

Iran Changes the Rules of the Game with Satellite Launch

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May 1, 2020

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Brief Analysis

On April 22, Iran announced the successful launch of its first Noor satellite into orbit by the IRGC after several previous failed attempts, a feat confirmed by NORAD. Despite the practical and scientific importance of this achievement, no less important is that the launch demonstrates Iran's ability to manufacture the missile that carried this satellite into orbit using both liquid and solid fuel. Moreover, the demonstrated range of the satellite suggests that, in theory, Iran is now capable of launching a missile that can reach targets on U.S. soil.

Iran's successful development of this type of intercontinental space missile has changed the rules of the military-political game it has been playing with the United States. Even with the many other factors currently **at play in U.S.-Iran tensions (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/during-conflict-between-the-united-states-and-iran-iraqs-shiite-forces-will>)**, the satellite launch will have serious repercussions on future relations between the two countries—already at a nadir.

What remains to be seen, however, is how these repercussions will unfold, and who will be able to take advantage of this new situation. In response to the launch, Pompeo has stated that all countries of the world must condemn this glaring Iranian violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 of 2015, which states that “Iran is called upon not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons.” Iran has responded by insisting that its missile activities are for peaceful purposes. It is true that the current launch featured a satellite rather than a warhead, but the technology is equivalent. The United States has unequivocally rejected this claim and is likely to call for a UN Security Council session to discuss potential responses.

Yet while the legalities of the launch can be debated, the immediate repercussions of this latest development will almost certainly escalate the U.S.-Iran conflict to a new and dangerous level. Concern over Iranian missile developments has characterized the Trump administration's messaging and policy towards Iran. Back in March 2018, when Iranian missiles had much shorter demonstrated ranges, **the U.S. administration via Pompeo (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/why-mike-pompeo-should-mediate-the-conflict-between-egypt-and-ethiopia>)** insisted that a halt on Iranian ballistic missile activity served as one of its twelve conditions for lifting its heavy sanctions on Iran.

The crucial question now seems to be why Iran chose the current moment to stage this landmark launch, and whether Iranian officials erred in their timing. There are several factors already impacting recent U.S.-Iranian tensions. Aside from the **recent targeted killing of Qassem Soleimani** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iraqi-reactions-to-soleimanis-assassination>), the devastating effects of coronavirus on both Iran and the United States have not stopped either from making statements against the other or, in the U.S. case, imposing new sanctions.

From the Iranian perspective, however, **the upcoming U.S. elections are key for understanding the future trajectory of these tensions** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/iran-and-the-u.s.-elections-a-chance-to-meddle>). Iranian officials appear to have been hoping for an electoral defeat of Trump in the upcoming U.S. elections in November. These officials see Democrats as likely being more flexible in dealing with the Iranian issue, especially given presidential candidate Joe Biden's role in securing congressional approval for the JCPOA during the Obama administration. The idea of Iran possessing long-range missiles that threaten not only Israel and Saudi Arabia—longstanding U.S. allies—but America too, especially as those missiles have the ability to carry nuclear warheads, is a strategic game changer in the relationship between the United States and Iran.

As such, Iran's decision to test the satellite launch capability now is somewhat puzzling. The move appears to provide a major justification for Trump's policies vis-à-vis Iran. Although American foreign policy is not necessarily an important consideration for most American voters—especially given the country's current domestic economic challenges—this latest development gives a window for the Trump team to bolster his image among his loyal base as a strong, resolute leader needed against a major challenge. Likewise, the concrete threat of a missile launch provides an easy way for Trump to stoke the fears of his base voters, which is an essential element of victory for a politician like Trump, who depends on such strategies for his electoral success.

The launch also appears to put the United States in a better position on the international stage. The world's nations that have supported the Iranian position regarding the nuclear agreement so far will have difficulty taking the same stance now that Iran has revealed its new missile capability.

Because of how the missile launch may affect U.S. policy toward Iran, it is unclear whether the more moderate forces of Iran, such as the president and the foreign ministry, will welcome the timing of this missile launch. This is of particular importance since one of the current U.S. administration's oft-repeated talking points when voicing its dissatisfaction with the nuclear agreement signed by the Obama administration is that this agreement did not address the issue of ballistic missiles, which represent a threat to global and regional security.

Moreover, the Iranian foreign ministry's campaign to promote Iran's position and to attack America's always focuses on two basic elements: the legal element, wherein Iran is committed to international law, as well as the humanitarian cost of U.S. sanctions, based on Iran as a peaceful nation that does not pose a threat to regional or international peace. These two crucial elements of Iran's defense now face a serious challenge because of the implications of the launch of its satellite.

Given all these factors, the satellite launch must be seen not as a policy supported by the entire Iranian state apparatus, but rather as a victory for the IRGC over other streams of Iranian authorities—the newest event in a years-long power struggle that can also be seen in the IRGC's proactive approach to **coronavirus** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/in-search-of-solidarity-the-coronavirus-and-chinas-views-of-the-uae-and-ira>) relief efforts. In contrast to elements more interested in negotiations, the IRGC strategy has long built itself around threats, creating a type of brinksmanship used successfully during the Obama administration that prompted Western countries to sit and work out a good deal with Iran.

It is clear that the struggle for influence and power between the civilian authorities of Iran and the IRGC has been

evolving over the last couple of years. The temporary resignation of Iran's foreign minister Javad Zarif back in February, 2019 after IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani invited Syria's Assad to visit Tehran without informing him was one very public indication of this rift. The targeted killing of Soleimani almost a year later has threatened to increase the power of the official, civilian Iranian institutions, such as the presidency, foreign ministry, national security ministry, and others. **The designation of Mustafa Khadimi**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Iraq-Parliament-politics-Al-Zurfi>) as prime minister in Iraq represents another loss for the IRGC parallel state as the latter views him as relatively close to the United States.

By launching this satellite by means of the ballistic missile, the IRGC has sent a clear message that it has no intention of losing ground to the official, civilian institutions of Iran. This struggle will likely continue to be a prominent feature of Iranian politics as the country works to rebuild after coronavirus, and is likely to gain more momentum if the powerful yet elderly supreme leader passes away.

Now that Iran has made a major change to the status quo, it is up to the United States for the next move. How, and whether the United States will respond to the satellite launch will dictate the direction of this new chapter in the tensions between the two countries.

As this new threat is likely to go through a thorough evaluation by the U.S. government, there should be an internal consensus within U.S. institutions that this missile launch represents a clear and present danger to U.S. security. The U.S. administration should also coordinate its reactions to this serious threat with its Western allies rather than unilaterally addressing the issue. While the United States and its allies have not necessarily agreed on an approach to Iran in the past, Iran's most recent actions should be a clear sign that there is a serious threat developing. And in recognizing the different powers at play in Iran, the United States should also work to initiate communication channels with the civilian channels within the Iranian state while maintaining pressure on the IRGC. Encouraging relatively moderate forces during an internal power struggle is an advantageous alternative to escalating the current confrontation with the regime.

Whatever the solution, the rules of game in the showdown between the United States and Iran have changed. Just as the world after coronavirus will be different from what preceded it, so too will the realities of the US-Iranian relationship after the launch of the Noor satellite, and those differences must be acknowledged and understood. ❖

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