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## ***Iran admits to inadvertently shooting down Ukraine International Airlines jet, killing 176***

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) admitted in a televised statement Saturday morning that it had inadvertently shot down a Ukraine International Airlines jet shortly after its takeoff from Tehran International Airport last Wednesday, killing all 176 people on board.

The plane was felled by an IRGC missile just hours after Iranian forces carried out carefully calibrated, non-lethal missile strikes on two bases housing US troops in Iraq. The strikes were in retaliation for Washington's criminal January 3 assassination of Gen. Qassem Suleimani. The IRGC commander and nine others were killed by a US drone strike as they left Baghdad International Airport.

In explaining how Iranian forces had come to shoot down a passenger plane, the head of the IRGC's aerospace division, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, said they were at the "highest level of readiness" Wednesday morning in anticipation of an American counterstrike. An officer took the "bad decision" to fire on the plane after mistaking it for a cruise missile, said Hajizadeh, adding, "We were prepared for an all-out conflict."

A separate statement from the headquarters of the Iranian armed forces claimed that Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 had come "close to a sensitive IRGC military centre at an altitude and flight condition that resembled hostile targeting." The statement continued, "Under these circumstances, the aircraft was unintentionally hit, which unfortunately resulted in the death of many Iranian and foreign nationals."

The vast majority of those killed were either Iranian citizens or Iranian born, including 57 Iranian-Canadians and several dozen other Iranians who were studying in Canada.

The disaster took place in context of fears of an imminent US attack on Iran. US President Donald Trump, who personally ordered Suleimani's illegal assassination, had warned Iran that 52 targets, including cultural sites, would be attacked if Tehran retaliated. On Saturday, the *New York Times* reported that Trump and top US military commanders had agreed to take out an Iranian command-and-control ship in the Persian Gulf if Iran launched "revenge attacks" for Suleimani's death.

This, however, does not account for Tehran's disastrous decision not to ground commercial flights in and out of Tehran under conditions where it had just ordered missile strikes in neighbouring Iraq and was bracing for US retaliatory strikes; nor for the regime's rebuff for the better part of three days of all suggestions that an Iranian missile might have been responsible for the crash of Flight 752.

The regime's initial concealment of its responsibility for the disaster reflects its immense fear, even in the face of a potential war with the United States, of a social upheaval within the country. The Islamic republic is a Shia clergy-led bourgeois state, facing growing opposition from the working class to its austerity policies and the growth of social inequality. Less than two months ago, it brutally suppressed mass protests over an increase in gas prices.

These circumstances contributed to the shock, grief and outrage among ordinary Iranians over the plane crash and the government's role. One news report cited an Iranian woman as saying, "They were so careful not to kill any American in their revenge for Suleimani. But they did not close the airport? This shows how much this regime cares for Iranians."

On Saturday evening, anti-government protests reportedly involving hundreds of students were held at multiple Tehran university campuses. These were ultimately broken up by riot police. On Sunday and Monday, similar protests spread to other cities, including, according to Western media reports, Isfahan, Shiraz, Esfahan, Hamedan and Orumiye.

According to some reports, riot police were out in force on the streets of Tehran Sunday and tear gas was used on a crowd in Azadi Square, estimated by the government-aligned Fars New Agency at 1,000 people. The Associated Press said tear gas was fired sporadically in Tehran, but there was no "wholesale crackdown" on protesters.

Washington, its imperialist allies and the Western media are seeking to exploit the tragic fate of Flight 752 and the eruption of anti-government protests to divert attention from the

war crime that was Suleimani's assassination and American imperialism's escalating war preparations against Iran.

The Western media have given great prominence to the protests over the downing of the plane, circulating video-clips that feed into their right-wing narrative, including images of Iranians chanting, "They are lying that our enemy is America, our enemy is right here."

No such coverage was given to the millions in Iran and Iraq who took to the streets over the past 10 days to voice their opposition to Washington's assassination of Suleimani and plans to plunge the entire Middle East into a catastrophic war.

As always, the "humanitarianism" and moral outrage of the political representatives of imperialism and the Western press are highly selective. Trump, who heads a government that has refused for over 30 years to pay compensation to Iran for the US Navy's downing of Iran Air Flight 655 in 1988, which killed all 290 people on board, has demagogically posed as a friend of the protesters.

In tweets posted in English and Farsi, he wrote, "To the brave, long-suffering people of Iran: I've stood with you since the beginning of my Presidency, and my Administration will continue to stand with you. There can not be another massacre of peaceful protesters, nor an internet shutdown. The world is watching."

On Sunday's US political talk shows, National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien and Defense Secretary Mark Esper shed crocodile tears for the people killed in the downing of Flight 752 and postured as supporters of the Iranian people's democratic aspirations.

All of this is preposterous. Trump heads a government that, under successive Democratic and Republican presidents, is responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Iranians due to crippling economic sanctions Washington has imposed on the country. The sanctions, illegal under international law and tantamount to war, have prevented critical health supplies from reaching the country, denied Iran access to the world market, and plunged millions into poverty as the country's currency has collapsed.

Washington's campaign of economic warfare has further exacerbated class tensions in Iran, which were already sharpening due to the bourgeois-clerical regime's rolling back of virtually all of the gains of the 1979 revolution, which toppled the bloody US-backed dictatorship of the Shah.

The goal of Washington and its imperialist allies is to restore a semi-colonial regime in Tehran akin to that of the Shah, which will facilitate their plundering of Iran's energy

resources and preside over the further impoverishment of the Iranian population. As it seeks to gain control over the energy-rich and geostrategically vital Middle East, the US ruling elite cannot countenance the existence of an Iranian regime that aspires to pursue its own regional interests, let alone the growing influence enjoyed by much larger rivals like Russia and China.

Trump's campaign of "maximum pressure" on the country and preparations for all-out war show no signs of let-up. On Friday, Trump unveiled a further round of sanctions against Iran, and more US troops and military assets are being deployed to the region.

Iranian government officials pointed to some of these political realities in their comments following their admission that an IRGC missile had shot down Flight 752. After acknowledging Iran's responsibility for downing the plane, President Hassan Rouhani blamed "threats and bullying" from the US for the incident. Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted that "human error at time of crisis caused by US adventurism led to disaster."

Iran has promised full cooperation with an international investigation into the felling of the Ukrainian Airlines flight. Ukrainian flight crash experts are already in Tehran to review the two black boxes recovered from the crash site.

However, just as the imperialist powers and their media outlets are seeking to leverage the grief and anger over the duplicity and negligence of the Iranian authorities, they will undoubtedly seek to exploit the investigation, including complaints that Tehran is failing to be forthcoming about the workings of its air defence system and operating procedures, to ratchet up pressure on Tehran.

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