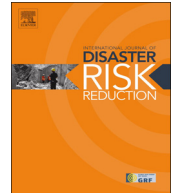




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# Impact of sanctions on Iranian airlines: How people in Iran feel about air travel safety?

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## ABSTRACT

Road traffic injuries are the second leading cause of death in Iran. After the 11th September tragedy many people all over the world changed their traveling behavior to rail and road transport. Following the Urmia air crash (2011) we aimed to investigate Iranians' attitudes and behaviors towards air travel. A cross-sectional telephone survey was performed on the residents of Tehran. A valid combined questionnaire was utilized to collect the information considering different aspects that may influence people's perception about their environment and events. Half of the population had concerns about safely reaching their destination while traveling by Iranian airlines. The most important characteristics which affected the interviewees' confidence in air-travel were their socioeconomic status and fear of restriction. Moreover, their economic status and connection to world network affected their perception of safety when comparing the Iranian airlines with their foreign counterparts. Old airplanes with technical defects (as a result of long-term sanctions) were the main reasons for people to feel unsafe. The international sanctions against Iran have influenced the Iranian population's conception of national airlines; these results remind us of the importance of the Chicago Convention and human rights.

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays faster but safe means of transport and traveling have become a necessity. People have always considered safety as an important aspect of their everyday lives. Currently flying is the safest way to travel; this is why many people opt for air travel as their best choice. On the other hand, stress and anxiety amongst air passengers is 10 times higher than that of road passengers [1–3]. Furthermore, an air crash has an overwhelming effect on

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both the public and crew, therefore it is crucial to increase the security and safety of flights [4].

### 1.1. Current travel pattern in Iran

Road traffic injuries are the second leading cause of death in Iran and its imposed burden on Iranian population is an important concept of public health that is worth to be considered [5]. As a result, preparation of safe and affordable transportation facilities such as airways and railways for general population would switch the public tendency from using road transportation and consequently decrease the road casualties. Rail transport is not available for all the regions in the country, and even then the facilities it can offer are quite limited, therefore road transportation will become the inevitable choice for most people. As Mehrara et al. reported as a result of the fair and availability currently there is no substitute for road transport in Iran so that 90% of all Iranian passengers travel by road [6].

### 1.2. Iranian airlines before and after world sanctions air accidents statistics

Before the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iranian flights were among the world's seven best airlines. The country had an invaluable Boeing fleet that all other countries in the region could only dream of. According to PlaneCrashInfo.com, during 1998 and 2007, HOMA, the oldest Iranian airline company had the largest number of air accidents among the 12 airline companies in the Middle East and Africa. As a result, its rank dropped to 78th among the world's 90 airlines. Between 1980 and 2010, the total count of casualties related to the Iranian airline accidents reached an approximate of 1800 [7]. Fifty nine percent of these accidents took place between 2000 and 2010 alone, costing 736 civilian lives<sup>1</sup> [8–11].

Iran has been under sanctions for the past thirty years. These sanctions have inflicted economic and political pressures on the Iranian government and public as well [12–18]. The sanctions imposed on Iranian banks and financial institutions have prevented the country from importing the necessary equipment for aviation safety [14,15,18,19]. Similarly, the air industry encountered complications when it tried to purchase new airplanes or import the required equipment for already existing airplanes [20]. Over the years, the Iranian airlines' ranking for safety and quality has dropped significantly. As a result, Iranian airlines are struggling to cope with the tough competition of their foreign counterparts. Neighboring countries in the Middle East and Africa have modernized their airports and obtained transit advantages. They now

own the most advanced airplanes and their share of the region's airline market has increased substantially [21–25].

According to 2004 reports, 88% of the world's airlines use airplanes manufactured by the West, while the remaining 12% use airplanes manufactured by eastern companies. Recent reports indicate that there are 220 airplanes with an average age of 22 years in the Iranian fleet that need to be replaced [26]. The US imposed sanctions have made it impossible for Iranian airlines to reconstruct or modernize their aviation system. Therefore most Iranian airlines have to use old airplanes. This can be problematic when considering the national airlines' safety, as one of the main principles for aviation safety is the use of well-equipped and modern aircrafts [19,27].

The Convention on International Civil Aviation (otherwise known as the Chicago Convention) was signed by 52 states on the 7th of December 1944 after World War II (the USA, European countries, Iran, etc.). It inhibits governments from interfering in other countries' transportation systems. Moreover, their political issues should in no way interfere with their aviation system. As a result of this convention, a specialized agency of the United Nations was established. This agency which is better known as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) was charged with the coordination and regulation of air travel at an international level. The rights of all signatory countries (in relation to air travel) were detailed in the convention. Rules of airspace, aircraft registration and safety have also been established in this document. It also exempts air fuels from tax. The Chicago Convention provided for airspace sovereignty above each state's territory. It went into effect on the 4th of April 1947 [19,28–35].

### 1.3. Safety perception

Upon decision making for risk reduction in a community a prevalent question is over allocating resources according to the priorities recommended by technical experts in risk assessment or considering the risk perceived by laypeople. Researchers of risk perception studies try to notify health officials about the ways people think and respond in risky situations. Without this insight even the most successful policies would be inefficient [36,37].

Although civil aviation is the fastest and most convenient mode of transport, when the number of an airline's aviation accidents increase, its popularity among the general population eventually declines. So in order to travel, most people will either use other vehicles, or choose to travel with other airline companies. People tend to use these vehicles if they feel safe. Even though the possibility of an air crash is very low, the number of its casualties will be very high. The larger number of passengers in modern airplanes only increases the possible count of casualties in case of an accident. The fact that passengers change their traveling behavior is what Schmidlin and Toft called a "Marketing of disaster" [38]. The perception of safety and the amount of confidence which passengers have about a safe journey is an important matter which has been investigated in various ways in recent years [39–41].

<sup>1</sup> The most important air crashes after 2000

- **Kerman, February 2003:** a military aircraft crashes killing all 302 people on board
- **Tehran, December 2005:** 128 people die in an air accident
- **Tehran-Bishkek flight, August 2008:** 68 people were killed and 15 were injured
- **Qazvin, July 2009:** an airplane crashes killing all 168 people on board
- **Urmia, January 2011:** 79 dead, 24 injured and 2 lost.

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