

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

IRAN WITHOUT MANDATORY QUARANTINE AND WITH SOCIAL DISTANCING STRATEGY AGAINST CORONAVIRUS DISEASE (COVID-19)

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THE NEW CORONAVIRUS (SARS-CoV-2) and the disease it causes (COVID-19) have had an impact on the public's health and the global economy. At this writing, this infection has involved more than 210 countries with more than 2,800,000 confirmed infected cases and nearly 200,000 deaths. The United States, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, the UK, China, and Iran have reported the highest number of confirmed cases.^{1,2}

In Iran, on February 19, 2020, 2 patients in Qom city were confirmed as COVID-19 positive. The disease spread rapidly in adjacent provinces, including Tehran, Markazi, Isfahan, and Semnan, and shortly thereafter in all 31 provinces of the country and most cities and towns. To date (April 12, 2020), according to the spokesman for the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, the total number of positive infected people has reached 71,686, with 4,474 deaths.³

In the early days of the outbreak, which primarily affected Qom and Guilan provinces, Iran could have instituted quarantines to slow the spread of COVID-19. However, as time passed and the disease spread, quarantine proved more difficult to implement because of the vastness of the affected areas. As a result, Iran has not implemented forced quarantine on provinces and cities. Meanwhile, other countries such as China, Italy, and the United States have used this strategy. China locked down whole cities,

and Italy imposed restrictions throughout the country. In the United States, thousands of people have been subjected to legally enforceable quarantines or are in "self-quarantine."⁴

Quarantines and travel bans are often the first response to highly transmissible diseases; they may delay the introduction of the disease to a country or area or they may delay the peak of an epidemic in an area where local transmission is ongoing, or both. However, if not implemented properly, quarantine may also create additional sources of contamination and dissemination of the disease as well as significant mental health and security problems.⁵

On February 23, 2020, following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Iran, by the order of the president and with the approval of the Supreme Leader of Iran, the National Committee to Combat Corona was formed. The members of this committee are the ministers of health (who serves as the head), science, interior, education, and culture; the head of the national radio and television; the spokesman of the government; and the disciplinary and armed forces commanders. This committee makes all the important decisions regarding the fight against COVID-19 and the imposition of restrictions and closures.⁶

From the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak, Iran has focused on social distancing, rather than mandatory quarantine, to slow the spread of this infection, using measures

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such as the closure of schools and universities, mosques, shrines, and Friday (Jumma) prayers; canceling sport events; and closing government jobs, with the exception of essential jobs.⁷ There were no mandatory restrictions on travel and commuting. People have been encouraged to voluntarily self-quarantine and stay home, and limited thermal testing has been done at the entrances to some cities and suspicious cases have been identified, while stricter measures were expected to be in place to reduce travel near the New Year's holidays.

With the exception of the closure of sightseeing attractions and tourism centers, some hotels, and some restaurants, no further action was taken to prevent Nowruz trips, but the reduction in travel rates was significant compared to previous years. According to the statistics provided by the Minister of Roads and Urban Development, rail travel has decreased by 94%, public road travel by bus by 75%, and air travel by 70%, and personal road travel also has decreased significantly.⁸

Finally, on March 26, 2020, the National Committee to Combat Corona decided to take stricter measures. In addition to previous measures, they decided to close down shopping malls and big markets, sport places and swimming pools, parks, and museums. The National

Committee also decided to take stricter measures to reduce travel: interprovincial car traffic was banned (relief cars, police, cargo, foods, and fuel not subject to restrictions) and transport by air, train, and intercity bus were restricted, while fully implementing health protocols.⁹ Figure 1 shows Iran's measures to combat the outbreak of COVID-19 from February 1 to April 11.

In the latest move, Iran has decided to implement smart distancing, which is in line with social distancing and provides conditions for society to gradually return to normal. Based on this decision, many jobs are to be resumed gradually; low-risk and essential jobs with low crowds and low traffic, such as production and industrial units, distribution, food, technical, and household services, can start after obtaining a license from the Ministry of Health and Medical Education and observing health protocols. According to the plan, two-thirds of government employees will start working in rotation.

Health experts are concerned about the consequences of this decision and the potential for increased transmission of the virus and the resulting deaths in the coming days. Officials attributed this decision to economic problems and possible unemployment due to continued severe restrictions following the spread of

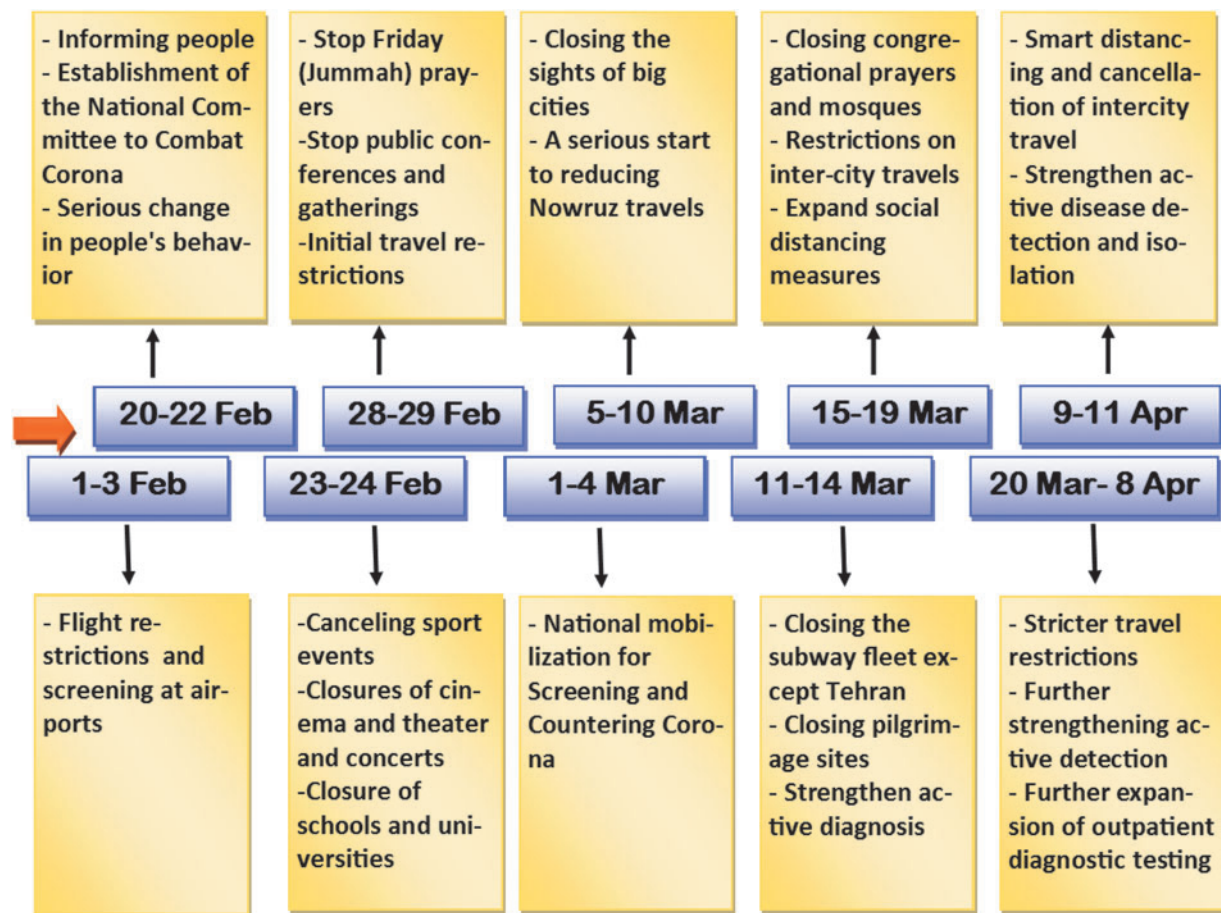


Figure 1. Iran's Course of Action to Counter the Outbreak of COVID-19 from February 1 to April 11

COVID-19. On the other hand, the government is unable to provide financial support to even the most vulnerable subpopulations in order to enable people to stay at home because of economic sanctions, declining oil sales, and a sharp drop in oil prices. However, the authorities hope that with these decisions, they will be able to reduce both the casualties and the financial losses to the society as much as possible.

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