

Iran's Growing Missile Threat

THE ISSUE

One of the key shortfalls in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—also known as the Iran nuclear deal—is that the deal does not address the growing threat of Iran's missile programs.

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.

Attention to this issue is critical.

A GROWING THREAT

The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) estimates that Iran has the largest missile arsenal in the Middle East. Indeed, according to General Kenneth McKenzie, Commander of Central Command,

[o]ver the last five to seven years, the Iranians have made remarkable qualitative improvements in their ballistic missile force while it has grown quantitatively as well, and now numbers, depending on how you choose to count the weapons, a little less than 3,000 of various ranges.

In addition to impressive numbers, Iran can strike targets up to 2,000 kilometers away, threatening U.S. allies, partners, and American forces in the region and some North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies in southeastern Europe.

Tehran has also invested “heavily in” and “made significant achievements” in its cruise missile and unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) programs.

These developments allow Tehran to project Iranian power and influence in the region.

According to the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy: “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.”

Besides attacking Iraq, Iran or its proxies have launched missile attacks and armed drone 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.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (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 Tehran 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.

LOOKING FOR SPACE TO GROW

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

The worry is that Iran's space program may serve as a convenient cover for an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program that could one day target the U.S. homeland.

Indeed, as noted in the DIA'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.”

It gets worse.

FOREIGN FRIENDS

According to a February [United Nations](#) report, Iran is also working (again) with North Korea to develop Iran's long-range missile program. Pyongyang and Tehran may also be [cooperating](#) on their space and nuclear programs.

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 requires to develop and deploy nuclear-armed missiles, including ICBMs.

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 against 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.

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