

President Trump's sanctions bring fear and misery for Iran's air travelers, aviation industry

Kim Hjelmgaard | USA TODAY
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In this photo provided by Tasnim News Agency, family members of a plane crash victims weep in the village of Bideh, at the area that the plane crashed, southern Iran, Sunday, Feb. 18, 2018. An Iranian commercial plane crashed Sunday in a foggy, mountainous region of southern Iran, and officials said they feared all people aboard were killed.

Ali Khodaei, Tasnim News Agency, via AP

Houshang Shahbazi saved the lives of more than 100 passengers and crew in 2012 when he successfully landed a 747 commercial airplane with a disabled wheel carriage.

As emergency workers at Tehran's international airport prepared for the worst, Shahbazi delicately brought an Iran Air flight to a halt using only landing gear under the wings.

Remember Captain Chesley Sullenberger? The U.S. Airways hero pilot of flight 1549 who against the odds and while the whole world was watching safely landed in the Hudson River in 2009 after his plane collided with birds, causing both engines to fail?

Well, Shahbazi is Iran's Sullenberger.

But while Shahbazi's flying skills are rightly celebrated, even heroes know their limits.

Iran's isolation from the world has left it with one of the oldest civil-aviation fleets in the world and facilitated a fatal trend in its aviation-safety record that experts say is likely to continue amid President Donald Trump's renewal of economic sanctions on Tehran.

Western manufacturers, under the sanctions, are strictly prohibited from selling planes and even crucial

spare parts to Iran. The sanctions started again in August and were re-imposed in full on Nov. 5. with a new clampdown on Iran's central banks and the nation's ability to export oil, a vital industry, after Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal.

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This worries Shahbazi, 62, who said he was forced into early retirement by Iranian authorities for repeatedly portraying Iran's commercial airlines as unsafe.

"We are flying planes with 60-year-old technology and these planes are technically worn out," he said. "U.S. sanctions have led to many crashes, and deaths."

"Treasury's imposition of unprecedented financial pressure on Iran should make clear to the Iranian regime that they will face mounting financial isolation and economic stagnation until they fundamentally change their destabilizing behavior," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement last week as the U.S. government sanctioned 50 Iranian banks and several hundred individuals and vessels in Iran's energy and shipping sector as well as an Iranian airline and its 65 aircraft.

According to Air Fleets, an aviation website, the average age of an Iranian commercial plane is 20.8 years. But many are closer to 30. One plane, a Boeing 747 flown by Caspian Airlines, which operates routes between Tehran and Middle Eastern hubs, is nearly 45. The average age of aircraft operated by major U.S. airlines is about 11 years.

While the United States and Russia account for the highest total number of fatal civilian airliner accidents from 1945 until the present day — 830 and 520, respectively, with a combined death toll of 19,136, according to the Aviation Safety Network, an industry database — decades of international sanctions have starved Iran of equipment and expertise and also contributed to an unusually high passenger death rate.



Iranian pilot Houshang Shahbazi.
Houshang Shahbazi

In fact, Iran's 20-year average is 1.89 deaths per 1 million passenger journeys, according to an analysis by Iran-focused website Bourse & Bazaar. The average over the same period for the rest of the world is 0.34 deaths per 1 million passenger journeys. By this measure, flying in Iran is 5.5 times more deadly than the world average.

When the nuclear deal was signed under former President Barack Obama, Iran quickly inked agreements with major aircraft manufacturers such as Boeing and Airbus. By the time Trump pulled the U.S. out of the deal two years later, Boeing had not delivered any of its aircraft to Iran. Airbus delivered three out of 98 ordered.

"It's not commonly discussed but when Iranian flights take off they fly mechanics with them in case anything goes wrong," said Addison Schonland, a partner at airline consulting firm AirInsight Group. "However, because the data aren't that great it's hard to determine how directly the sanctions are responsible for Iran's crash record, but there's no doubt that they are a contributing factor," he added.

Schonland noted that while older planes are not inherently unsafe, they "are like older people, they need more health care. So parts are critical to acquire."

The "sad state" of Iran's aviation industry is pretty clear, said Trita Parsi, the founder of the Washington-based National Iranian American Council, which advocates for greater understanding between the Iranian and American people.

"In Iran, people routinely talk about which airlines to avoid," he said.

Of the five major fatal planes crashes in 2018, one has been in Iran. Sixty-six people were killed in February after an Aseman Airlines plane crashed an hour outside Tehran.

One of those who died was Majid Eslami, 40, the plane's flight engineer.

His wife, Fatemeh, 37, blames the Trump administration for his death and described the U.S. sanctions on Iran's aviation industry as her husband's ultimate "murderer."

Yet for Washington, the Iranians have only themselves to blame.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has accused Iran of spending billions of dollars across the Middle East to gain influence, support terrorism and destabilize governments.

The State Department wants countries around the world to cut purchases from Iran's lucrative oil industry to zero to pressure Iran's economy and limit its ability to fund its nuclear weapons program, although it gave sanctions waivers to eight large customers of Iranian oil such as South Korea and India. Tehran may also continue to sell oil to China, Russia and other nations through back-door channels. Oil analysts believe Iran will likely be able to sell about one million barrels of oil a day, about half of what it was selling last year, but enough to allow its economy to tread water.

"It's a complete fantasy to think that Iran's oil exports will be brought down to zero," one senior Iranian diplomat based in Europe told USA TODAY.

Meanwhile, the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, has repeatedly certified that Iran is fully complying with the terms of the nuclear accord by freezing parts of its nuclear enrichment program. And human rights organizations say the sanctions are preventing Iranians from accessing essential medicine and food despite Washington's insistence the sanction's don't target these.

Still, Pompeo says that the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran — exiting the nuclear accord, reimposing sanctions — is designed to choke off funds that Iran's regime is using to fuel violence and destructive activity in Afghanistan, Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen.

"Instead of using what wealth the (nuclear deal) has generated to boost the material well-being of the Iranian people, the regime has parasitically consumed it and shelled out billions in subsidies for dictators, terrorists and rogue militias," Pompeo wrote in an essay for the November/December issue of Foreign Affairs magazine. "Iranians are understandably frustrated. The rial's value has collapsed in the past year. A third of Iranian youth are unemployed. Unpaid wages are leading to rampant strikes."

Pompeo has also accused Iran of assassination attempts against dissidents in Finland and France and backed an allegation from Danish security services that Tehran was plotting an assault in the Scandinavian nation. Iran says it has not seen the evidence. It also points out that Denmark received its intelligence about the alleged plot from Israel, a longstanding enemy of Iran that strongly opposes the nuclear deal.

"Foreign adventurism is holding Iran back, there's no question about that," said Nicholas Hopton, who until this past April was Britain's Ambassador to Iran.

"But sanctions work when they're coupled with engagement," he added.

And for the time being, whatever engagement Iran is getting is not from Washington, but Europe, where governments and policymakers have scrambled to devise a way of keeping the nuclear deal alive by sidestepping Washington and ensuring that economic ties and banking connections to Iran remain in place despite U.S. sanctions.

One idea from the Europeans is a "special purpose vehicle" that would enable trade with Iran to continue through a Europe-based financial intermediary. It would use euros rather than dollars and wouldn't permit U.S. authorities to scrutinize Iran's transactions.

"The United States is exercising its economic power beyond the normal acceptable limits," Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif told USA TODAY in an exclusive interview. "The special purpose vehicle is one measure specifically designed as the first step to deal with Iran's situation, but it's ultimate objective, as we've heard from the Europeans, is not simply to insulate trade between Iran and Europe, or between Iran and its third-party partners, but in fact (for Europe) to insulate themselves from the pressure it faces from the United States," he added.

Bruno Le Maire, France's economy minister, told the Financial Times in an interview that "Europe refuses to allow the U.S. to be the trade policeman of the world." He said that the goal of the financial channel

being opened to Iran was part of a broader push to ensure Europe maintains its "economic sovereignty" from Washington.

However, the idea risks drawing the Trump administration's wrath.

"Iran's been a much different country" after he withdrew the U.S. "from the horrible, one-sided Iran nuclear deal," Trump said at a midterm elections campaign rally Sunday in Georgia. "When I came in it was just a question of how long would it take them to take over the whole Middle East," he added.

And last month, U.S. National Security Advisor John Bolton said: "We do not intend to allow our sanctions to be evaded by Europe or anybody else."

Europe's efforts won't immediately help Iran's flyers, either.

Shahbazi, Iran's hero pilot, said he knows scores of frequent travelers in Iran who do everything in their power to avoid stepping onto one of Iran's commercial aircraft.

"Everybody knows the risks Iranians face in the air," he said. "And everybody's scared."

In July, USA TODAY reporter Kim Hjelmgaard was given rare access to travel to Iran. You can read and view stories, photos and video from his trip.

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