

The Growing Danger of Iran's Missile Programs

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Tehran is committed to the continued development and diversification of its missile force for both deterrence and offensive purposes.

Iran's missile programs are a growing threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond, and the U.S. must address them.

Iran's missile programs must be included in any new nuclear deal, and the U.S. must build on its missile defenses to deter and defend against the Iranian threat.

With so much handwringing over the Biden Administration's contemplation of rejoining the problem-ridden Iran nuclear deal, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), other issues of international security are being overshadowed.¹

Among these matters of gravity is Iran's dedicated development, deployment, and use of its various missile programs—an issue that the U.S. must address competently and comprehensively as soon as possible for a number of reasons.

The U.S. cannot forget that a little over a year ago, more than 10 Iranian ballistic missiles armed with high explosives struck the Ain al-Asad base in Iraq, injuring a significant number of U.S. troops posted there.²

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A Growing Threat

While exact numbers are difficult to discern from open sources, Iran is estimated to have the largest missile arsenal in the Middle East, according to the Defense Intelligence Agency.³

One estimate indicates that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force of 15,000 airmen has as many as 50 medium-range ballistic-missile launchers, and as many as 100 short-range ballistic-missile launchers.⁴ The number of missiles available or deployed may far exceed the number of launchers according to one analysis.⁵

With a “substantial inventory of close-range ballistic missiles (CRBMs), short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs), and medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) that can strike targets throughout the region as far as 2,000 kilometers from Iran’s borders,” Tehran poses a significant regional threat to U.S. allies, partners, and American forces in the region and some North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies in Southeastern Europe.⁶

Iran’s missile arsenal, which includes not only ballistic missiles, but cruise missiles, and arguably unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs, or armed drones), allows Tehran to project Iranian power and influence, compensating for Tehran’s long-standing lack of conventional air power.⁷

Indeed, its missile program has also come to play a central role in advancing Iran’s hegemonic ambitions in the Middle East.⁸ According to the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States: “In the Middle East, Iran is competing with its neighbors, asserting an arc of influence and instability while vying for regional hegemony, using state-sponsored terrorist activities, a growing network of proxies, and its missile program to achieve its objectives.”⁹

Besides attacking Iraq, Iran or its proxies have launched missile attacks and UCAV attacks against Saudi Arabia; opponents in Syria; maritime targets in the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Arabian Sea; and possibly against the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The IRGC, Hezbollah, Iranian-backed paramilitary units in Iraq and Syria, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad, and the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen have all used Tehran’s missiles in acts of hostility.

The expiration of the U.N. arms embargo on Iran last year will make it easier for Iran to transfer missiles to both its allies and proxy groups, which is likely to further boost the threat and range posed by these missiles to U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Iran's Unrestrained Program

Unfortunately, the Obama Administration's 2015 nuclear deal with Iran failed to capture Tehran's ballistic-missile program, some of which could carry a nuclear warhead. In fact, U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, which endorsed the nuclear deal between the JCPOA's seven parties, weakened the missile language of the previous U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929 that attempted to restrain Iran's nuclear-capable ballistic-missile programs.

Resolution 2231 relaxed the language in Resolution 1929 that prohibited "any activity related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons," to language that merely "called upon" Iran to refrain from activities "related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons."¹⁰

Naturally, Tehran has taken advantage of this regrettable verbiage rhetorically and practically, viewing the "called upon" language as a suggestion rather than a requirement to halt nuclear-capable missile development.

Indeed, President Joe Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan noted in February that Iran's missile capability had advanced dramatically over the past eight years, covering both the Obama and Trump presidencies.¹¹

And a March 2021 bipartisan congressional letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken signed by 140 lawmakers stated that the "refinement and advancement" of Iran's missile technology over the past five years is "destabilizing" and "increases the potential threat of a nuclear attack on nations within the region."¹²

The IRGC recently allowed some media into a new IRGC navy underground missile facility—apparently one of a number of "strategic underground cities" along the southern coast—that houses ballistic and cruise missiles made in Iran despite international sanctions.¹³ This public show was clearly a warning to potential opponents, but especially the U.S. Navy, whose ships ply the Persian Gulf waters.

But it is not just these regional missile programs that are of concern.

Looking for Space to Grow

The Iranian space program, which Tehran insists is a peaceful undertaking, is also of concern.¹⁴ For instance, while Iran previously launched civilian research satellites and space launch vehicles (SLV), last April, the IRGC launched Iran's first military reconnaissance satellite into space.¹⁵

While the launch revealed the dual civilian–military nature of its space program, Iran’s space program is not likely limited to the launch of military spy satellites, but may serve as a convenient cover—like its civilian program under the Iranian Space Agency—for an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program.¹⁶

Indeed, as noted in the Defense Intelligence Agency’s 2019 report, *Iran: Military Power*, “Progress in Iran’s space program could shorten a pathway to an ICBM because [space launch vehicles] use inherently similar technologies.”¹⁷

In early February 2021, according to Iran’s Defense Ministry and other Iranian state news sources, Tehran launched another SLV, this time with three stages and possibly even more powerful, solid, and liquid-fueled engines.¹⁸

It gets worse.

Foreign Friends

According to a February United Nations report, Iran is also reportedly working (again) with, and receiving assistance from, North Korea to develop its long-range missile program.¹⁹ Pyongyang and Tehran may also be cooperating on their space and nuclear programs.²⁰

This situation is significant since North Korea is already a nuclear weapons state with a highly-capable ballistic missile arsenal—including ICBMs.

Missile, space, and possibly nuclear weapon cooperation between Tehran and Pyongyang could significantly shorten the timelines that Iran would require to develop and deploy nuclear-armed missiles, including ICBMs capable of reaching the U.S. homeland.²¹

Recommendations for Washington

In order to address the growing threat posed by Iran’s ballistic missiles, the Biden Administration should:

- **Ensure a positive military balance with Iran in the Middle East.** The United States and its allies should continue to maintain a favorable military balance of power with Iran, its allies, and proxies to oppose Iran’s malign activities in the region and deter the use of Iranian military forces, including missiles, against U.S. forces and interests.
- **Include missiles in any new nuclear agreement with Iran.** The Biden Administration has said that it will not attempt to include Iran’s missile programs in its early efforts to revive the JCPOA, suggesting that

a “longer and stronger” deal with Iran could come later.²² This approach is wrong-headed. Any new nuclear agreement with Iran must include missiles, especially ballistic missiles, which could one day carry nuclear warheads. The Iranian missile threat is here—and it will only get worse as capabilities potentially increase to intercontinental range.

- **Introduce more U.S. missile defense into the Middle East to increase deterrence and defense.** While, due to limited resources, not every missile attack on a U.S. military asset can be averted with missile defenses, the Pentagon needs to ensure that U.S. missile defense capabilities are deployed based on continuously updated risk assessments. Increasing missile defense presence, mobility, and deception can introduce doubt into the risk-benefit process of an opponent, therefore enhancing deterrence. Increasing the number of missile defense units and improving the integration, distribution, and flexibility of these batteries would also be helpful.²³
- **Work with Israel and Gulf Arab partners to blunt the Iranian ballistic and cruise missile threats.** The United States and Israel have successfully worked together on missile defense research and development for some time—and this work should continue. Washington also should try to extend the benefits of this cooperation to members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that are threatened by Iranian missiles. Saudi Arabia, in particular, has suffered 860 ballistic-missile and armed-drone attacks from Iran-backed Houthi forces in Yemen,²⁴ as well as attacks from Iraq launched by Iran-backed militias. Israel has reportedly approved the deployment of U.S. Iron Dome missile defense batteries purchased from Israel to the Gulf.²⁵ Washington should encourage Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to strengthen their own missile defenses through direct cooperation with Israel. In addition, the United States should encourage the acquisition of threat-appropriate U.S. air and missile defense systems for GCC states, including the layering of defenses and networking among them.

Conclusion

Stopping Iran from developing nuclear weapons is a clear national security imperative for the United States—and others. So, too, is preventing Iran from developing the means to deliver these weapons to potential targets in the region—or beyond, including the United States.

Nor can the U.S. ignore Iran's conventionally armed missiles as a significant threat, as evidenced by attacks in the region directly or through Iranian proxies against Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, U.S. forces in Iraq, and targets at sea.

Iran's missile programs are an increasing threat to America's national interests and those of U.S. allies and other partners in the Middle East. Failing to deal with Iran's growing missile arsenal will only elevate the risk of crisis and conflict.

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