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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 Jan. 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.

There are conflicting reports on whether the plane had turned back toward Tehran due to a technical problem or was flying its normal route when it was struck. Should it turn out that the plane had sought to return to the airport, this could further explain why the IRGC believed it to be an incoming attack missile.

The fear of a devastating US assault was well grounded. 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.

These circumstances have contributed to shock, dismay, grief and outrage among ordinary Iranians. 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. Yesterday, 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 yesterday, 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. This is part of their decades-long efforts to demonize Iran's clerical-led bourgeois nationalist regime.

The Western media have given great prominence to the protests over the downing of the plane, which to date have remained comparatively small, 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—those who are leading the planning for an all-out war on the Iranian people—cynically 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.

US imperialism bears chief responsibility for the destabilisation of the entire Middle East region, which has experienced one savage US-led and fomented war after

another over the past two decades. Taken together, the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria have claimed the lives of millions and forced millions more to flee their homes.

Washington's plotting for war with Iran, including the tightening of its military alliance with the Saudi monarchy, the Gulf sheikdoms and Israel, as well as its support for Riyadh's war on Yemen, which has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of innocent civilians, have brought the entire region to the brink of military conflict—one that could rapidly draw in the major powers and be fought with nuclear weapons.

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, getting to the bottom of what precisely led to the shooting down of the plane is a highly sensitive issue, given that it is closely bound up with the workings of Iran's air defence system. For understandable reasons, the regime in Tehran will be less than enthusiastic about turning over such information to the United States and its allies under conditions where 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.

Just as the imperialist powers and their corporate media outlets are seeking to leverage the grief and anger over the 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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