

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Michael Pompeo
Secretary
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Steven Mnuchin
Secretary
U.S. Department of the Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20220

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Secretary Mnuchin,

The spread of coronavirus around the globe poses a severe threat to the United States and requires a comprehensive global response. We believe that one area that needs far more attention and action to contain and treat Coronavirus is within Iran, which has emerged as an epicenter of the virus globally and regionally. While the Iranian government's official statistics say that over 2,000 have died and 25,000 have been infected¹, it is likely that the virus has spread much further.

With neighboring countries ravaged by war, medical systems either in disarray and underfunded, and the constant migration of pilgrims and immigrant workers, the virus's further spread in the Middle East poses serious risk both to human health and life and to regional economic and political stability. These may in turn negatively impact the economic and security interests of the US and our allies. For instance, there are reports that the virus is spreading from Iran to Afghanistan², endangering our troops and mission in that country³. U.S. ally and longtime foe of Iran, the United Arab Emirates, has already recognized the potential negative impact of the Coronavirus crisis in Iran and has taken an active role in facilitating humanitarian aid shipments to Tehran.⁴

The Iranian government has made numerous errors in their handling of the crisis, including failing to act swiftly, provide the public accurate and timely information, and take sufficient quarantine measures. However, U.S. sanctions over time have also contributed to the deterioration of Iran's public health sector by limiting their ability to import medical devices and medicine manufactured in the West.

According to an [October 2019 Human Rights Watch report](#) before the outbreak of COVID-19, the United States 'maximum pressure' campaign had "drastically constrained the ability of Iranian entities to finance humanitarian imports, including vital medicines and medical

¹ Zaheena Rasheed, Umut Uras, and Usaid Siddiqui, Al-Jazeera, "Coronavirus updates", March 30, 2020,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/death-toll-york-state-passes-1000-live-updates-200329234257896.html>

² Fatima Faizi and David Zucchini, New York Times, "Fresh From Iran's Coronavirus Zone, Now Moving Across Afghanistan," March 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/world/asia/afghanistan-iran-coronavirus.html>

³ Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Julian E. Barnes, New York Times, "Coronavirus Disrupts Troop Withdrawal in Afghanistan," March 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/world/asia/coronavirus-withdrawal-afghanistan.html>

⁴ Al-Monitor, "UAE sends medical aid to Iran as coronavirus outbreak intensifies", March 17, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/uae-iran-medical-aid-coronavirus-outbreak.html>

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equipments.” With so many restrictions and sanctions to contend with, Iran’s medical industry has been limited in its ability to purchase equipment rapidly and adapt to changing circumstances on the ground in fighting the pandemic.

Additionally, by targeting an entire economy that supports more than 80 million people, U.S. sanctions make it harder for ordinary Iranians to obtain basic necessities like food and hygienic supplies essential to stemming the pandemic and that are basic to survival.⁶

We support the Treasury Department’s decision to exempt humanitarian trade involving the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) from sanctions, which partially reversed a deeply concerning move in September.⁷ This humanitarian trade exemption reflects an understanding that the spread of Coronavirus represents a shared threat and that U.S. sanctions were complicating efforts to get humanitarian supplies to the Iranian people. We also support the U.S. offer of direct aid to Iran to combat the spread of the virus.⁸

However, we are concerned by the decision to impose new sanctions against Iran on March 18.⁹ Such a decision is both callous and short-sighted in light of the seriousness of the public health crisis and the shared nature of the threat. On the same day, the United Kingdom joined other countries around the world in voicing support for sanctions relief.¹⁰

Rather than continue to invoke new sanctions in the Iranian people’s hour of need, we urge you to substantially suspend sanctions on Iran during this global public health emergency in a humanitarian gesture to the Iranian people to better enable them to fight the virus. Sanctions relief that should be considered are those that encompass major sectors of the Iranian economy, including those impacting civilian industries, Iran’s banking sector and exports of oil, and should last for at least as long as health experts believe the crisis will continue. Failure to do so risks inhibiting the delivery of key humanitarian goods and putting the Iranian people into further health and economic peril. We further urge you to work closely with domestic and international

⁵ Human Rights Watch, “Iran: Sanctions Threatening Health”, October 29, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/10/29/iran-sanctions-threatening-health>

⁶ Karen DeYoung, Erin Cunningham, and Souad Mekhennet, “‘I have lost hope for my life’: Iranians describe hardships as Trump expands sanctions”, Washington Post, June 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/i-have-lost-hope-for-my-life-iranians-describe-hardships-as-trump-expands-sanctions/2019/06/30/0f7d689a-9a86-11e9-8d0a-5edd7e2025b1_story.html

⁷ Tim Ahmann, Reuters, “U.S. grants sanctions waiver to ease humanitarian aid to Iran”, February 27, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-usa-humanitarian/us-grants-sanctions-waiver-to-ease-humanitarian-aid-to-iran-idUSKCN20L23W>

⁸ Michael Crowley and Lara Jakes, New York Times, “Trump’s ‘Disaster Diplomacy’ Has So Far Had Few Results”, March 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/26/us/politics/coronavirus-diplomacy-iran-korea.html>

⁹ U.S. Department of State, “Further Sanctions on Entities Trading in or Transporting Iranian Petrochemicals”, March 18, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/further-sanctions-on-entities-trading-in-or-transporting-iranian-petrochemicals/>

¹⁰ Patrick Wintour, The Guardian, “UK presses US to ease Iran sanctions to help fight coronavirus”, March 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/uk-presses-us-to-ease-iran-sanctions-to-help-fight-coronavirus>

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commercial and financial actors as well as partner governments in order to ensure that there is a practically accessible channel for the export of medical goods to Iran.

Additionally, we encourage the U.S. to find a way to deliver aid directly to the Iranian people to support the Iranian people's fight against Coronavirus, as many other nations have done. There is precedent for both of these steps, as the George W. Bush administration eased sanctions and delivered aid to Iran following a deadly earthquake near Bam in 2003¹¹.

We should also consider suspending sanctions in other countries facing outbreaks¹² to reduce human suffering.

Pandemics know no borders. Allowing this crisis to become more dire in Iran threatens significant harm not only to the people of Iran but also to people in the United States and around the world. Our many disputes with the government of Iran or others should not stand in the way of actions that can materially help innocent people weather a pandemic. Thank you for your consideration and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez
Member of Congress

Bernard Sanders
U.S. Senator

Edward J. Markey
U.S. Senator

Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress

Jared Huffman
Member of Congress

Joaquin Castro
Member of Congress

Ayanna Pressley
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

Elizabeth Warren
U.S. Senator

Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

¹¹ Negar, Mortazavi, Responsible Statecraft, "Bush and Obama eased sanctions on Iran during humanitarian crises, why isn't Trump?" March 13, 2020, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/03/13/bush-and-obama-eased-sanctions-on-iran-during-humanitarian-crises-why-isnt-trump/>

¹² Colum Lynch, Foreign Policy "U.N. Calls for Rolling Back Sanctions to Battle Pandemic", March 24, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/24/un-coronavirus-cuba-iran-venezuela-north-korea-zimbabwe-sanctions-pandemic/> ("The appeal reflects mounting concerns that sanctions regimes may be impeding efforts in Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe to battle the coronavirus, and enhancing the prospects of the pathogen's spread to other countries.")

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