

Will Turkey soon have more coronavirus cases than Iran?



Turkish riot police stand guard in front of the Iranian Consulate during a protest against Iran's role in Aleppo, in Istanbul - (photo credit: REUTERS)

Turkey's pro-government media has been trying to spin the coronavirus as an Ankara victory for the last few months, even as the country's cases rapidly increased to more than 50,000, making it the second-worst outbreak in the Middle East after that of Iran. Just a month ago on March 8, *Daily Sabah* claimed that Turkey had special expertise in the fight against COVID-19 and the country was "virus-free." It was not virus-free, however - and the government's attempt to pretend there were no cases have now come back to haunt it. Turkey put in place a two-day curfew over the weekend.

Turkey is an example of what happens when a country has almost no critical media; having muzzled or put in prison critical journalists over the last twenty years, the country's media is dominated by state-run media or those connected to the ruling party. Ankara is among the largest jailor of journalists in the world according to Amnesty International and the Committee to Protect Journalists. There was little critical discussion of the government's claims about the virus during key weeks in February and March when Ankara claimed the country was a model in the fight against the rising pandemic. Since the first of April, the number of cases has risen from 15,000 to more than 52,000. Iran officially has 70,000 cases so it appears Turkey is on pace to have more cases than Iran in the next week. Turkey has more than 1,000 dead so far.

For Ankara's leadership which is used to creating nationalist causes and wars over the last years to distract the public from problems at home, the virus has proved a problem. Ankara is concerned about new bombing raids in Iraq, or sending more Syrian mercenaries to Libya, as it did in December, and does not want areas it occupies in northern Syria to become virus-hit or turn into a new conflict crisis.

How Ankara continues to try to distract from any criticism of its handling of the virus is to portray other countries as doing worse. It's Anadolu media had twelve top stories on April 12, each of which focusing on the failures of foreign countries. These included a focus on India's cases topping 8,000, Spain's new deaths at 600, Iran having 4,500 deaths and a focus on new cases in Russia, China, the US, Italy,

and France. For Turkey, the headlines were that there were fewer patients in intensive care and the army was handing out bread to the poor.

Turkey's media is one of the least critical in the entire Middle East, with even less critical of government policy than Iran's media. This has helped keep Ankara insulated from any critique that it's handling of the emerging threat may have been slow or non-existent. For instance, when Turkey's regime ordered a sudden curfew over the weekend without informing mayors and locals, there was a massive rush as hundreds of thousands packed supermarkets. The rush of people is the opposite as intended by social distancing guidelines. Istanbul municipality, the largest in the country, wasn't even told beforehand about the government's policy. Istanbul is led by the opposition party.

Even as Turkey's cases doubled every few days, the country's leaders dispatched aid to the UK and other countries, hoping to get headlines from what looked like boxes of aid sent abroad while people at home were being infected. According to one list, Turkey sent aid to the UK, Spain, Italy, the US, several Balkan states, Tunisia, Libya and even sought to send aid to Israel and the Palestinians. The aid shipments received praise from the World Health Organization as "exemplary." The WHO head Tedros Ghebreyesus joined Turkey's leader alongside those of other Central Asia countries including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan as well as Azerbaijan on Friday. The countries said they were cooperating in the battle against the virus. WHO CEO for Health Emergencies Mike Ryan was quoted by Turkish state media as claiming there was "no better country on the European continent, better prepared, to deal with natural disasters" than Turkey. Oddly the WHO also mentioned the millions of refugees, mostly Syrians, in Turkey at the moment and urged support for Turkey. It was unclear why Turkey had sent support abroad if the WHO was also asking for the international community to send support to Turkey for the refugees, the very same refugees Turkey could have sent support to rather than sending it abroad.

According to TRT Turkey has sent respirators to the Balkans, 500,000 test kits to the US, and hundreds of thousands of masks to various countries. Some of the countries that received medical equipment have fewer cases than Turkey. No explanation was given as to why Turkey sent test kits to the US but not to areas it occupies in northern Syria, much closer to home.

Turkey's health care diplomacy, at a time when its own population needs testing and areas it occupies in Syria are vulnerable, may have more to do with getting positive headlines. Its pro-government media runs numerous articles not about coronavirus in Turkey but about requests to Turkey for aid. *Daily Sabah* claims that Armenia and Israel asked Turkey for assistance. "UK thanks Turkey, praises support," said a headline at the same newspaper. Two of the top stories on Turkish government TRT are about Turkey receiving praise and sending support.

As Turkey now is providing face masks to the public and trying to quarantine

more than 135,000 people, according to Turkish media, it is unclear if the country can continue to provide aid to dozens of countries. It is also unclear if and when there will be questions about what will happen to the millions of refugees in Turkey and the Turkish-occupied areas of Syria amid the pandemic. The health care diplomacy may have been designed to make sure those areas get aid from the countries Turkey sent aid to, as a way to mobilize solidarity in the months to come as the pandemic continues. For now, Ankara must try to find a way to flatten its curve of infections or it will become the country with the largest number of cases in the Middle East. To avoid being portrayed as a center of the virus in the region Ankara may leak information about the real infection rates and the death toll in Iran. Back on February 21 Turkish media let it leak that there were 750 cases in Iran when Tehran claimed there were none, and Turkey sought to slow travel from Iran due to the outbreak. Iran does not appear to be on the list of countries Turkey sent aid to, despite Iran claiming it requires immediate aid and sanctions relief to fight the virus. Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif did reach out to his Turkish counterpart and express sympathy for Turkey, but so far little more than words have been exchanged. It is unclear why Turkey was able to send aid to faraway England, complete with quotes from the poet Rumi, and couldn't send across the border to Iran. The poetic line was: *After hopelessness, there is so much hope and after darkness, there is the much brighter sun*

This could call into question Iran's claims of being in desperate need of aid and if its talk of fighting coronavirus to get sanctions relief is just a way to get around sanctions.

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