

Shooting down an airliner

It has been widely accepted that the Iranian authorities made a tragic mistake. They now confess that they wrongly thought a civil airliner with 176 people on board was an incoming cruise missile.

In a world desperate to calm tensions it is probably wise to accept the latest Iranian explanation of what happened. It is important, however, that Iran learns the lessons of this tragedy. The plane they shot down had only just taken off from their main civilian airport. It had been given clearance by the Iranian authorities for take off, and must still have been in closely controlled airspace adjacent to the airport. Their military need to know of civilian movements from a central civil aviation hub under the control of their government. They could always instruct the airport to avoid take offs at times of high tension where and when they might unleash missiles.

It appears that many people in Iran are now angry with their government over the delay in offering this latest explanation of the last seconds of the airliner, which in turn is reminding them of their dislike of other features of the Iranian regime. Iran's stance supporting various terrorist movements around the Middle East, and backing proxy wars against Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states has led the USA to impose strong sanctions on Iran. These are gradually damaging the Iranian economy, and are forcing Iran to find sales outlets for her oil away from traditional markets in the West. Some Iranians also dislike the disregard for personal freedoms and the limited adherence to human rights.

Mr Trump clearly still does not want to go to war with Iran. Because he had signalled his wish to avoid military encounters in the Middle East he felt Iran saw this as weakness and thought they could attack the USA and her friends in the area as they chose. The President countered with an unexpected targeted attack on the high command of Iran. It was a formidable demonstration of the powers of US military technology, knowing exactly where a named individual would be and being able to kill him from a distance with no US individual needed anywhere near the scene. The Iranian government thought they saw an opportunity to speed the USA's departure from the Middle East, hoping they could accelerate US withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

The US President hopes he has found a technological answer to so called asymmetric warfare. If Iran uses terrorist groups and informal armies to kill Americans and damage US installations, the USA will use precision to kill the leaders responsible. The danger is a possible escalation. The fact that so many Iranian people now think their government has gone too far is a better augury. Any sensible person wants peace, which means different future conduct by Iran to be matched by the USA responding favourably to such moves.