



PERSPECTIVES

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Could Chernobyl Syndrome Take Hold in Iran?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The display of fundamental incompetence, followed by denial and a cover-up, that accompanied the recent shooting down of a Ukrainian passenger airliner by Iran are reminiscent of the Soviet Union's reaction to the explosion and fire at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in 1986—a response that marked the beginning of the end of the USSR. The Tehran regime's combination of ineptness and self-protective lying similarly triggered an unprecedented voicing of criticism by Iranian citizens, suggesting that popular rage is overcoming fear of regime violence and repression.

On January 8, Iranian forces shot down a Ukrainian passenger airliner shortly after it departed Tehran, leaving no survivors. The plane was carrying 176 passengers bound for Kiev. Many of those killed were Iranian nationals living abroad, including over 60 from Canada who had come to visit family during the winter break.

The tragedy was caused when a trigger-happy Iranian anti-aircraft crew fired two Russian-made missiles at what they later claimed to have mistaken for a US cruise missile. This happened a few hours after Iran had conducted a missile attack on an Iraqi base housing US troops. That strike was in retaliation for the targeted killing by the US of Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani.

Tehran's initial reaction to the downing of the plane was a flat denial of responsibility, despite obvious indications otherwise. It was only after four days and an overwhelming accumulation of evidence, including a video showing the missiles' impact, that the regime finally changed its tune and began to release a trickle of details. But officials continued to reject any independent investigation of the decisions that led up to the disaster, including their failure to close the airport. And when FM Javad Zarif, who is responsible for marketing the Islamic

Republic to outsiders, finally acknowledged the truth, it was threaded with the usual propaganda lines and deflection of blame: “Human error at time of crisis caused by US adventurism led to disaster.”

If this combination of lies and denial sounds familiar, that is because the same elements were central to the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor fire in 1986, recently depicted in a five-part television series. In that case too, evidence slowly trickled out and the Kremlin’s attempt at a cover-up unraveled. The regime’s criminal incompetence was thus suddenly revealed in a manner that even its strongest defenders could no longer ignore. Five years later, the Soviet regime and empire, with its stranglehold on close to 300 million citizens, had unraveled too.

History rarely repeats itself, and a Chernobyl-type result in Iran—meaning a revolution, an overthrow, or a replacement of the regime—is admittedly a long shot. But the habits of incompetence, lying, and imposing codes of silence are deeply ingrained in Tehran, just as they were in Moscow.

Even after the Iranian government admitted that it had launched ground-to-air missiles at the slow-moving Ukrainian civilian airliner, officials continued to put out false claims that revealed still more incompetence. Apparently, one military official had proposed closing the airport on the grounds that such an incident was possible in view of the heightened tensions with the US. He was either ignored (according to one version) or the communication links with the authorities able to take this action were down (according to another). The Iranian cover-up also included measures to prevent independent investigations from determining the true sequence of events, establishing responsibility, and correcting the mistakes.

In the wake of this tragedy, most airlines canceled flights to Iran pending the implementation of measures to prevent another such incident, leaving the airspace over the country largely empty. Iran thus found itself abruptly isolated from most of the rest of the world.

To bring back airlines and passengers, Iran needs to behave responsibly. But instead of following the standard procedure of immediately sealing off the area of the crash and ensuring that all evidence is left undisturbed until qualified international investigators arrive, officials ordered the area cleared of all debris, including the remnants of the missiles that had brought down the plane. In an effort to undo some of the damage this caused, Iran announced that it would turn over the plane’s “black boxes”—which contain recorded data from the plane’s last moments just before and during impact—to Ukraine and France. But the regime reversed itself a week later, adding to the confusion and worsening the image of incompetence.

These decisions and actions roiled popular anger, which was still simmering after the regime's violent crackdown on earlier protests. Thousands of Iranians, led by university students in Tehran, took part in noisy demonstrations openly mocking and challenging the regime. They can be seen courageously and defiantly denouncing the "shamelessness" of their leaders, including Ali Khamenei, while chanting that it is Iran's leaders who are the enemy, not the US. They also denounced the man who had been the subject of so much official public adulation in recent days by chanting: "Soleimani was a killer." Many Iranian newspapers printed headlines highlighting the word "shame."

In another sign of incompetence and paranoia (which often go together), Iran detained the British ambassador, who had gone to Tehran University to participate in a memorial vigil for the victims of the crash. He had made a point of leaving when the political chanting against the regime began, but that didn't stop the authorities from hauling him in.

Even more than the Soviet citizens of the 1980s, Iranians are not willing to accept widespread international isolation and ridicule as the price for permanent revolution.

It is far from clear whether these events are enough to finally trigger full-blown rebellion and internal regime change in Iran. There are important differences when compared to Chernobyl, primarily that of magnitude: the calamity of the nuclear disaster and cover-up were on a much greater scale than the downing of Ukrainian Air Flight 752. And Iran appears, at least from the outside, to be more resilient than Gorbachev's teetering empire was in the late 1980s.

But for the people of Iran, and for everyone else in the region, the scenario provides hope.

This Perspective is based on an [article](#) that appeared in the Washington Examiner on January 22, 2020.

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