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What the Iran plane crash tells us about Canadian nationalism

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"Just think of the potential that was on board that plane and it's been extinguished. ... We will never get that back." **Paul Davidson** (<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/01/11/the-iran-plane-crash-dealt-a-huge-blow-to-canadian-universities-here-are-some-of-the-bright-minds-that-were-lost.html>), president of Universities Canada.

According to the 2016 census, there are 210,405 people of **Iranian origin** (<https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Geo2=PR&Code2=01&Data=Count&SearchText=Canada&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&B1=Ethnic+origin&TABID=1>) residing in Canada. Taken together with nationals of other Muslim countries such as Syria, Sudan, Libya, Somalia, Yemen and Iraq, Iranians have probably felt the effects of nationalist ideology over the years while living in Canada.

As a Muslim, one occupies an axis of difference within Canadian society. Public hate positions a Muslim subject on the outside of society rather than inside its cultural perimeters. And hate crimes against Muslims are documented to have **increased by 253 per cent** (<https://globalnews.ca/news/3523535/hate-crimes-canada-muslim/>) from 2012 to 2015, prior to the terrorist attack on Centre Culturel Islamique de Québec, where **Alexandre Bissonnette** (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jan/30/quebec-city-mosque-shooting-alexandre-bissonnette-murder-charge>) killed six men and injured 19 others.

On Wednesday, January 8, Ukrainian Airline flight PS752 **crashed** (<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51032823>) close to Tehran amidst rising tension between the U.S. and Iran. All 176 passengers, including 57 Iranian-Canadian citizens, died. Most of the victims were academics:



The public rhetoric in Canada surrounding this recent tragedy shows us not only that former outsiders can become insiders, but also that such a transition across inclusionary-exclusionary national boundaries is possible only when human value is superseded by factors of social, cultural and economic significance.

Good and bad migrants

A nation state, speaking abstractly, is the frontier that attributes righteous qualities to migrant subjects: some migrants are good; others are bad. The good ones are welcomed inside the nation while the bad ones are unwelcome.

Think of the myriad pathways of migration to Canada. Skilled migrants are recruited on a selective, **human capital points system** (<https://www.cic.gc.ca/english/immigrate/skilled/crs-tool.asp>), determined by education, language proficiency and age. As highly educated people possessing at a minimum a university degree, with most having graduate level studies, and fluent in one or more official languages, the people killed on PS752 were the good type of migrants, those publicly desired.

By contrast, low-skill migrant workers, temporary foreign workers and undocumented individuals are not wanted by the Canadian state. Their entry (on limited work contracts) and stay requirements (on temporary entry, with no access to permanent resident status) are defined on the premise of future exclusion (deportations; having to leave at the end of their temporary stay, etc.).

The selection of skilled migrants on the basis of human capital skills is considered the **gold standard in managing migration** (<https://www.ubcpres.ca/points-of-entry>) into the country. Doctors, lawyers, scientists and academic newcomers to the country are envisioned by the state to benefit Canada and its economic market. Immigrants pay taxes, facilitate economic development, and constitute a source of labour for Canadian employers. In many instances, skilled immigrants positively impact Canadian society, if they end up in scientific or knowledge production fields. Their ability to contribute -- economically, intellectually, culturally -- ends up mattering more than they matter as people.

Whose loss is it anyway?

In reporting on the deaths on flight PS752, public emphasis was placed on the loss of the professional groups these people belonged to, on the loss of an anticipated future and the impact the victims would have had on their academic community, their cities and Canada as a whole: their deaths were an overall loss to the Canadian national character. They were among "the best and the brightest" who choose to make Canada their home.

[Nanjax Toaqy](https://www.nanjaxtoaqy.ca/local-news/so-many-intellecutuals-jet-crash-in-iran-causes-tremendous-loss-of-potential-2011678) (<https://www.nanjaxtoaqy.ca/local-news/so-many-intellecutuals-jet-crash-in-iran-causes-tremendous-loss-of-potential-2011678>) wrote that the jet crash in Iran caused tremendous loss of potential for Canada since so many intellectuals were on board. The **[Edmonton Journal](https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/unimaginable-loss-university-of-alberta-mourns-deaths-of-academics-students-in-iran-plane-crash)** (<https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/unimaginable-loss-university-of-alberta-mourns-deaths-of-academics-students-in-iran-plane-crash>) emphasized the loss of tremendous talent to the academic community. The **[Toronto Star](https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/01/11/the-iran-plane-crash-dealt-a-huge-blow-to-canadian-universities-here-are-some-of-the-bright-minds-that-were-lost.html)** (<https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2020/01/11/the-iran-plane-crash-dealt-a-huge-blow-to-canadian-universities-here-are-some-of-the-bright-minds-that-were-lost.html>) followed suit in writing that the Iran plane crash dealt a huge blow to Canadian universities.

The crash becomes less about those who died and more about Canada. In reading between the lines, it is Canada that is being portrayed as the one that suffered the real loss.

The reason the crash is a national tragedy is because Canada lost these people's potential to contribute to its national fabric. As migrants of the good type, the victims could have yielded future economic, cultural and societal returns for the country. What these victims possessed was a profitable currency: for the Canadian market, for the Canadian nation and for competitively positioning Canada on a global scale, through research and scientific endeavours. Their lives were a loss in the present only because Canada will miss out on their potential benefits in the future.

The adequate public response to a heartbreaking tragedy that killed so many is to mourn them as people. Mourning them because of their human capital skills -- because their social, economical, and cultural potential wasn't sufficiently put to use for the nation -- becomes ethically problematic.

Conferring to a community the badge of inclusion because its members are educated and part of the intellectual class, raises the question of what would happen when those lacking human capital encounter Islamophobia and hate crimes?

A community whose members were not that long ago positioned outside society have become insiders, not because they matter as people but because their human capital skills matter in building the nation-state of Canada.

But a life matters as a life. And a person is a person, and not simply a capital-carrying object.

People lost children, mothers, aunts, uncles, friends and colleagues. This is the real tragedy, not that Canada lost out on the potential to benefit from people's future economic returns to their adoptive society.