



Iranian Lives and American Spare Parts

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On December 6, 2005, an Iranian military plane, a US-made C-130 Hercules (Lockheed Martin), crashed minutes after it had made a delayed take off from the Mehrabad Airport in Tehran. The plane was carrying 94 passengers, 68 of whom were reporters and photographers, many working for the state-run radio and TV stations. All passengers died, including an additional 12 or more on the ground (mostly women and children) when the plane, on its way back to the airport for an emergency landing, hit a military-residential high-rise in the Touheed district in southern Tehran. The plane was on an unscheduled flight to the southeastern Chahbahar Port, on the coast of the Persian Gulf. The civilian reporters and photographers were being sent to cover planned military exercises around the port. C-130, while multipurpose, is primarily intended for military use (transport and cargo).

This was the fifth C-130 owned by Iran to crash in the post-revolution period that began in 1979. The first C-130 crashed during the Iran-Iraq war in 1983, killing 130 passengers, including several high-ranking military, media, and religious personalities. Three more crashed, largely during military missions, in 1994, 2000, and 2003. The Carter Administration used several C-130 in 1980 in an attempt to rescue American hostages in Tehran. The planes were caught in sand storm and crashed in southeastern town of Tabas, Iran. The Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi regime had purchased 50 of the C-130 planes from the US long before the revolution. Fifteen still remain in use in Iran, many owned by the Revolutionary Guard Corps, and most are believed to be unsafe. Many of the planes of the same type and age have been taken out of service in many countries.

Since the revolution, Iran has had more than 250 civilian and military air incidents, of which 70 or so alone have led to the death of over 1,000 people. In addition, Iran has experienced another 170 or so air accidents that involved no human toll but significant economic losses. This is an unacceptably high rate, particularly for a country as rich as Iran. In the Middle East, only Egypt has a poorer record. These tragedies include five accidents that have been recorded among the world's "100 worst civil aviation disasters" since 1980s. The two notable cases are the A-300 Airbus that was shot down by the American Marines in the Persian Gulf, killing 290 civilians, and the Russian Ilyushin 76, which crashed in the southeast of the country, killing 276 Revolutionary Guard Corps. These accidents have involved planes made by the US, Russia and Europe.

Each of these air tragedies has had its own specific causes. However, most plane crashes in the post-revolution Iran have been caused by mechanical problems. This has been particularly the case with the US-made planes, including Boeing Jets and C-130 planes, arguably the safest aircrafts available. The C-130 crash this week is said to have been caused by "engine trouble." In contrast, most Russian-made planes have smashed into mountains in bad weathers (an



Ilyushin and several Tupolevs). Iran Air flies international routes with 7 Boeing Jets, 16 Airbuses, and several Russian-made planes. The fact is a good number of the planes in the Iranian air fleets, military and civilian, are too old, poorly maintained due to lack of spare parts, and are thus unsafe. Among them, the US-made planes are the oldest and the least safe.

The American sanctions have prevented the Iranian Government from buying American-made planes and spare parts and prevent the planes from being serviced by qualified technicians. The black market has not been helpful and the Government has often been forced to use parts from a plane considered “unusable” to patch up another plane considered “repairable.” As one Tehrani who lost a brother in the latest tragedy put it, the repaired plane is then let fly while the crew “pray to God for a safe landing.” The US sanctions have, in recent years, also blocked Iran from purchasing planes made elsewhere, particularly in Europe and Japan, where planes (including European Airbuses) are made with certain percentage of American components or US capital investments. Kept out of these markets, Iran has purchased many unsafe Russian planes.

The scope of the tragic Iranian air safety situation becomes even more telling when one considers the fact that Iranian territory and population size are large, the highway system is undeveloped, train lines are limited, and there is no internal water transport. Iran also has an overland-transport-unfriendly geography that makes air transportation a necessity. Caught in the middle of the sensational feuding between Iran and the US for over a quarter century, most Iranians, who must move fast across the country and travel to international destinations, and their number is exponentially increasing, have little to no options to avoid the obsolete Iranian planes. This is particularly tragic when one considers the fact that the Iranian Government and its private cronies control the civilian and military aviations in the country (domestic and international routes).

Who should we blame for the dismal state of the Iranian air safety? The Iranian Government and its supporters point finger to the US, and the American Government and the opposition to the regime in Tehran blame the Iranian Government. The first in the line of responsibility is of course the Iranian Government, who is directly obliged to safeguard its citizens. The Islamic Government’s anti-American pronouncements and actions since the revolution leaves little room for policy options that could help normalize US-Iran relations. The Islamic Republic is the only state in the world today that has no sustained and meaningful dialogue with the US. More significantly, it is the only state that endorses scandalous slogans like “Down to America.” Given this attitude, it is hypocritical of Tehran to blame the US for the unsafe Iranian planes.

Nonetheless, the US Government must also accept responsibility for the unsafe American-made Iranian civilian planes. True, the US Government is not responsible for the safety of the Iranian citizens, but international aviation norms make human safety, particularly the well-being of innocent civilians, including the elderly, women, and children, regardless of citizenship, a top priority of all Governments. The American sanctions on spare parts for the American-made Iranian planes are not justifiable from a moral standpoint. Nor is the policy to prevent Iran to buy such spare parts a reasonable business practice. The policy is also unacceptable in the context of



the frameworks that regulate international aviation transactions and safety standards. More significantly, the policy undercuts American public diplomacy toward the Iranian people.

I believe that those against normalization of relations between the two countries are also responsible for the unsafe Iranian civilian planes. They include legal and exile opposition groups and personalities. They justify their opposition in terms of struggle for democracy and human rights, and argue that normalization will further empower the repressive regime. In other words, under normal relations, the US promotes repression while in the absence of normal relations the US promotes democracy and human rights! Not only this is an anti-American argument, it is also utterly wrong and a total misreading of the historical experience with democratic developments throughout the world. Besides, the argument is downright irresponsible as it disregards the present public safety and well-being for future goals that may not be attained, certainly not in the absence of normal relations between the US and Iran.

Yet, fingering blame at this or that player will not remedy the situation. We must look for an urgent solution. President George W. Bush has said that he is on the side of the Iranian people. Here is a test case, Mr. President! Deal with the Iranian Government in whichever way you deem necessary, but please do not make the Iranian people pay for your anti-regime policy. Blocking sales of civilian planes and spare parts is neither good public diplomacy nor humane foreign policy. It is equally unacceptable to make the sale of spare-parts part of an incentive package in the nuclear negotiations with Iran. That incentive approach sends a terrible message to the Iranian people: we provide for your safety only if your Government compromises on its nuclear programs! Otherwise, you the people of Iran have to pay with your life for your Government's refusal!

Mr. President, the Iranian people deserve a better deal and here is why they do. They are among a few peoples in the Greater Middle East (GME) who are not, generally speaking, anti-American. They are among a few peoples in GME who are moving away from radical Islam toward political reforms. They are among a few peoples in GME who condemn terrorism and are its victim as well. They are among a few peoples in GME who want to live in peace and have been a victim of war. They are among a few peoples in GME who oppose nuclear technology for military use and want a nuclear-free region. They are among a few peoples in GME who fight for democracy and against the abuses of human rights. In short, Mr. President, they are among a few peoples in GME who are your allies on the most serious concerns you have raised regarding the region.

Mr. President, please do not listen to those who equate Iranian lives with spare airplane parts, as in the case of the EU-incentive package for Iran that is part of the nuclear negotiations. Please do not listen to those who tell you selling spare parts to Iran will promote terrorism and lead Iran to building nuclear bombs. Please do not listen to those who tell you selling spare parts to Iran will increase state repression and abuse of human rights. Please do not listen to those tell you selling spare parts to Iran will block democratic movements and promote Islamic radicalism. Please do not listen to those who tell you selling spare parts to Iran will prolong the life of the Islamic



regime. Please do not listen to those who tell you selling spare parts to Iran will lead to more regional instability. Mr. President, none of this will happen!

Instead, Mr. President, in my humble opinion, you should listen to the voice of the many millions of the innocent Iranian people, whose safety is being increasingly compromised. They want the spare parts, and if you do not help provide them, they are unlikely to rise up and overthrow the regime in Tehran. Instead, they will doubt your sincerity when you say you are on their side and wish them safety and well-being. Mr. President, it is their lives that are on line, not those of the Iranian officials! Mr. President, it is time that you again make a humanitarian gesture toward the Iranian people as you kindly did during the tragic earthquake that destroyed Bam in southern Iran. As in that case, you will make both the Iranian people and their fellow one-million strong expatriate Iranian-Americans indebted to your goodwill. Be assured, Mr. President, that your favor will be returned when the time comes!

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