

# If the Arms Ban Ends: Implications for Iran's Military Capabilities

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Brief Analysis

**Discussions about lifting the ban tend to focus on major weapons systems Tehran might acquire abroad, yet the most important long-term impact may be on its ability to upgrade existing capabilities and strengthen domestic arms production.**

**T**he ban on arms transfers to and from Iran is [scheduled to “sunset”](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sunset-of-the-iran-arms-embargo-the-narrow-path-to-a-policy-compromise) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sunset-of-the-iran-arms-embargo-the-narrow-path-to-a-policy-compromise>) on October 18, in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2231, the document that gave international legal force to the Iran nuclear deal. If the ban is not extended, what are the likely implications for the Islamic Republic's military capabilities?

## CONVENTIONAL ARMS PROCUREMENT OPPORTUNITIES

**T**ehran's relatively modest defense investments in recent decades have yielded some impressive niche capabilities, enabling long-range precision strike, naval guerrilla warfare, and proxy operations. The regime has used these to gain leverage and project influence while avoiding a major regional war. Thus, drones and missiles in the hands of proxies and partners threaten America's foremost regional allies (Israel and Saudi Arabia), while Iran's own long-range precision strike forces can hit U.S. military bases and other targets throughout the region. Iran can also disrupt traffic through two major maritime chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandab Strait (the latter via its Houthi partners in Yemen).

In Tehran's view, the successes that its proxies and partners have registered in the Middle East—expelling Israeli forces from Lebanon in 2000, ousting U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, and defeating the “U.S.-Saudi-Zionist

conspiracy” to unseat Bashar al-Assad in Syria since 2011—have vindicated its approach of using force to shape the regional security environment. Iran also regards its armed forces as an effective deterrent against a large conventional attack—a mindset no doubt reinforced by Washington’s reluctance to employ military levers as an integral part of its maximum pressure policy.

Iran is therefore likely to maintain this basic approach if the ban on arms transfers ends later this year, while filling capability gaps and selectively modernizing its conventional forces to reflect lessons learned in Syria. To this end, it would try to purchase at least some of the systems it has been unable to produce domestically, such as advanced surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), fighter aircraft, infantry fighting vehicles, and tanks. Indeed, media reports indicate it has already approached Russia about buying Su-30 fighters, S-400 SAMs, T-90 tanks, modern artillery systems, and Yakhont antiship cruise missiles. Likewise, it would probably continue **strengthening its guerrilla navy** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-evolving-approach-to-naval-asymmetric-warfare-strategy-and-capability>) by acquiring advanced mines, torpedoes, and antiship ballistic missiles. It is also likely to enhance the expeditionary capability of its Shia foreign legion by acquiring fixed- and rotary-wing close support aircraft, transport helicopters, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technology, potentially enabling proxies to conduct sustained operations abroad independent of Russian air and fire support.

Given Iran’s dire economic circumstances, however, the regime would likely be unable to buy large numbers of major weapons systems. For instance, initial outlays for a single squadron of 18-24 fighter aircraft could approach \$2 billion, and the process of recapitalizing the air force as a whole could approach \$100 billion, since it requires buying modern aircraft, stockpiling large quantities of munitions and spare parts, modernizing and hardening air bases and maintenance facilities, and expanding command, control, communications, and intelligence networks. Recapitalizing the army and navy would require investments of a similar scale. Perhaps most important, Russia and China are unlikely to extend Tehran the line of credit needed to facilitate large-scale purchases.

Yet across-the-board military modernization is unnecessary to achieving Iran’s core national security goals, which depend on only **a handful of robust, niche capabilities** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/operating-in-the-gray-zone-countering-irans-asymmetric-way-of-war>). And while the lack of hard cash and other factors may prevent Tehran from negotiating co-production and technology transfer deals, the regime would likely acquire at least modest amounts of more advanced arms, thereby enabling its industries to reverse-engineer and eventually produce some of these weapons on their own.

## **BOOSTING SELF-RELIANCE AND DOMESTIC PRODUCTION**

Indeed, lifting the ban could make a bigger difference for Iran’s domestic arms industry. The **ethos of self-reliance** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/observations-on-the-islamic-state-in-iran>) is fundamental to the Islamic Republic, which has aspired to boost domestic arms production since the early 1980s in order to reduce dependence on outside suppliers, evade sanctions, and develop capabilities tailored to its specific operational needs. It has made major strides in the production of small arms, light and heavy weapons, munitions of all types, drones, rockets/missiles (including antiship, surface-to-surface, and SAM systems), light armored vehicles, and small warships (e.g., midget submarines and frigates).

Without the ban, Tehran may have more opportunities to acquire parts, components, machine tools, computer-aided production technologies, and special materials needed to produce more-advanced systems. Yet even under the current restrictions, Tehran has been able to procure commercial, off-the-shelf, dual-use items using convoluted and expensive clandestine procurement schemes. Many of these are small-ticket items that are available from numerous sources, difficult to track, and affordable even for fiscally constrained Iran. Over time, the regime has used these acquisitions to produce an impressive range of simple but highly capable weapons systems that are good enough for its needs and allow it to punch far above its weight.

For instance, the September 2019 strike on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure was carried out with an estimated 18 delta-wing drones and 7 Qods-1 cruise missiles, but this relatively small arsenal was sufficient to cut the kingdom's oil production in half for several weeks (equal to about 5 percent of global output). According to the [UN Panel of Experts on Yemen \(https://www.undocs.org/s/2020/326\)](https://www.undocs.org/s/2020/326), the motors of the drones used in the attack were unlicensed copies of a British engine that may have been produced in China and/or Iran, while their avionics, flight control, and fuel systems contained components from Britain, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Poland, South Korea, Sweden, and the United States. Likewise, the cruise missiles were powered by Iranian copies of a Czech turbojet engine and contained flight control and fuel components from Germany, Italy, and Switzerland.

Iran was able to obtain these commercial dual-use items despite international sanctions, and lifting the arms ban would make it easier. Even if unilateral U.S. sanctions remain in place or are strengthened, Iran could evade them by [acquiring components from Chinese firms \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/with-covid-19-irans-dependence-on-china-grows\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/with-covid-19-irans-dependence-on-china-grows) or other vendors that do not have business interests in the United States. Likewise, countries with weak export controls would likely be less vigilant about such transfers if the ban is lifted. And Washington would almost certainly have trouble convincing some countries to interdict arms and dual-use components en route to Iran if there are no Security Council resolutions proscribing them.

At the same time, several emerging high-tech trends will likely benefit Iran's procurement and production efforts. Cutting-edge dual-use technologies are increasingly being developed by private firms around the world, not just by top-secret government labs in the United States and Russia. For this reason, it will be increasingly difficult to control the diffusion of "[radical leveling technologies \(https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/47874\)](https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/47874)" (e.g., artificial intelligence, additive manufacturing, advanced robotics) that could enable Iran to gradually narrow certain military gaps with its adversaries. And because most modern weapons rely on embedded miniature computers, leaps in capability (e.g., harnessing AI to create complex drone swarms) may be just a software download away, as U.S. Navy commander Jeremy Vaughan [pointed out in a 2017 IISS study \(https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2017/12/gulf-security\)](https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2017/12/gulf-security). Even if some of these upgrades require the help of foreign software designers, such assistance would be difficult to detect and stop.

This Iranian strategy of marginal gains could pose substantial proliferation challenges to the United States and its allies. For instance, without an arms ban, Tehran may acquire technology to convert its long-range rockets to missiles, improve the accuracy of its short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, and manufacture countermeasures and penetration aids (chaff, jammers, decoys, maneuvering warheads) to defeat missile defenses. This could increase the [striking power of its missile force \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/europe-pushing-back-on-irans-ballistic-missile-program\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/europe-pushing-back-on-irans-ballistic-missile-program) by an order of magnitude, making it a potential [game-changer \(https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/israel-precision-guided-missiles/\)](https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/israel-precision-guided-missiles/) in a future conflict. To illustrate: a point target that might once have required 100 inaccurate missiles to ensure destruction could be taken out by 2-3 highly accurate missiles in the future. Increased accuracy would also dramatically expand the number of targets Tehran can strike. Similar increases in capability would likely be realized for other types of Iranian weapons as well. And the regime would proliferate many of them to its various foreign proxies—as it has already been doing for years in violation of Security Council Resolutions 2231 (2015), 2216 (2015), and 1701 (2006). Once that happens, these proxies would inevitably become proliferators in their own right down the road, transferring Iranian arms to their own partners.

## CONCLUSION

**M**ost discussions about lifting the ban focus on how major arms transfers might affect Iran's military capabilities. Yet while such transfers are a major source of concern, other factors may have a more significant long-term military impact. In particular, Iran would likely focus even greater resources on acquiring dual-use components,

production technology, and special materials needed to upgrade its existing systems and advance its domestic arms industry. This approach makes more sense for the regime financially, politically, and militarily, as these kinds of acquisitions are relatively inexpensive, difficult to detect, and conducive to achieving technological surprise during a crisis or conflict. It is also more consistent with Tehran's effort to realize a "revolution in military affairs" by seeking marginal gains that enable leaps in capability. As experience has shown, further Iranian progress of this type would disadvantage the United States and its allies, with potentially unsettling consequences for regional stability and global oil markets.

*Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. This PolicyWatch updates the author's 2017 article '[Iran after Sanctions: Military Procurement and Force-Structure Decisions](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-after-sanctions-military-procurement-and-force-structure-decisions) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-after-sanctions-military-procurement-and-force-structure-decisions>).'* ♦

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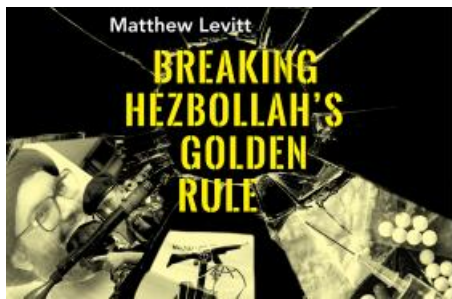
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