



COVID-19 places Iran's nomadic pastoralists at a crossroads

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Nomadic pastoralists in Iran play an important role in national food security and sovereignty.¹ Since the arrival of COVID-19, they have been deeply concerned about the impact that the pandemic is likely to have on them. Their recently established national platform, the Union of Indigenous Nomadic Tribes of Iran (UNINOMAD),² is taking action. UNINOMAD outlined its members' concerns and proposed solutions in a letter sent to key national authorities on 10 March. We will outline the main points of the letter and reflect on what the overall situation might mean for nomadic pastoralism in Iran.

Historical context of the current crisis

Driven by desire for political control, access to natural resources and “modernization”, successive Iranian political regimes and governments since 1921 have attempted to sedentize the country's nomadic pastoralists – whether through war, land reform, forced sedentarization or various top-down programmes for natural resource management (see Fig. 1). The continued existence of nomadic pastoralists (currently a population of 1.2 million) bears testimony to their resilience. At the same time, it is important to recognize that every “natural” shock to pastoralist systems (droughts are common, for example) represents a nudge in the direction of the overall policy objective of sedentarization.

UNINOMAD's concerns about COVID-19 impacts

According to UNINOMAD, the nomadic way of life has protected them from the disease because they are relatively isolated. This could change with the arrival of spring, when the tribes begin their traditional seasonal migration. Due to urban sprawl and land grabbing, their migration routes bring them in contact with rural and urban populations.

They believe that the seasonal migration must be delayed to prevent the spread of the disease, but are concerned about several negative consequences that could ensue. Delayed seasonal migration could cause weight loss and illness in livestock due to rising temperatures in wintering grounds, as well as extra expenses for buying feed and water. Their delayed arrival at the summering grounds could leave these pastures vulnerable to encroachment by, and conflicts with, neighboring rural communities (a common occurrence).

Added to that, livestock markets (as well as restaurants, hotels, tourism activities and all gatherings) are either closed or not active due to social distancing regulations, implying that pastoralists' main opportunity for earning income (livestock sales from late May to August) is compromised. Furthermore, when markets do open again, they could be faced with excess supply, driving down prices. It should be noted that one of the government's key concerns is providing food at the lowest possible prices (including through imports) to feed citizens already under economic strain from years of sanctions.

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¹ They manage about 40% of the country's rangelands (35 million hectares), raise 23 million heads of livestock, and produce 190,000 tons of meat annually (equivalent to 25% of the country's red meat production, 6 million tons of various livestock, horticultural and dairy products (including 35,000 tons of milk), and 35% of the country's handicrafts (IRNA.ir <https://b2n.ir/535435>).

² The Union of Indigenous Nomadic Tribes of Iran is an organization that was established in April 2010 with the support of the NGO, CENESTA, by representatives of several tribal confederacies and independent tribes. After holding its last general assembly in 2018, it is currently undergoing its official registration process.

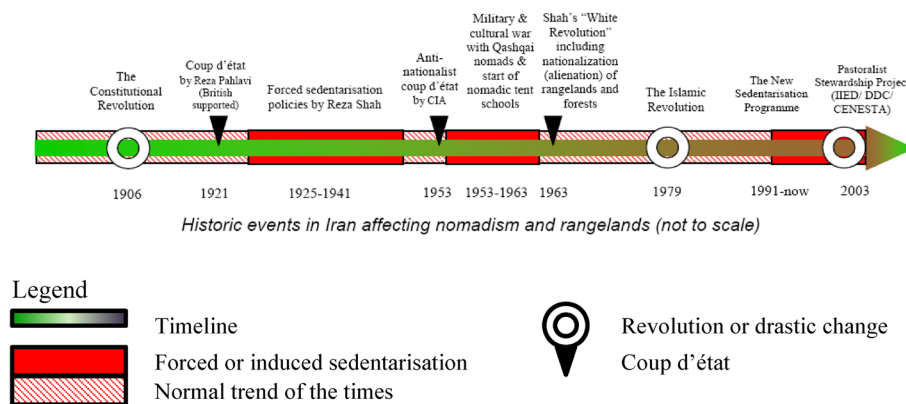


Fig. 1 Political and policy changes impacting nomadic tribes' governance of natural resources and ICCAs in the past century (Source: Naghizadeh, N., Abbas, D., and Farvar, T. 2012. In: Kothari, A. with Corrigan, C., Jonas, H., Neumann, A., and Shrumm, H. (eds). *Recognising and Supporting Territories and Areas Conserved By Indige-*

nous Peoples and Local Communities: Global Overview and National Case Studies. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Montreal, Canada. Technical Series No. 64. (https://www.academia.edu/30352893/RECOGNITION_AND_SUPPORT_OF_ICCAs_IN_IRAN)

Request for government support

In response to these challenges, UNINOMAD made the following proposals for government support:

1. Reduce livestock/meat imports from late May to August.
2. Implement direct cash purchasing of livestock at guaranteed prices.
3. Provide access to feed and water in winter pastures in case of delayed seasonal migration.
4. Cover the costs of transporting livestock by vehicle (rather than traditional migration by foot) to minimize pastoralists' exposure to urban and rural populations.
5. Pasture wardens (employed by the government and seen as ineffective) should be selected by the tribes themselves to protect pastures from encroachment in case of delayed transhumance.

If they do not receive the needed support, it is clear to them that the most vulnerable will risk losing their livestock and settling in villages and cities and working as unskilled labourers.

Implications

The UNINOMAD letter was picked up by authorities and social media to an extent that is unusual for a communication from a community-based organization. The letter, and the issues that it points to, were raised during several government coronavirus taskforce and coordination meetings.

The Organization for Nomadic Pastoralists Affairs is raising its key points in some of its communications.

Regardless of whether or not authorities actually take action on any of the proposals, the immediate impact of the pandemic and the letter is seen in UNINOMAD's self-perception. The letter was the most pro-active and strongest action the union has ever taken, suggesting that the crisis has strengthened pastoralists' sense of their essential role in society as food producers. Even the method of working together to write the letter was important: it was the first time they used mobile phone tele-conferencing technology to connect pastoralists from across the country. This may mean that in the future they will be able to be more reactive to issues as needed, rather than waiting for infrequent in person meetings.

This positive dynamic highlights a clear tension. Will this crisis be an opportunity for pastoralists to take advantage of their new union, highlight the benefits of local food production, and assert their rights like never before? Or will it – like so many crises in the past—weaken their resilient but strained production systems? As mentioned above, the national policy for the past 100 years has been to assimilate nomadic pastoralists into rural and urban populations. Any shock to the pastoral system accelerates this process. All the government has to do to achieve its policy objective is to let the crisis play out.

There is an irony in expecting governments to kick into action in an emergency to support people and production systems that they actively undermine in the best of times. This shows that COVID-19 is not impacting food systems in a vacuum, but is in fact a shock to an ongoing struggle for power and survival. Like many smallholder producers

worldwide who make a massive contribution to food security, pastoralists struggle against forces that seek to upend their way of life in favor of industrial food systems.

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