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If Iran Deploys Missiles in Iraq: U.S.-Israeli Response Options

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Brief Analysis

If Iran duplicates its formula from Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen by sending long-range missiles to Iraq, then future conflicts with Israel would likely include military action on Iraqi soil.

Iran's long-range rockets and missiles allow it to threaten enemy forces and populations hundreds of kilometers away, while proxy warfare enables it to indirectly harass and deter these enemies with minimal risk of confrontation on Iranian territory. In recent years, Tehran has combined these strategies to great effect in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. There are signs that Iraq may be the next theater for this approach—signs that were evident well before the latest U.S. military deployments to the region and meetings with Iraqi leaders. If so, such a scenario would threaten Iraq's hopes for a peaceful future and its relations with the United States.

IRAN'S FORWARD BASING OF MISSILES

Iran's foreign missile transfers have followed a distinct pattern—first, long-range artillery rockets are provided (and

Occasionally upgraded with better accuracy), then short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) are added. Where longer reach is required, extended-range SRBMs have been provided. These range increases not only expand the number of reachable targets, but also allow for a broader and less predictable set of launch locations. Tasking forward proxies with manning the launchers allows Iran to increase its fire volume with less risk compared to firing from its own territory or using Iranian crews. Several examples of this pattern are evident:

- **Lebanon.** Iran's ballistic support to Lebanese Hezbollah, the flagship of its proxy enterprise, is decades long. By 2006, the group had built up an arsenal of around 12,000 munitions—mainly short-range rockets, along with a few hundred 75 km Fajr-5 artillery rockets, 300 km Zelzal-3 missiles, and 300 km Syrian M-600 missiles (which are copies of Iran's Fateh-110). During the 2006 war with Israel, Hezbollah launched around 4,000 of these weapons across the border. Current assessments suggest that the group's long-range artillery rocket arsenal is now in the low thousands and its SRBM arsenal in the low hundreds, some of them augmented by precision guidance and embedded in populated areas.
- **Gaza.** Iran has provided Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad with rockets and the ability to locally produce and service them, including the 75 km Fajr-5 (aka M-75). Such rockets were fired from Gaza into Tel Aviv last month, and heavy salvos of shorter-range rockets were fired at Israel as recently as May 4-5.
- **Syria.** Iran has provided forces in Syria with finished missiles and the ability to produce them, including the 300 km M-600. In May 2013, Israel reportedly struck an M-600 cache near Damascus. By 2018, Iran had deployed production facilities, launchers, and munitions in Syria, spurring Israeli forces to launch strikes against them. In response, Iranian proxies launched dozens of rockets at Israel in May 2018, as well as a heavy rocket (possibly M-600) in January 2019.
- **Yemen.** Since the current Yemen war began in 2015, Iran has taught the Houthis how to produce the very accurate 150 km Badr-1P artillery rocket, and to convert SA-2 missiles into the 250 km Qaher-1 free-flight missile and its 400 km Qaher-M2 variant (the equivalent of Iran's Tondar-69 missile). Also sent over was a 1,000 km version of the Qiam-1 SRBM (called Burkan-2H by the Houthis). [According to the UN](#), this missile was manufactured by Iran's Shahid Bakeri Industrial Group specifically so that the Houthis could strike Riyadh and other Saudi cities. The UN also reported that Iran has supplied the rebels with equipment for producing the oxidizer used in this longer-range liquid-fueled SRBM.

IRANIAN MISSILES AND IRAQ

Concern is mounting within Iraqi, U.S., and Israeli intelligence circles that Iran is covertly supplying long-range artillery rockets to proxy militias inside Iraq, including U.S.-designated terrorist groups Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HaN), and potentially the Badr Organization. These Shia proxies have reportedly developed exclusive use of secure bases in the provinces of Diyala (e.g., Camp Ashraf), Salah al-Din (Camp Speicher), Baghdad (Jurf al-Sakhar), Karbala (Razzaza), and Wasit (Suwayrah). It is also widely accepted that militias have developed a line of communication and control to Iran through Diyala, allowing them to import missiles and equipment without government approval or knowledge. For example, artillery rockets may already have entered Iraq inside empty water or oil tankers, a tactic also used in Yemen. If so, Iran's playbook suggests that SRBMs and/or precision guidance systems could soon follow.

Whether Iran uses Iraq as a launch site or a staging area for moving materiel into Syria, deploying SRBMs there would cross a line, mainly because it would bring a wider array of U.S. forces and partners into potential firing range. In a future conflict, missile-armed proxies operating from Iraq could target U.S. forces in various parts of the Gulf, Iranian Kurdish oppositionists, the Iraqi government, or Saudi Arabia. These groups have already demonstrated a willingness to conduct such operations. In July 2013, for example, Kataib Hezbollah members fired tactical rockets into Saudi territory after a Lebanese Hezbollah office in Beirut was hit by a car bomb. And in May 2015, HaN leader

and U.S.-designated terrorist Akram Kaabi threatened the kingdom with revenge attacks for its crackdowns on Saudi Shia. If Iranian-provided SRBMs were deployed to the southern Iraqi desert today, they could target Riyadh, as occurred numerous times when Saddam Hussein conducted his Scud campaign during the 1991 Gulf War.

Missile strikes from Iraq are not an unprecedented threat for Israel either. Saddam's forces launched thirty-nine Al-Hussein missiles against Israeli cities in 1991, and a dedicated U.S.-British air and special forces campaign failed to destroy any launchers once they were dispersed across western Iraq. In a future conflict, Iran could greatly increase its potential fire on Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities by forward-deploying SRBMs into this same area of Iraq, perhaps taking advantage of militia control over highways in Anbar province. Iraqi militia leaders have already issued occasional threats against Israel. In March 2017, Akram Kaabi threatened to move his forces to the Golan Heights to fight Israel; Asaib Ahl al-Haq leader Qais al-Khazali signaled similar intentions when he visited the Israeli border area that December.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Washington and Baghdad need to make sure that Iran does not develop the capability to covertly move missiles into Iraq. Such deliveries would violate UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which bars “the supply, sale, or transfer of arms and related materiel from Iran.”

For its part, Israel is no doubt considering whether it should approach this potential threat following its older Lebanese mindset (i.e., do little until war) or its newer Syrian model (strike early before the missile threat develops into a formidable deterrent). Either approach would spell trouble for the United States and Iraq, so both governments should take steps to spare Israel from making the choice in the first place.

If Israel does feel compelled to take action, launching overt airstrikes into Iraq would not be its first option. For one thing, an Israeli strike in Diyala province or similarly distant areas would need to penetrate more than 800 km of defended airspace, crossing Jordanian and Saudi territory while braving Iraqi and possibly Syrian air defenses. The Israeli Air Force has shown its capability to operate far and wide, but ongoing strikes 1,000 km from home are a different animal from strikes in nearby Syria. In addition to operational challenges, overt Israeli action would complicate U.S. relations and interests in Iraq, not to mention Israel's own regional relations.

If the past is prologue, Israel's would more likely start off by asking U.S., European, and regional partners for intelligence support and communication channels to relevant Iraqi leadership, bolstering its own independent options. It would then use those channels to prevent Iranian missile deployments to Iraq. At the same time, Israel would prepare operational options to destroy threatening capabilities as a final backstop. It might also advance other prevention efforts, going “upstream” beyond missiles and equipment to target the key actors responsible for generating the Iranian ballistic-by-proxy threat against Israel. In parallel, it could seek to change Tehran's risk calculus by showing the regime that indirect warfare is not a one-way street, and that attacks launched out of third-party territories may draw repercussions on Iranian personnel and soil.

Washington and Baghdad have obvious reasons to avoid the above scenarios, since each one could imperil the U.S. position in Iraq and spoil the country's first chance at sustained peace after decades of conflict. Accordingly, U.S. officials should persistently bring up the risk that Iraq faces if Israel or other parties perceive that unmonitored Iranian missile shipments are getting through. This includes reminding Iraqi leaders that the United States would be obliged to bring up any such evidence in biannual reporting to the UN secretary-general regarding compliance with Resolution 2231 (these reports are delivered each July and February).

As Secretary of State Mike Pompeo emphasized during his recent visit to Baghdad, the Iraqi government can address this problem directly by keeping a close eye on Iran's militia proxies and their bases. This argues for ensuring that state-controlled intelligence and counterterrorism forces have access to military bases that are now used exclusively

by pro-Iranian units of the Popular Mobilization Forces such as Kataib Hezbollah, HaN, and Asaib Ahl al-Haq. This first step might provide some reassurance to those parties concerned about Iranian missiles in Iraq.

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