

The Strategic Spears: Iran's Ballistic Missile Arsenal as a Pillar of Power

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Key Points:

- Iran possesses the largest and most varied arsenal of ballistic missiles in the Middle East, which is integral to its strategic agenda.
- It has gained such an arsenal due to a combination of historical traumas and the lack of a modern air force.
- The country has deployed this arsenal for defensive and propaganda purposes in the past, now, however, Tehran also supplies its proxies with missiles to enforce its regional operations.
- Continuous development of this arsenal can improve its effective range and accuracy, and its potential as an excellent delivery platform for nuclear warheads.

Introduction

Iran has greatly invested in its ballistic missile program, earning the spot of having the largest and most diverse arsenal in the Middle East. Ballistic missiles are designed to attack critical or strategic targets deep within a country's borders by bypassing most of its defences; they can deliver, in an arched trajectory, hundreds of kilograms of high explosive payloads, as well as chemical, biological or nuclear warheads.¹

They have demonstrable psychological, propaganda, and military benefits as weapons – with some effects including spreading terror among the population to force governments into political concessions – showcasing the military might of a regime, destroying critical military targets, and disrupt state operations.

Tehran's missile program is integral to its strategic and regional agenda, with the added benefit of being a useful form of deterrence, political leverage in power plays, and a long-term investment towards ascending to the nuclear club. The country began its investment in this program due to historical traumas and military necessity, the former being connected to the heavy loss of life resulting from the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the latter due to the fact that Iran's air force is severely outdated and unable to modernise as a result of ongoing

¹ Arms Control Association, "Worldwide Ballistic Missile Inventories", Arms Control Association, December 2017, Available at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/missiles>

sanctions.² The effective range of these missiles (reaching a maximum range that encompasses all of the Middle East, including Israel, and parts of Southeast Europe) makes the program a useful replacement, with its deterrence ability being exercised against jihadist and US targets in the past. Knowing that this program is a subject of concern for its Western adversaries, Iran's President Raisi stated that the ballistic missile program is 'non-negotiable' when discussing the nuclear deal, protecting it from possible concessions.³ This safeguarding is symbolic of the importance of the program, where Iran is willing to consider (temporary) concessions over its nuclear program for the sake of protecting the missiles' development.

“The War of The Cities”: Historical Background on Iran’s Ballistic Missiles

To understand Iran's dedication to having a ballistic missile arsenal, especially for the purposes of defence, one should look first at the historical context that led to the commitment in the first place. During the period of the Shah's leadership, Iran possessed over 400 combat airplanes and had one of the largest air forces in the Gulf.⁴ However, due to the relationship with the West degrading, Iran was not able to procure the materials required to maintain the air force altogether, thus denying its ability to strike targets deep behind enemy lines.⁵ This led to an initial opportunity for Iraq, which was supported by the US intelligence,⁶ to strike with SCUD missiles against Iran's cities without fearing much retaliation during the Iran-Iraq War. The war is the key historical event that led to Iran's current arsenal, as the great loss of life and terror inflicted to the Iranian citizens, combined with Tehran's defencelessness against such strikes, would be traumatic for decades to come. Iraq's SCUDs targeted densely populated areas (especially cities), the objective being to force the Iranians to negotiate peace to Baghdad's advantage, and demonstrating the powerful psychological and propaganda tools which were conducted in a type of war of attrition.⁷ Iran sought to retaliate, an exchange that

² Elleman M., “Iran’s Ballistic Missile Program”, The Iran Primer, 13 January 2021, Available at: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-ballistic-missile-program>

³ Cunningham E., Fahim K., “Raisi says Iran’s ballistic missiles are ‘not negotiatble’ – and he doesn’t want to meet Biden”, The Washington Post, 21 June 2021, Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/06/21/iran-nuclear-power-plant-bushehr/>

⁴ Elleman M., Fitzpatrick M., (2019) “Evaluating Design and Intent in Iran’s Ballistic Missile Programme”, Adelphi Series, 51:4660467, p. 89-130, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19445571.2017.1555918>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ NPR, “U.S Links to Saddam During Iran-Iraq War”, NPR, 22 September 2015, Available at: <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4859238&t=1573287420836>

⁷ Taremi K., “Ballistic Missile in Iran’s Military Thinking”, Wilson Center, 14 October 2003, Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/ballistic-missiles-irans-military-thinking>

became known as the “War of the Cities”,⁸ which involved five periods of high-intensity bombardments against at least 11 Iranian cities both close and far away from the border, including Tehran. The logic of forcing Iran to negotiate peace with Iraq by targeting civilians was to spread fear and inflict psychological damage upon the general population, thus increase the political pressure on Iran’s leadership to stop the bombardments.⁹ The strikes would cause panic among the civilian population with millions choosing to flee their homes and abandon their cities out of fear of them being struck by Iraqi missiles either armed with high-explosives or chemical warheads. While estimates vary, approximately 13,000 people died as a result.¹⁰

Iran, with its outdated air force, initially did not have the capacity to retaliate without risking the little equipment or trained pilots it had. Thus, it negotiated with various other powers for the acquisition of their own missiles that would be used against Iraq. North Korea became the provider with the most longevity due to its ability to answer Tehran’s needs the most, being able to provide the missiles and the know-how to Iran in exchange for monetary compensation; a relationship that would continue beyond the war.¹¹

Yet, the sense of helplessness and defencelessness would become a driving force for the continued acquisition of missiles, as well as developing its own domestic infrastructure focused on building and improving ballistic missiles in a push to reach self-sufficiency. This type of infrastructure development would be made to guarantee a stream of missiles that would not only ensure Iran’s rapid response against possible attacks like those that Saddam Hussein ordered against Tehran, but also to ensure that Iran has a deep-strike capability which can replace the outdated air force and to provide a standard deterrent function against potential adversaries. To this day, it is estimated that Iran can launch similar or greater attacks than those it fell victim to during the 1980-1988 war, with their inherent political and psychological effect being stronger than their warfighting capability.¹²

⁸ Associated Press, “‘War of Cities’ Truce Ends as Iraqi Missile Hits Tehran”, Los Angeles Times, 14 March 1988, Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-03-14-mn-734-story.html>

⁹ Taremi, “Ballistic Missiles in Iran’s Military Thinking”, Wilson Center [Online]

¹⁰ Blance E., “How Saddam’s ‘War of the Cities’ spawned Iran’s Missile drive”, The Arab Weekly, 15 March 2018, Available at: <https://theArabweekly.com/how-saddams-war-cities-spawned-irans-missile-drive>

¹¹ Elleman M., “North Korea-Iran Missile Cooperation”, 38 North, 22 September 2016, Available at: <https://www.38north.org/2016/09/melleman092216/>

¹² Cordesman H. A., “Iran’s Rocket and Missile Forces and Strategic Options”, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 7 October 2014, Available at: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/141007_Iran_Rocket_Missile_forces.pdf

Ballistic Missiles as Strategy Tools

After the trauma endured at the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran recognised the need to have defensive capabilities against regional nemeses (such as the US or Israel) in case of an invasion or against their force projection.¹³ To this end, since November 2020, Iran possesses at least 8 different types of ballistic missiles in service (and 4 in current development), with the most notable types including both short range missiles such as the Fateh-313 (a missile with a range of 500km¹⁴) or the Shahab-3 variants (the original design being based off the model of North Korean NoDong-1 and an effective range of 2000km¹⁵). For comparison, Israel possesses 4 types of more modern ballistic missiles that can reach targets at over 4000km.¹⁶ Iran can exercise the benefits of this arsenal in at least three ways.

Firstly, they act as deterrence against an invasion or attack. The arsenal has given Iran the opportunity to develop capable and cheap area-denial and anti-access abilities by having the opportunity to strike enemy bases.¹⁷ Moreover, Iran also possesses advanced anti-ship missile designs such as the “Khalij Fars” model which was designed to target ships in the Persian Gulf.¹⁸ This greatly limits the ability of adversaries to deploy military assets at bases without the risk of being attacked by missiles. This ability has been famously demonstrated in retaliation to the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in 2020, where Iran launched as many as 11 Qiam-1 and 2 Fateh-313 missiles against the US in Iraq.¹⁹ These attacks left over 100 US personnel with Traumatic Brain Injury.²⁰ The attack demonstrated Iran’s willingness to use the missile program defensively in case of attacks from possible adversaries, including those with

¹³ Taremi K., (2005) “Beyond the Axis of Evil: Ballistic Missiles in Iran’s Military Thinking”, *Security Dialogue*, 36:1, March 2005, Available at:

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0967010605051926?journalCode=sdib>

¹⁴ Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Fateh-313”, CSIS, 31 July 2021, Available at:

<https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/fateh-313/>

¹⁵ Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Shahab 3”, CSIS, 31 July 2021, Available at:

<https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/shahab-3/>

¹⁶ Erästö T., Wezeman D. P., “Addressing Missile Threats in the Middle East”, November 2020, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Available at: https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/pb_2011_missiles_0.pdf

¹⁷ Ajili H., Rouhi M., (2019) “Iran’s Military Strategy”, *Survival*, 61:6, p. 139-152, Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1688575>

¹⁸ Keck Z., “Meet Iran’s “Carrier Killer”: The Khalij Fars”, *The Diplomat*, 11 May 2013, Available at:

<https://thediplomat.com/2013/05/meet-irans-carrier-killer-the-khalij-fars/>

¹⁹ Roblin S., “Meet the Qiam Missile Iran Used to Blast a U.S. Airbase”, *The National Interest*, 11 January

2020, Available at: <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/meet-qiam-missile-iran-used-blast-us-airbase-112911>

²⁰ Chappell B., “109 U.S. Troops Suffered Brain Injuries in Iran Strike, Pentagon Says”, *NPR*, 11 February 2020, Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/02/11/804785515/109-u-s-troops-suffered-brain-injuries-in-iran-strike-pentagon-says>

a more developed military than itself. Furthermore, the ability for Iran to domestically produce these missiles allows it to establish an asymmetrical response to the military threats where it can deal considerable damage to at a much lesser cost than procuring the weapons.²¹

Secondly, it synergises with Iran's use of proxy warfare to enforce its influence in the region. Proxies are the second pillar of Iran's regional strategy, as they extend the country's military and political reach, suppress its opponent's operations in the region, and create a network of allies that helps maintain power in the Middle East.²² Giving missiles to proxies allows Iran a wider variety of military options, as it would strengthen supporting factions with armament with a longer range and effect than artillery and improve the regional power of Iran and its allies in the Middle East.²³ Examples where Iran provided missiles involve, among others, Hezbollah with numerous Fateh-110 missiles at least once, during November 2014.²⁴ Israel stopped previous deliveries of such missiles, which can reach the north of the Negev Desert, as it recognises them as grounds for a pre-emptive attack.²⁵ Another example includes the provision of Houthis, which allowed them to strike US bases and Saudi targets on an almost weekly basis with advanced rocket weaponry.²⁶ Over 162 Houthi rockets were intercepted between March 2015-April 2020 by the Saudi defence forces.²⁷

Hezbollah has launched missiles against Israel in the past,²⁸ and while they have yet to launch ballistic missiles with deep-strike capability since the start of 2021,²⁹ Iran's provision of these types of armaments makes Lebanon a separate location from which Iran is able to exert pressure against Israel, being able to use shorter and more reliable or accurate missile models on top of the Shahab-3 from its own territory. The missiles would be able to strike Israel's civilian

²¹ Ajili, Rouhi, "Iran's Military Strategy", Online

²² Ostovar A., (2018), "The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War", Security Studies, 28:1, p.159-188, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508862>

²³ Hanna A., "Iran's Missiles: Transfer to Proxies", The Iran Primer, 17 February 2021, Available at: <https://iranprimer.usip.org/index.php/blog/2021/feb/03/irans-missiles-transfers-proxies>

²⁴ Eshel T., "Iran: We supplied ballistic guided rockets to Hezbollah", Defence Update, 24 November 2014, Available at: http://defense-update.com/20141124_fatah110.html#.VH47w8IcQdU

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hinz F., "Missile Multinational: Iran's New Approach to Missile Proliferation", CSIS, April 2021, Available at: <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/research-paper/2021/04/iran-missile-proliferation-strategy>

²⁷ Williams I., Shaikh S., "The Missile War in Yemen", CSIS, June 2020, Available at: https://missilethreat.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Missile-War-in-Yemen_June-2020.pdf

²⁸ Goldstein E. et.al, "Civilians Under Assault", The Human Rights Watch, October 2006, Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2007/08/28/civilians-under-assault/hezbollahs-rocket-attacks-israel-2006-war>

²⁹ Williams I., Shaikh S., "Hezbollah's Missiles and Rockets", CSIS, July 2018, Available at: https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180705_Williams_HezbollahMissiles_v3.pdf

population and strategic assets which would result in loss of life and a substantial military escalation in response from Israel.³⁰

An interesting feature that relates to the supplying proxy forces is plausible deniability. The Houthis have claimed responsibility for the attacks against the Abqaiq and Khurais oil plants in September 2019, which briefly suspended their operations.³¹ However, the then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo accused Tehran of being behind the attacks, not the Houthis.³² By blurring the lines of responsibility over who has launched an attack, Iran is able to deflect blame by having another faction take it instead. This has military and political implications since if a proxy faction says they are responsible for an attack, they will be the ones to face retaliation and not Tehran, which would fulfil the strategy of protecting Iran's security while another faction continues to fight for them.

A third way is the propaganda and political effect ballistic missiles have. The Iranian regime has consistently used ballistic missiles as a device for showcasing its power, both domestically and abroad. It has publicised the launch of various missile types.³³ There is also a narrative that promotes the defensive use of ballistic missiles, such as preventing a 'new Saddam Hussein', in other words avoiding the same situation of helplessness the country was in during the 1980s war but now in a situation where they are surrounded by US bases.³⁴ The continued publication of edited missile launch material for propaganda purposes also showcases Iran's continuing development of its arsenal, which, when combined with narratives promoting the personalisation of enemies and underlining of threats, acts as a cycle of reinforcing the need for the missiles to exist under a defensive pretext.³⁵ Finally, the continued use of ballistic missiles for propaganda purposes represents an image, produced by the Iranian regime, of endurance against hostile odds in the region (from enemies to sanctions) and promoting a sense

³⁰ IDF, "Hezbollah's Precision Guided Missile Project", IDF Website, August 2021, Available at: <https://www.idf.il/en/minisites/hezbollah/hezbollahs-precision-guided-missile-project/>

³¹ Hubbard B. et.al, "Two Major Saudi Oil Installations Hit by Drone Strike and U.S. Blames Iran", The New York Times, 14 September 2019, Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html>

³² Pompeo M., "Tehran is behind nearly 100 attacks on Saudi Arabia...", Twitter, 13 September 2019, Available at: <https://twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1172963090746548225>

³³ DW News, "Iran test-fires ballistic missiles at 'hypothetical' enemy ships", DW News, 2019, Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-test-fires-ballistic-missiles-at-hypothetical-enemy-ships/a-56248486>

³⁴ Eslami M., Vieira G. V. A, (2020) "Iran's strategic culture: the 'revolutionary' and 'moderation' narratives on the ballistic missile programme", Third World Quarterly, 42:2, p. 312-328, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1813562>

³⁵ Elias F., "Iran's Military Propaganda: Failures and Successes", Fikra Forum, 9 September 2018, Available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-military-propaganda-failures-and-successes>

of the resilience of the Islamic regime; overall making Tehran's leadership appear both powerful and capable of ensuring the security of its regime and its people.

Conclusion

Iran's ballistic missile program is indispensable to its defence, with its historic roots stemming from the traumatic bombardment Iran received during the 1980-1988 war. The impact arising from the devastation during that war compelled Tehran to answer the need to ensure that Iran can retaliate beyond its borders and deter possible invasions. The inability to modernise its severely outdated air force is also a reason for the need to retain and expand its missile program, as otherwise, they would not be able to attack against strategic targets due to their geographic positioning. It also acts as a deterrence against attacks, preventing enemies from attacking without fearing missile strikes in retaliation. However, the program also pays dividends beyond fulfilling a defensive role. It allows Iran to benefit from distorting its adversaries' operations by providing missiles to supporting proxy fighters beyond its territory. The Houthis, for example, used suspected Iranian missiles to strike Saudi Arabia, while Hezbollah (with its history of attacking Israel) is in possession of newer Iranian missiles. These two proxies and more provide the possibility for Iran to enforce its operations in the region and permit the launching of missiles from more strategic locations that lie beyond its own borders. Overall, the ballistic missile program is perceived as vital for both Iranian defensive interests as well as projecting power through the transfer of missiles to proxies, allowing it to fulfil a necessary and indispensable role in the toolset available to Tehran for ensuring and protecting its interests in the Middle East.

Recommendations For The Western Community

- Iran's expanding missile arsenal can cause a security dilemma and may lead to a regional arms race in the Middle East. Action should be taken to limit Iran's development of missiles that can be used more offensively than defensively, such as imposing harsh sanctions as a response to developing missiles with greater payload threshold or effective range. Careful attention should be given to Israel's response to such developments, as further expansion or modernisation of the arsenal can become grounds for pre-emptive strikes and lead to escalation.
- The development of a defensive missile shield in the region would be a complicated endeavour that can lead to deepening Iran's sense of insecurity. Such types of programs must ensure regional allies in the Middle East can cooperate sufficiently enough to ensure their installation, which must be done in stages with a priority for civilian targets first to defuse the threat of cities being targeted by Iranian missiles. This, in turn, may persuade Iran to tackle regional issues through diplomatic channels upon seeing further limitations of the missiles. If such does not happen, the missile shield should expand towards military targets to increase the pressure.
- An escalation in the operations to prevent arms-trafficking of missiles towards proxies should occur to prevent an increase in the intensity and lethality of terrorist attacks that rely on missiles. While Iran may observe this as an attempt to limit its power in the region, these should be justified as counter-terrorist operations as opposed to subverting Iran's reach to motivate Tehran against accelerating the development of its arsenal.

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