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op-ed submission: Coronavirus doesn't stop Iran from fueling the fire of conflict

1 message

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To: Rob Shimshock <rshimshock@mrc.org>

Hi Rob,

How are you? I hope you're staying safe and healthy. I'm reaching out today to offer CNSNews.com the attached op-ed by Jesse Bogner (you can see some of his other writing [here](#)), who examines how the coronavirus is not stopping Iran from fueling conflict and undermining sanctions through its proxies. Specifically, he looks at Armenia's role in empowering Iran economically.

The full text is also included below, and Jesse's headshot is attached. Please let me know if CNSNews.com is interested in publishing this commentary, and thanks so much as always for your time and consideration!

Coronavirus doesn't stop Iran from fueling the fire of conflict

By Jesse Bogner

Governments are scrambling to mitigate not only the devastating health implications of coronavirus, but the hits to their images. A [new report from the State Department](#) describes the disinformation campaigns of nations such as Iran, which is [blaming U.S. sanctions](#) for its surge of COVID-19 deaths.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has lamented, "We had always said the sanctions are unjust, but coronavirus revealed this injustice to the world." Yet Iran's behavior in recent weeks tells a much different story. Not the virus, nor the sanctions stopped Iran from [harassing U.S. Navy vessels in the Persian Gulf](#). They also did not prevent the Iranian Defense Ministry from [showing off new drones that can reach Israel](#).

In another instance of Tehran's aggression that flew relatively under the radar, Iranian trucks recently [delivered fuel to Nagorno-Karabakh](#), the Armenian-occupied region which [several U.N. resolutions](#) affirm as part of Azerbaijan. Iran insists that it respects Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, claiming after the fuel delivery that the regime is fundamentally opposed to any move that would fuel conflict between the two neighboring countries of the Azerbaijan Republic and Armenia." In reality, the Iranians are only adding fuel to the fire of the decades-long conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, per their well-established modus operandi. Vardan Voskanyan, an Iranian studies expert at Yerevan University, [explained](#) that Armenia's occupation of Nagorno-Karabakh solves an Iranian national security dilemma by creating a buffer zone between Azerbaijan and northwestern Iran, which is home to the Islamic Republic's Azerbaijani minority.

Iran's move in Nagorno-Karabakh also exhibits how despite the closure of borders and businesses

worldwide — and the sanctions that Tehran claims are hampering its response to the virus — the economic doors between Iran and Armenia are wide open.

Although COVID-19 has taken a heavy toll on the Iranian people, it has not slowed the growth in commerce from Tehran to Yerevan which was ignited last October, when Iran secured official membership in the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) trade alliance. Rouhollah Latifi, a spokesperson for the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration, [said this month](#) that Armenia “imported over \$430 million worth of Iranian goods in the past Iranian calendar year [ending on March 19], to become the country’s second-[largest] export destination among the Eurasian Economic Union’s member states, after Russia.”

By joining the EAEU, Iran gained the ability to export goods to Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia with virtually no tariffs. The linchpin in that equation is Armenia, which is the only EAEU member state that maintains a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA) with the European Union. As such, Iran-Armenia trade is a [precursor to Iranian commerce throughout Europe](#) as well as a vehicle for circumventing sanctions.

In fact, Iran’s [history as a sanctions-buster](#) is well-documented. Armenian banks have a [track record](#) of enabling Tehran’s obfuscation of payments to and from foreign clients. In August 2019, America [imposed sanctions](#) on two Armenian companies over their business ties with Iran.

Meanwhile, Democratic U.S. lawmakers continue to push a pro-Armenian policy agenda that empowers Iran. Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) is [circulating a letter](#) which aims to prevent the Trump administration from cutting U.S. aid to Nagorno-Karabakh. Menendez, a longtime supporter of Armenia but simultaneously an outspoken voice against Iranian aggression, is consistently silent on the matter of how the Tehran-Yerevan relationship undermines the very Iran sanctions that the New Jersey senator has worked tirelessly to design and implement. The irony is not only tragic, but dangerous.

In signing a [letter](#) last September that called for “the immediate halt of military aid to Azerbaijan” over claims of “aggression against Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh,” Reps. Frank Pallone (D-N.J.), Jackie Speier (D-Calif.), and Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) also advocated a position that would have strengthened Iran. The funding targeted by their letter — \$58.6 million for Azerbaijan in fiscal year 2018 and \$42.9 million in fiscal year 2019 — fell under the Section 333 Building Partner Capacity program and pertained to maritime security as well as border capabilities, including the curbing of Iranian aggression at the Iran-Azerbaijan border.

From the Persian Gulf to Nagorno-Karabakh, Iran has laid bare its ambitions to perpetuate chaos and conflict. Israel — long the target of the Iranian-funded terrorism of Hamas and Hezbollah — knows this predicament all too well. Especially amid the unprecedented instability of the coronavirus era, it is incumbent upon the U.S., Israel, and Azerbaijan to work together as likeminded allies to counter both overt Iranian aggression and the more covert influence of Tehran’s enablers.

[Jesse Bogner](#) is an author and journalist. His memoir and social critique, [The Egotist](#), has been

translated into five languages. His work has been featured in The Daily Caller, MSN, and The Huffington Post.

Best,
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This material is distributed by Stellar Jay Communications on behalf of the Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan to the United States of America. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

2 attachments



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