

Tehran Eyes Lifting of Arms Embargo

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Brief Analysis

The regime senses a major win in the forthcoming move, perceiving an isolated and weakened United States and opportunities for escalation on many fronts.

Iran is poised to declare a major victory with the automatic lifting of arms restrictions on October 18 under UN Security Council Resolution 2231. Considering Iran's relative self-sufficiency in military production, the country is likely to expand its showcase of domestically made hardware by various means, now with a focus on potential export markets. The [Nagorno-Karabakh conflict \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/flare-up-in-nagorno-karabakh-the-iranian-dimension\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/flare-up-in-nagorno-karabakh-the-iranian-dimension) is showing Iran how much it is losing to rivals such as Turkey, whose overall defense exports stood at \$2.74 billion in 2019. One advantage for Iranian exports, however, would be their freedom from licensing problems, whereas Turkey—for now—relies on certain Western technologies and components to facilitate domestic production.

Iran also seeks to reward Russia and China for their political support through future joint ventures and the purchase of arms and components for its domestic weapons industry. In recent years, Iran has had mixed experiences with its existing weapons systems. Positive experiences have included its mastery of “precision targeting” systems; clandestine actions against oil shipping, including a stunning attack on Saudi Arabia's most vital oil facility; and arguably missile strikes against U.S. forces in Iraq. Negative ones center on the “misidentification” and downing of a departing civilian airliner by a short-range missile system and the accidental sinking of an Iranian naval vessel with an antiship missile during a live-fire exercise.

In August, Iranian defense minister Brig. Gen. Amir Hatami flew to Russia to attend the Army-2020 International Military-Technology Forum, an event organized by the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, to present

Iran's latest defense products, gauge the latest Russian hardware, and explore possible military cooperation between both arms industries and training exchanges as part of their previous agreements. General Hatami spent several days examining weapons systems of particular interest, including the Almaz-Antey S-400 long-range air defense system, upgraded Pantsir-S2 short-range air defense system, T-90 main battle tank, and much-anticipated Sukhoi Su-30 long-range multirole fighter jet.

Although Russia has already expressed its willingness to sell arms, including the vaunted S-400, to Iran, it will likely initiate arms sales with a more token military deal—for example, one that includes tanks and armored personnel carriers—rather than a major deal that includes modern fighter jets or the S-400. More recently, unilateral sanctions have forced Russian banks to abandon even those financial transactions that are conducted with Iran in Russian rubles; thus, national and international banking will remain sensitive to U.S. sanctions, even though barter deals involving Iranian crude oil shipped through a revamped Neka oil terminal on the southeastern shores of the Caspian, or involving other methods, will remain an option for Iran to pay for the weaponry it purchases from Russia. Russia will also be wary of the twenty-five-year agreement being finalized between Iran and China, as well as what that might mean for strategic military cooperation and arms sales. In recent weeks, Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif traveled in haste to both Moscow and Beijing to rally support for and to finalize the long-term cooperation agreements.

IRAN FLEXES ITS MUSCLES IN THE GULF

One way of advertising domestically produced military products is to prove them in operational conditions.

Recently, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) celebrated the addition to its arsenal of a large fleet of armed and reconnaissance drones. A larger drone fleet will allow the IRGC to monitor activities, including shipping in the Strait of Hormuz and throughout the Persian Gulf, across broader swathes of water at any given time and without direct involvement of manned speedboats. Some of the drones are configured for both boat launch and recovery and, if configured for suicide missions, can pose a new threat to international shipping in the region.

Iran has also been flexing its muscles recently in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, with live-fire exercises conducted on October 5–6 and October 7. The last publicly announced exercise was a series of naval drills on September 10 that started in the Persian Gulf—specifically the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman—and involved hitting floating targets with antiship missiles, including one fired from a submerged submarine.

The IRGC should be expected to use drones more aggressively across the Persian Gulf region and the Arabian Sea. Tehran is now confident its deterrent is such that it can start any venture in the region without a risk of war.

Iran also reacted angrily to the recent Israeli peace agreements with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Top Iranian military officials, including the chairman of the Armed Forces General Staff, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, repeatedly warned those countries against inviting any Israeli military, intelligence, operational, or cyber presence into the Gulf region, calling such a possibility a dangerous precedent that would put the host countries on par with Israel. For years, Iran has used similar rhetoric against countries that host U.S. military bases in the region, but a Gulf-Israeli security-defense link will be seen as a direct threat to Iran's longstanding concept of "strategic depth" vis-a-vis Israel, and therefore will be resisted.

Technically speaking, an Israeli corvette or submarine could transit the Strait of Hormuz entirely in Omani waters and turn immediately southward toward UAE waters without ever entering Iranian waters. Such a scenario will, however, be a real test of Iran's tolerance and its declared commitment to "freedom of navigation" through international straits.

LIMITS OF MAXIMUM PRESSURE

The Persian Gulf region will remain a yardstick for tense U.S.-Iran relations as well. Despite the official rhetoric, the strong possibility for escalation in recent months has reportedly made the Tehran regime's top clergy very concerned, forcing IRGC commander Gen. Hossein Salami to publicly rule out any such eventuality, thanks to the IRGC's very expensive "strong deterrent."

Meanwhile, the United States has conducted several assertive drills in the Persian Gulf, while avoiding measures elsewhere that could provide Iran with immediate justification for military escalation. For example, the United States has so far refrained from actively intercepting Iranian gasoline shipments to Venezuela, choosing "persuasive" methods instead. There are limits to this approach, however, as Iran's continued gasoline lifeline to Venezuela has shown.

The U.S. "maximum pressure" policy is unlikely to affect Iran's overall military capability, given that the lifting of arms sanctions will hardly affect the arms markets. They will be seen as proof by regime hardliners, especially within the IRGC, that the United States is caught in a no-win situation and should either leave the region and relinquish the ability to fight Iran, or stay and be at the mercy of Iran's accumulated power.

Although the portrayal of an invincible front against the enemy is partly to boost morale in a country battered by economic hardship and the COVID-19 pandemic, that should not obscure the fact that, for an aggressively ideological enemy now assured of its military might, bending under pressure will not be an option.

Farzin Nadimi is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Gulf region. ❖

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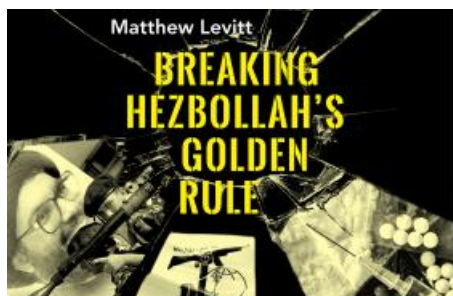


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