

Missiles in the Middle East:

A New Threat to Stability

Jun 1, 1988



In-Depth Reports

Surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) have begun to assume a central role in the military forces of the Middle East. Not only do 10 countries in the region possess them, but five countries are trying to develop their own independent missile capabilities.

In the early 1988 "War of the Cities," Iran and Iraq together fired more than 500 ballistic missiles at each other. Virtually all of the missiles were aimed at urban areas with the intent of attacking civilians; the results were devastating. This willingness to fire hundreds of SSMs at civilian targets indicates the extent to which these weapons have become an acceptable means of waging war in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia's secret acquisition in early 1988 of long-range Chinese DF-3 ballistic missiles (U.S. designation CSS-2) further underscores the importance of SSMs. Most experts believe that these missiles are so inaccurate that they have little military value when armed with conventional warheads. Nevertheless, the Saudis took substantial political risks to acquire them.

Concern for the proliferation of ballistic missiles stems from two characteristics that distinguish them from other weapons and invest them with a dangerous potential to destabilize the volatile Middle East:

- SSMs travel long distances in a very short period of time. In just five minutes, for example, the Soviet-made Scud-B can fly its full 280-km range. By comparison, a typical jet fighter might take 20-25 minutes to fly the same distance.
- No defenses exist to protect against ballistic missiles once they have been launched. Thus, barring mechanical failure, every missile fired will reach its target.

These capabilities raise the possibility that SSMs could be used to launch devastating "out of the blue" surprise attacks.

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