

# Europe Pushing Back on Iran's Ballistic Missile Program

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**Britain, France, and Germany are taking a more proactive role by publicly emphasizing known concerns about the regime's R&D efforts, but practical mechanisms for ensuring transparency are still needed.**

On December 6, envoys from the remaining parties to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action met with Iranian representatives in Vienna to discuss the country's **[latest steps away from the nuclear deal](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/moving-the-goal-posts-irans-uranium-enrichment-program)** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/moving-the-goal-posts-irans-uranium-enrichment-program>). While the European representatives—hailing from Britain, France, and Germany—stopped short of triggering the snapback mechanism for UN sanctions, they **[expressed “serious concerns”](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/71644/chairs-statement-following-6-december-meeting-joint-commission-jcpoa_en)** ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/71644/chairs-statement-following-6-december-meeting-joint-commission-jcpoa\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/71644/chairs-statement-following-6-december-meeting-joint-commission-jcpoa_en)) about Tehran's recent decisions, called on the regime to avoid “further escalatory steps,” and noted that it must fully comply with the JCPOA's provisions, which include limits on the development of nuclear-capable ballistic missiles. Crucially, this was the Joint Commission's first meeting since Washington withdrew from the deal in May 2018—and since European members formally highlighted the missile issue before the international community last month.

On November 21, ambassadors from Britain, France, and Germany submitted a **[letter to the UN secretary-general](https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2019/911)** (<https://www.undocs.org/en/S/2019/911>) expressing grave concern that Iran has developed “potentially” or “technically” nuclear-capable missiles. They also urged him to declare the country's ballistic missile program “inconsistent” with UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231. Among other reasons, they cited the Missile Technology Control Regime's definition that a missile capable of delivering a 500-kilogram payload to a range of at least 300 kilometers is inherently capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. Iran's medium-range Shahab-3 missile

exceeds those criteria.

In addition, the letter expressed the persistent concern that Iran's ballistic missile and space programs share many technological similarities. It then concluded that the Safir satellite launch vehicle is also inconsistent with JCPOA provisions barring activity related to missiles "capable of delivering nuclear weapons."

On December 4, Iran's permanent representative to the UN, Majid Takht Ravanchi, sent a rebuttal to both the secretary-general and the Security Council chairman. After dismissing the European letter, its references to the nonbinding Missile Technology Control Regime, and the contention that Iran's missile and space launch programs are related, Ravanchi reemphasized the view that Iran's missiles are "designed to be exclusively capable of delivering conventional warheads." He then asked the secretary-general to refrain from discussing "such irrelevant activities" in his next report.

## WHAT TRIGGERED EUROPE'S LETTER?

The European parties to the JCPOA began expressing their concerns about Iranian missile activities more forcefully after the United States left the deal in 2018. By April 2019, they were calling for a full UN report on the matter following a string of Iranian space launches and missile unveilings earlier that year, a trend they considered to be inconsistent with UNSCR 2231.

The pattern of potential Iranian violations was hardly new—in October 2015, just months after the parties agreed to the JCPOA, Tehran tested its most advanced ballistic missile yet, called Imad, with a maneuvering winged reentry section and a range of around 1,700 kilometers. At the time, this was interpreted as a technical milestone aimed at increasing the stability, maneuverability, and accuracy of Imad's reentry section and warhead.

The November 21 European letter also specifically noted that "Undated footage released on social media 22 April 2019...reveals a previously unseen flight test of a new Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile variant equipped with a manoeuvrable re-entry vehicle"—a milestone that would allow Iran to produce more accurate missiles and upgrade its existing stocks. Tehran is known to have been developing maneuverable reentry sections for years, the most prominent being the Imad configuration tested in 2015 and exhibited inside an underground base in January 2016, in what appeared to be operational configuration.

Days after the 2015 Imad test, the Obama administration called the vehicle "inherently capable of delivering a nuclear weapon." Two months later, a team of Security Council sanctions experts produced a confidential report that reached the same conclusion, noting that the Imad violated the then-still-binding UNSCR 1929. Yet the test was not found to be in "technical violation" of the nascent JCPOA at the time, and U.S.-European calls for the UN sanctions committee to respond to the matter were eventually muted.

Again, though, experts define even the original, non-upgraded Shahab-3 as nuclear-capable, since it is based on the North Korean Nodong missile (aka Hwasong-7). Like the Pakistani Ghauri missile from the same lineage, Western intelligence organizations believe the Nodong is capable of carrying a nuclear warhead.

## THE KHORAMSHAHR THREAT

Not mentioned in the European letter was Iran's development of the Khoramshahr surface-to-surface missile, which may be even more troubling. First unveiled in 2017, it reportedly boasts more inherent capabilities than other Iranian systems, such as carrying either a single 1,800-kilogram warhead or three smaller 600-kilogram warheads to a range of 2,000 kilometers. The Khoramshahr has also reportedly been armed with a maneuvering reentry section. On November 3, Iran unofficially published a photo of a Khoramshahr with a new camouflage paint scheme, perhaps to imply that it has entered operational service. Whatever the case, rocket engineers regard this design as Iran's most capable ballistic missile when it comes to potentially carrying a nuclear warhead.

Despite this highly visible string of advancements and subsequent suspicions, the JCPOA does not provide any verification mechanism for ensuring that Iran’s missile R&D stays within prescribed limits. Moreover, diplomatic maneuvering has thus far failed to deter the regime from pursuing its ballistic and space launch programs, as further emphasized in Ravanchi’s December 4 letter to the secretary-general, which vowed that Iran would “resolutely continue” all activities related to both types of missiles.

Indeed, when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei set out a rigid “[no negotiations” framework](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irgc-states-its-case-for-escalation-against-the-united-states-britain-and-s) (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irgc-states-its-case-for-escalation-against-the-united-states-britain-and-s) for Iranian politicians to follow toward the United States in a November 3 speech, he specifically forbade any talks over limiting the range or other specifications of the missile arsenal. He also boasted that current Iranian missiles “can deliver a 2,000 [kilogram] warhead to a range of 2,000 kilometers with a precision as good as one meter.”

## CONCLUSION

Under the JCPOA, the limits on Iran’s weapons exports and imports will be lifted in October 2020. Although the United States has urged the UN to maintain the arms embargo for longer than that, it would likely take an international effort—including Russia and China—to effectively prevent the regional proliferation of potential Iranian weapons of mass destruction beyond that date. Europe’s recent letter and other actions are welcome, but consistent follow-on efforts are needed, and each step must be based on the most up-to-date information possible. The United States should also ask the secretary-general to fully report on Iran’s cruise missile activity and use of drones as munitions (the latter is not covered by any UNSCR pertaining to Iran, and Annex B of UNSCR 2231 does not call on the regime to refrain from any cruise missile activities).

More broadly, the emphasis should go back to the WMD nature of ballistic and cruise missiles, regardless of competing claims about whether Iran’s are designed to carry nuclear or conventional warheads. The subject of Iranian missiles is a matter of intentions as much as technical specs, and the regime has repeatedly shown its willingness to play a zero-sum game against its perceived enemies, if not the world.

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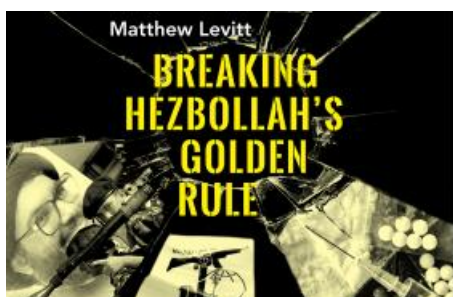
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