



India Evacuates its Citizens from Iran

OE Watch Commentary: When COVID-19 hit Iran, Qom quickly became its initial epicenter. Close to Tehran, Qom is the site of pilgrimage to the Shrine of Fatima Masumeh, the second most sacred site inside Iran for Shi'ite Muslims after the tomb of Imam Reza in Mashhad. Beyond pilgrimage, however, Qom is a center for study, second only to Najaf in Iraq. Thousands of foreigners study in its religious seminaries.

The excerpted article from the *Mehr News Agency*, an outlet owned by the Islamic Ideology Dissemination Organization, details a meeting between India's ambassador to Iran and the governor of Qom as the two governments sought to evacuate the 1,200 Indian pilgrims and students stranded in Qom during Nowruz and after the coronavirus lockdown. In early March, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar reported 6,000 Indian nationals were in Iran, including 1,100 from Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir, and Maharashtra, 300 students from Jammu and Kashmir, and 1,000 fishermen from Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat. The article highlights the many special measures that authorities in Qom took for the safety of Indian citizens and notes that the Indian Ambassador "praised the management of the province in hosting and treating Indian citizens..."

India and Iran have always maintained close cultural links. Persian is an Indo-European language and was for centuries the lingua franca across the Indian subcontinent; it was the official language of the Mughal Empire until 1835, when the British Empire imposed English in its stead. It is closely related to Urdu, Punjabi, and Sindhi, and Persian loan words populate Hindi.

That so many Indian pilgrims and students were stranded in Qom highlights the depth of Indo-Iranian relations. India has not only the second-largest Muslim population in the world, but also the second greatest numbers of Shi'ites—perhaps 45 million in all—after Iran, which has 66 million out of a population of 81 million in total. Many Indian businessmen seek to leverage their cultural familiarity with Iran to trade, even against the backdrop of US unilateral sanctions. Indian diplomats repeatedly lobby to utilize the Iranian port of Chahabahr to offload and then truck goods into Afghanistan, thereby bypassing Pakistan. The exchanges go both ways: With many Iranians unable to study in the West, those who seek to study abroad often turn to Indian universities. In recent years, the Iranian navy has also made repeated calls in Indian ports.

That authorities in Qom painstakingly worked to shelter and provide care for Indian students and pilgrims at the height of the coronavirus crisis underscores just how important bilateral relations remain for Iran. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**



Indian pilgrims in Tehran demand evacuation against the backdrop of the Coronavirus pandemic.
Source: Idat.ir, <https://idat.ir/upload/attach/573/20200312-1840070.jpeg>

“The fight against this disease has not reached the final stage.”

Source: “Zarurat-e Tasrih dar Bazgardandan ba Ghimandeh-e Atbah Hindi dar Qom (The Necessity to Accelerate the Return of the Remaining Indians in Qom),” *Mehr News Agency*, 5 April 2020. <https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4893056>

Repatriation of Indian Pilgrims, Students in Qom

According to the *Mehr News Agency*, citing the governor of Qom, [Governor] Barham Sarmast, in a meeting held in Qom province with Gaddam Dharmendra, the ambassador of India in Iran, referring to the friendly relations between the two countries, said, “Iran and India have joint cooperation in various fields.” Referring to the discovery of the first cases of coronavirus in Qom, he said, “With the first signs of the disease, officials in Qom province devised special measures to protect the health of citizens as well as foreign nationals.” The governor of Qom, referring to maintaining health and providing equal health services to foreign nationals since the outbreak of the disease in Qom, added: “Despite the fact that governments prioritize their services, such a procedure did not take place in Qom and the Islamic Republic.” He noted the settlement of Indian citizens in 50 locations in Qom, and said, “With the spread of the disease, organizing Indian citizens in hotels for quarantine, and the treatment of Indian patients was on the agenda.” Sarmast stated, “A good reception was given to Indian citizens based on the host culture that comes from the Iranian-Islamic tradition, and even Iranian flights were used to send them to their country.” He noted that 802 Indians had been repatriated in five stages, but he stressed the need for the Indian government to speed up repatriation given the recovery period. In another part of his speech, the governor of Qom, referring to the control of corona in Qom, said: “Qom province is in the middle of the road and the fight against this disease has not reached the final stage yet...” The Indian Ambassador praised the management of the province in hosting and treating Indian citizens in Qom province and said: “We hope that with the end of this crisis, we will be able to renew relations with the Islamic Republic more strongly than before.”