirus cases in the region were linked to Iran – even though the UAE's first COVID-19 cases

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[7]Both in Saudi Arabia and in Bahrain, Shiite populations are often politically marginalized, stigmatized for their religious beliefs and practices and suspected of loyalty to Iran (Matthiesen, 2020).
[8] https://twitter.com/KSAMOFA/status/1235646719267721216.

were Chinese tourists from Wuhan reported on January 29th, well before the outbreak in Qom became public (Gambrell, 2020).

To amplify the anti-Shiite prejudice and discrimination in the Middle East there is also the story of Lebanon, where the nation's most powerful political and military force, Hezbollah, has strong ties to Iran. Therefore, Lebanon allowed flights from Iran to continue until the second week of March. Iran's support of Hezbollah is fiercely contested, and the rival parties have politicized the virus (Apnews, 2020), using it to criticize Iran's influence in the country. According to some sources (Aboulenein, 2020; Matthiesen, 2020; Mubasher, 2020; France24, 2020)

> on February 21, Lebanon confirmed its first case of COVID-19, a 45-year-old woman who had recently returned from Qom. On February 24, the governments of Iraq, Bahrain, Oman and Kuwait announced their first cases of coronavirus infection, and by March 2, Qatar and Saudi Arabia had reported cases as well; in all six countries, the earliest coronavirus patients had recently traveled to Iran.

The Iranian government's answer to the Covid outbreak was slow and the president did not issue travel restrictions, continuing to allow Shiite pilgrims in and out of the country.

According to tradition, the Shiites commonly make a pilgrimage to the Imamzadeh shrines, as in the case of the Sayyidah Fatima al-Ma'suma Shrine in Qom. Here, men and women pray for cures for their ailments, solutions for their problems, as well as forgiveness for their sins (Betteridge, 2002, pp. 276-289). On the occasion of visits to the sanctuaries, it is traditional for devotees to stop for hours or days to pray in the mosque and to perform rituals such as touching and kissing the tombs of the Imams (and their relatives) considered close to Allah. Consequently, during the early days of the coronavirus epidemic, shrines became viral vectors, infecting Shiite pilgrims – some of whom had underlying health conditions or were elderly – who then were later accused of spreading the disease throughout the country and in the Middle Eastern region.

If on the one hand it is true that there is a movement of Shiites for religious tourism within the country, on the other hand it is true that, between February 2019 and 2020, Iran welcomed 8 million tourists from Europe, China, Azerbaijan, Iraq and Turkey. In particular, Chinese inves-

tors represent a market that moves nearly 65 million people in the Middle East. Relations between Beijing and Tehran are not only economic and commercial, but also tourist. In fact, the Chinese are among the main visitors to the country. Iranian officials stated that the virus arrived in Qom both through Chinese Muslim students in the city's religious seminaries and through Chinese workers building a high-speed rail line there.

Another aspect to consider concerns the way, by the Shiites, to carry out religious tourism: it is never itinerant tourism that provides for visiting several sanctuaries located in different states. According to some interviews given to Azerbaijan Shiites, the Shiite pilgrim travels mainly to the city of Karbala in Iraq for two reasons: first of all, the city is the preferred destination to make the pilgrimage considered most important in the life of a Shiite[9]. Secondly, the festivity that moves hundreds of thousands of pilgrims is the Muharram, which in 2019 took place starting from September 1 and in 2020 will take place starting from August 20. In addition to Karbala, Shiite religious tourist destinations are also present in Iraq and Syria, as shown in Figure 1.

Regarding the accusation of Saudi Arabia towards Iran about the spread of Covid-19 by the Shiites, it needs to be carefully evaluated as an asymmetrical conflict exists between Iran and Saudi Arabia and therefore it is not convenient for a Saudi Shiite to visit an Iranian shrine.

The question of who caused the spread of the virus in the Middle Eastern context is particularly complex, mainly because there is no real data relating to the movement of people entering and leaving Iran and or in any of the states of the Middle East. The only fact is the political exploitation of Covid-19 to exacerbate social, economic and religious issues within Iran on the eve of the presidential election. Externally, however, the Shiite issue is a pretext for further isolating Iran in the region in favor of US policy which operates openly against the Rouhani government.

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[9]For Shiites, Karbala represents the religious destination that should be seen at least once in a lifetime. Every year hundreds of thousands of pilgrims go to this city, where the Imam Husayn Mosque is located.

Fig. 1 – *The main destinations of Shiite religious tourism*
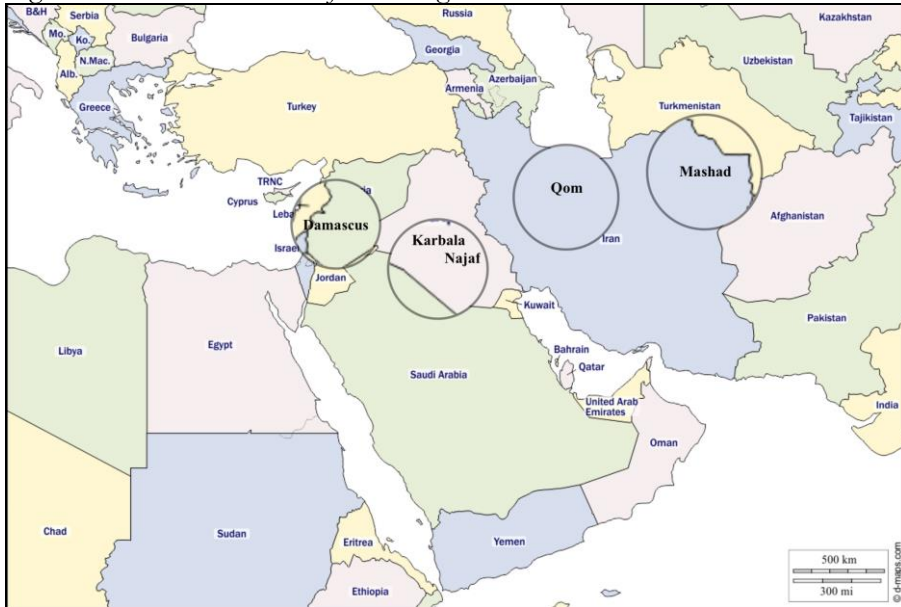
Source: elaboration by Giovanna Giulia Zavettieri, 2020

Mapping Covid-19 incidence in Iran. – Currently (May 2020), Iran is the first country for Covid-19 contagions for numbers of infections in the Middle East region, although the number of infections and deaths has been concealed by the Rouhani government on several occasions. Disinformation is linked to the country's fragile political, economic and social balances. The conservative political front has an interest in undermining the moderate blockade of Rouhani through internal media propaganda that highlighted the poor management of the pandemic (Tabatabai, 2020). At the economic level, there is a system that has long been in crisis due to the US embargo and today[10], in the midst of a pandemic, Iran faces serious circumstances as trade contracts, borders with important partners like Afghanistan, Iraq and Turkey are closed, and China's oil

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[10]In May 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump imposed sanctions on Iran that damaged the country's economy, depleted its foreign exchange reserves and severely limited its ability to respond to a health crisis. Add to this the fact, in the midst of a pandemic, the fall in the price of oil. U.S. sanctions have reduced Iran's average purchasing power by nearly 20% since 2018 and the ongoing health crisis will further reduce that figure (Salehi-Isfahani, 2020).

demand, a quarter of all Iranian trade[11], drops (Wright, 2020). In society, the Iranian middle class thrived during the oil boom of the 2000s, accounting for 60% of the total population in 2012. In 2018, however, the middle class shrank to 53% of the population. Currently, it represents less than 50% and two to three million families of the middle class employed have seen their incomes decrease by 15% during 2020. Unemployment has put further pressure on Rouhani, as there are between three and four million unemployed workers, a figure that could increase if the Covid-19 emergency persists (Salehi-Isfahani, 2020).

Especially in the first phase of the spread of the epidemic (February-March), the actual number of Covid-19 deaths and infections was concealed by the government which ordered the ban on news reporting for fear of riots and popular outrage. The Civil Registry of Tehran itself, according to a directive from the Ministry of Intelligence, has been closed to prevent the leakage of information on the death toll. The universities of medical sciences were also warned not to provide data (Lesani, 2020).

According to the government, the carrier of the virus may have been a trader who traveled between Qom and Wuhan, China. It has been estimated that the epidemic started between three to six weeks before February 19 (the date of the first two deaths in Iran) and, eight days after the first reported death, the virus has spread to 24 of the country's 31 provinces with a number of cases that has increased day by day.

The development of epidemiological maps (Figure 2), built with the official data provided by the Iranian health authorities, allows:

a) analysis the case distribution by provinces and the incidence rates,

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[11] Since 2016, China and Iran have increased trade volumes and Beijing has replaced Moscow as the largest trading partner of Iran and the other Middle Eastern states. However, relations between Tehran and Beijing go beyond the economic and commercial aspects. Iran is among the major beneficiaries of the Belt and Road Initiative. Indeed, Iran's geographical position makes the country a land link between China and the states of Central Asia, which for Chinese investors represent a market of almost 65 million people, and the Caucasus region (Voccia, 2020). In addition, China is investing in Iranian transport and infrastructure with agreements that provide for the electrification of 900 km of railway lines, 400 km of high-speed lines and the strengthening of the infrastructure of Tabriz (industrial city of Iran north-west from which a 2500 km gas pipeline that arrives in Ankara), an important passage of the new Silk Road towards Europe (Dinucci, 2020).

cases/100,000 population by provinces in the period between February 19 and March 9[12];

b) reflection on the relationship between the spread of the virus and the mobility of Shiite pilgrims in Iranian holy places;

c) reflection on the relationship between the spread of the virus and the mobility of tourists and international workers in Iran.

During the first 20 days of the epidemic, 7,161 cases of COVID-19 were reported in the country, for a cumulated rate of 8.9 cases/100,000 population, reaching up to 1,234 cases on March 6, 2020. From the maps, it is clear that infection in the country is occurring from north-central provinces such as Tehran and Qom. However, all the provinces have been affected, and rates ranged from 0.8 (Boushehr) to 61.8 cases/100,000 population (Qom). The highest number of cases have been reported in Tehran, 1,945, followed by Qom, 712, and by Mazandaran, with 633. Qom is on the border with Markazi and Semnan, provinces with rates from 27.2 to 34.9 cases/100,000 population (Arab-Mazar Z. *et al.*, 2020).

The provinces of Qom and Khorasan Razavi are the favorite destinations for Shiite pilgrims, national and international, for the presence of important places of faith. However, in the period considered (February 19 - March 9), the two provinces show a substantial difference in the number of Covid-19 confirmed cases, with a trend comprised, in absolute terms, between 500 thousand and 1 million units of Qom, one of the two Iranian holy cities (the other being Mashhad in Khorasan Razavi) and the 100 - 500 thousand units of Khorasan Razavi. There is also a substantial difference in the incidence of Covid-19 on the population: over 50 cases/100,000 population in Qom, from 1 to 5 cases/100,000 population in Khorasan Razavi[13]. This suggests that Shiite pilgrims can-

[12]The writer thought it interesting to analyze this specific time span, because it related to the Covid-19 diffusion phase 1 in which the Government did not initiate any virus containment action, or continued to allow outbound, inbound and the domestic tourism, in addition to gatherings of people.

[13]The population of Qoom amounts to 1.2 million inhabitants, that of Khorasan Razavi to 6.7 million (data 2019) (www.citypopulation.de). The capital city of Khorasan Razavi, Mashhad, is the second-largest holy city in the world, attracting more than 20 million tourists and pilgrims every year, many of whom come to pay homage to the Imam Reza shrine (the eighth Shiite Imam).

not be considered the only carriers of transmission of the virus within Iran. Moreover, in the months of January and February there were no particular religious holidays (e.g. Muharram, see paragraph 2) to cause the presence of international flows of Shiite pilgrims in Iran.

Fig. 2 – *Epidemiological maps of the case distribution by provinces and the incidence rates, cases/100,000 population by provinces (February 19 - March 9, 2020)*
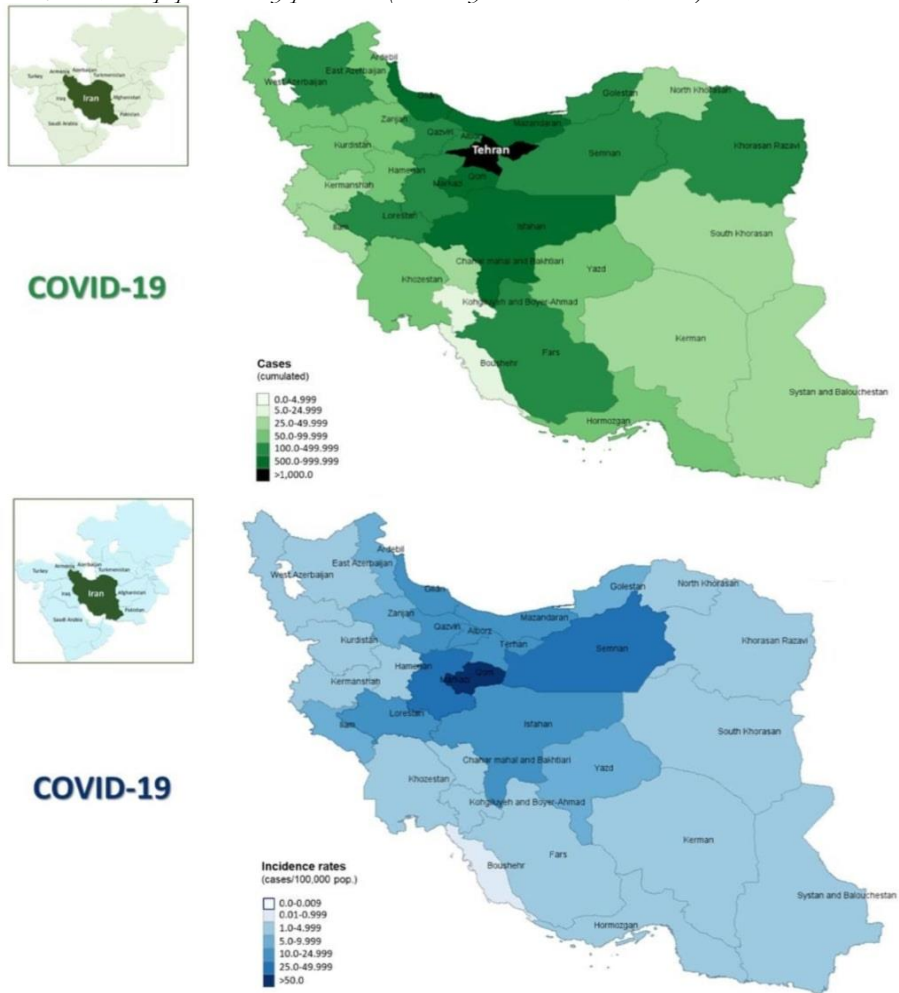
Source: Arab-Mazar Z. *et al.*, 2020

Due to its proximity to Tehran, Qom is a destination for international arrivals and is affected by local mobility to and from the capital. In Mashhad despite being a deeply conservative city, there is no shortage of foreign investments and therefore foreign presences, not necessarily Shiite pilgrims.

In addition to the two centers of Shiite spirituality, Iran includes cities such as Tabriz (province of Eastern Azerbaijan), Isfahan (in the homonymous province) and Shiraz (province of Fars) which are destinations for foreign tourism but, above all, for Chinese investments. For some time now, they have been cities crossed by a lively mobility of businesspeople passing through. Crossings, however, were not limited during the first period of spread of the virus. Figure 2 shows an equal (if not superior) distribution of Covid-19 cases between the province of Khorasan Razavi and those of East Azerbaijan, Isfahan, and Fars. The incidence rate it is even higher in the province of Isfahan than in Khorasan Razavi.

Regarding the charge of exportation of the virus by Shiites, for example to Saudi Arabia, it appears implausible considering both the objective difficulties for a Shiite Iranian to enter Saudi Arabia (see paragraph 2) and because in January, China signed new economic agreements for the oil trade with Riyadh, an element that suggests flows of Chinese entering the country. Therefore it seems more likely that the spread of Covid-19 in the Gulf countries may be more likely attributed to the mobility of Chinese businesspeople and other nationalities than Shiites.

Three months after the outbreak of the pandemic, according to the Iranian Ministry of Health spokesman Kianoush Jajanpour's bulletin (Redazione ANSA, 13 maggio 2020) there were more than 112 thousand cases[14] with almost 7 thousand deaths confirmed since the beginning of the pandemic (Figure 3), with about 90 thousand patients healed and 600 thousand tests carried out[15].

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[14] 114 thousand for the WHO Dashboard, https://covid19.who.int/.

[15] In Italy on the same date, there were 223 thousand cases, with 31 thousand deaths, 115 thousand recovered and almost 3 million tests carried out (Ministero della Salute, 14 May 2020).

Fig. 3 – *Trends in confirmed cases and Covid-19 deaths from 19 February to 14 May 2020*
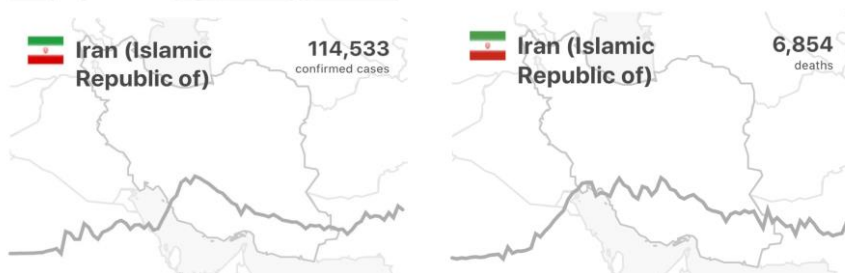
Source: https://covid19.who.int/, last consultation 14 May 2020

The already worrying lack of transparency has been further exacerbated by Tehran's late implementation of containment measures. Since the presence of the disease was detected in Qom, the Ministry of Health did not immediately impose quarantine on cities, considering this measure obsolete, and did not adequately identify, isolate or treat people with the virus. As a result, the infection spread to other parts of the country. Also, the initial refusal by religious officials to close the Fatima al-Ma'suma Shrine in Qom and other monuments, a refusal confirmed by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei[16], favored the spread.

Today, with the Covid-19 epidemic still underway, Iran is facing an economic challenge internally, linked to the depreciation of its currency which has been in difficulty for some time, as well as politics, due to the growing mistrust of the moderate government.

Conclusion. – The spread of Covid-19 in the Middle Eastern region is not attributable only to Shiites, but to an international mobility of people and business people who gravitated to the area already in the months preceding the outbreak of the epidemic. The central theme of the Covid-19 issue in Iran concerns the internal mismanagement of the spread of the virus. In particular, with regard to external relations, the Rouhani government, for the reasons outlined above, did not promptly close its borders, thus endangering the nearby war zones, namely Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

Covid-19 has put global trade on hold, placed half of the world popu-

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[16]According to the supreme leader, any attempt to restrict access to the shrine would have supported the US conspiracy that the holy city is unsafe (Afkhami, 2020).

lation in confinement and has the potential to topple governments and reshape diplomatic relations (Alaaldin, 2020). At this historic moment, as declared by the United Nations, it is above all the areas of war that worry about the impact that the pandemic could have. The Middle East, agitated by multiple wars, raises further concerns about the multiple unresolved issues of Syria and Iraq.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the month of March recorded, with 103 deaths, the lowest civilian death toll since the conflict started in 2011. The key to the credibility of the multiple Syrian administrations including the Damascus government, the autonomous Kurdish administration in the northeast and the jihadist-led alliance that runs Idlib, is in the demonstration of the efficiency of the Syrian state and that therefore all territories should be returned under his government. However, the pandemic and global mobilization could lead to the departure of US-led troops from Syria and neighboring Iraq, allowing the Islamic State jihadist[17] group to intensify its attacks[18] (Bangkok Post, 2020; Van Ostaeyen, 2020).

The same is true of Yemen, where Houthi rebels initially responded positively to the UN appeal for a ceasefire, as did neighbouring Saudi Arabia, which leads a military coalition in support of the government. That rare glimmer of hope in the five-year-old conflict was short-lived, as it escalated again in the following weeks when Saudi air defences intercepted ballistic missiles over Riyadh and a border city fired by the Iran-backed rebels. In response, Saudi-led coalition retaliated by striking Houthi targets in the rebel-held capital Sana'a. Flare-ups in Yemen could

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[17]«A first reaction by the group was to define it as divine punishment for crimes against Muslims. China was hit first, in IS' view as punishment for its ongoing crimes against its Uyghur population. When Iran followed, the reaction was that it was the nation's devious interpretation of Islam that led to this onslaught. Shia Islam has always been regarded as a deviant sect, one that even stands outside the realms of Islam as such (at least perceived so by the Islamic State). And then, when Europe and the US were hit, the explanation was that God punished the "crusader states" for their crimes against Islam throughout the Middle East» (Van Ostaeyen, 2020).

[18]«The overall rate of attacks throughout Syria and Iraq has also increased dramatically since April as we see in the numbers reported by Aaron Zelin. IS made a huge leap in claimed attacks in April compared to prior months in Iraq and Syria: Jan: 88, Feb: 93, Mar: 101, Apr: 151» (https://twitter.com/azelin/status/1256215578882330626).

compound the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, facilitating a coronavirus outbreak of catastrophic proportions, since in Yemen the health infrastructure has collapsed, water is a rare commodity and 24 million people currently require humanitarian assistance (Bangkok Post, 2020). In conclusion, the spread of the coronavirus in Yemen or Syria, as well as in the camps in Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, hosting millions of Syrian refugees, is likely to be devastating. Both from a security and humanitarian perspective, the pandemic in the Middle East is shaping up to be a crisis of epic proportions (Matthiesen, 2020).

On a regional scale, there is no value in placing blame on one state or another for the spread of Covid-19. The problem in this area is related to geopolitical instability and the political-economic coalitions that have formed. There is a pro-American bloc backed by Saudi Arabia and a pro-Chinese bloc with Iran and Oman for investments related to the New Silk Road.

It is too simplistic to blame Shia pilgrims for spreading the virus. Covid-19 circulates in the Middle East due to human mobility, globalization and the Chinese presence in these territories. After all, new territorialisation and reterritorialization processes are underway in the Middle East region and it is now clear that China's positioning is investing in local infrastructure, buying gas and oil and dreaming of the return of the Silk Road. The reality, pre and post Covid-19, is that of a contrast between the US and China in Middle Eastern territory.

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Politicizzare il virus. Tensioni settarie in Medio Oriente al tempo del Covid-19. – Il Covid-19 ha esacerbato le tensioni settarie in Medio Oriente dopo la sua diffusione in Iran. Dal 24 febbraio Iraq, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar e Arabia Saudita hanno annunciato i loro primi casi di infezione imputandone la causa a viaggiatori e/o pellegrini iraniani. Il presente saggio ha voluto dimostrare, anche attraverso carte epidemiologiche relative ai casi e all'incidenza del virus nelle 31 province iraniane, l'insostenibilità dell'ipotesi che la diffusione del virus sia unicamente legata al movimento di pellegrini sciiti all'interno dell'Iran e, più in generale, del Medio Oriente.

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