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From the Ukrainian Airplane to the Coronavirus: The Crisis of Public Confidence in the Iranian Regime

Raz Zimmt

The failed attempts by the Iranian authorities to hide information from the public regarding the downing of the Ukrainian airplane by the Revolutionary Guards (January 2020) and the outbreak of the coronavirus (February 2020) have caused further significant damage to Iranian public confidence in Islamic Republic institutions. The erosion of public confidence, already evident in Iran in recent years, was likewise reflected in the unprecedentedly low voter turnout in the parliamentary elections in late February. The intensifying crisis of confidence has posed an ongoing challenge to the Iranian regime, even though it does not spell a significant immediate threat. However, despite the main weaknesses of the protest movement in Iran, the continued loss of public confidence may undermine the foundation of the regime's legitimacy over time, particularly if there is a further deterioration of the economic crisis or following the departure of the current Supreme Leader.

The downing of the Ukrainian airplane by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) and particularly the failed conduct of the Iranian regime regarding the incident in January 2020 aroused public anger toward the regime. The IRGC admission that they were responsible for shooting down the passenger plane brought thousands of angry citizens to the streets in protest against senior officials who for three days tried to cover up the details of the affair. Iranian citizens demanded to know why the authorities refused to close Iranian air space when they knew that the country might sustain a military response due to the attack on the American military base in Iraq on the night the plane was shot down, and why they tried to hide the truth from the public regarding those responsible for the incident.

A January 11, 2020 piece on the Asr-e Iran news website discussed the damage to public confidence caused by the authorities, writing that while the Ukrainian plane was hit by just one missile, the public's confidence had suffered an attack of thousands of missiles. In tandem, in his Twitter account, political commentator and regime critic Sadeq Zibakalam compared the behavior of the Iranian regime to the behavior of the United States after the Iran Air incident, in which a plane was accidentally shot down by the US fleet in the

Persian Gulf in July 1988. He claimed that while Washington took responsibility for the incident, the Iranian authorities lied for three months and spread conspiracy theories. The damage to the Islamic Republic was reflected in the frequent recourse by many Iran social media users to the term “Iranian Chernobyl” following the downing of the plane. Many wondered whether, much like the Chernobyl tragedy, the Ukrainian airplane incident was a harbinger of the decline of the Islamic Republic.

In mid-February 2020, a few weeks after the Ukrainian airliner was shot down, public confidence in the Iranian regime suffered another serious blow following the outbreak of the coronavirus, which within a few days spread from the city of Qom, a Shiite pilgrimage site, to most parts of the country. The regime’s handling of the outbreak of the virus, which has so far claimed the lives of hundreds of Iranians, again exposed a series of failures and attempted cover-ups that further embittered the public and aroused piercing public criticism. For instance, the airline Mahan Air, which is owned by the Revolutionary Guards, continued to fly to and from China even after the outbreak of the disease, and even after the Iranian authorities declared in early February a halt to flights between the countries. Thus, for many days, the authorities avoided taking preventive measures that could have halted the spread of the disease, such as imposing a quarantine protocol, closing educational, cultural, and sport institutions, and limiting mass gatherings, particularly in Qom, a focal source of the disease.

Even after the authorities were forced to acknowledge the outbreak of the disease and begin issuing data about the number of victims, the official reports were met with distrust. The confusion and panic in the public increased from the time that foreign media, social networks, and even local officials, including a lawmaker from Qom, claimed that the numbers of infected and dead people were many times higher than what the government made public. The Iranian news website Alef described the crisis of confidence between the public and the authorities as “much more serious than the corona,” and said that the situation was exploited by foreign media outlets acting in the service of Iran’s enemies. An article published on March 1 wrote that when the authorities hid information from the public for three days after the Ukrainian airliner was shot down, and did not provide data for three months regarding the number of people killed in the gasoline riots in November 2019, it is natural that the citizens do not believe Ministry of Health data and rely on foreign networks.

The deterioration of public trust toward the authorities was evident in the low voter turnout in the February 21 parliamentary elections in Iran. Despite calls by senior regime officials led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to the Iranian public to go out and vote, voter turnout was only about 42 percent—the lowest it has been since the Islamic Revolution. In the large cities, particularly in Tehran, voter turnout was even lower. The

sweeping disqualification of 50 percent of the candidates by the Guardian Council of the Constitution contributed to public apathy, but the low voter turnout also reflected increasing despair among the public toward the regime and the political system.

This trend does not reflect a new phenomenon. The calls heard during the protest demonstrations in Iran over the past two years, along the lines of “conservatives, reformists, the story is over for all of you,” attest to the loss of public confidence in the main political camps. Since the gasoline riots, commentators, intellectuals, and leading Iranian academics have warned about the worsening frustration, despair, and erosion of public confidence in the authorities. Following the elections, reformist sociologist Abbas Abadi discussed recent public opinion surveys indicating that most citizens who had not participated in the elections were young, educated, urban, and hold higher economic and employment levels, and are also considered as having greater social influence. He argued that the main reason for the low voter turnout was not only the disqualification of the candidates or the failures of the government, but also public despair regarding the future and a lack of confidence in the political institutions.

The lack of public confidence was also due to the authorities' incompetence in face of the worsening economic crisis and natural disasters that have hit Iran in recent years, for example floods and earthquakes. Following the strong earthquake that hit western Iran in November 2017, claiming the lives of hundreds of people, many citizens were forced to appeal to non-governmental organizations for help due to the powerlessness of the government in dealing with the earthquake victims. Many citizens also preferred donating money to the victims through private bank accounts that were opened for instance by soccer star and former national team coach Ali Daei and reformist Sadeq Zibakalam, for fear that the money sent through governmental institutions such as the Red Crescent would not reach their targets. This concern increased following some corruption and embezzlement scandals that were exposed in recent years at a number of governmental organizations in Iran.

The worsening crisis of confidence poses an ongoing challenge to the Iranian regime, but it does not mean that the current political order is under any significant immediate threat. To be sure, the intervals between the waves of protest have become shorter in recent years, mainly in view of the worsening economic crisis; the protests are wider in their geographic scope; and they are much more extreme than in the past, both in displays of violence and in the rhetoric sounded against the very existence of the regime. However, the protest movement still suffers from several essential weaknesses. First, it has not succeeded in attracting a critical mass of protesters. Even the November riots, which were the broadest since the 2009 Green Revolution riots, apparently encompassed no more than 200,000 Iranians. Second, it has suffered from significant organizational

failures, such as the lack of leadership at the national level, and the difficulty in coordinating between the various focal points of protest throughout the country and in shutting down essential economic sectors, such as the oil industry. Third, a large part of the public, including those opposed to the regime, are still concerned about chaos and the loss of control, particularly in view of the experience of many Arab countries in the past decade. To many Iranians, the alternative to the current regime may be even worse, for instance, a Revolutionary Guard takeover of power centers if the current political system collapses. Fourth, most of the demonstrators in the waves of protest in the past two years belong to the lower layers of society, and not to the educated urban middle class, which is considered the main agent of change in Iran. The middle class's absence from the protests makes it difficult to form a nationwide cross-sector social coalition, which is an essential condition for promoting political changes in Iran. Fifth, the Iranian regime still holds significant means of repression, and does not hesitate to resort to brutality to repress demonstrations that challenge its stability. Moreover, even if there was currently motivation to renew the protests in Iran, the spread of the coronavirus is presumably a retraining factor, given the concern among the citizens to take to the streets. Yet despite these limitations, the continued loss of public confidence in the Islamic Republic institutions may over time undermine the regime's legitimacy, particularly if the economic situation deteriorates further or if political stability is undermined, for instance following the departure of the current Supreme Leader.