

# Iran's Missile Defiance: Potential Threats to Europe, the Gulf, and Israel

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Brief Analysis

## Tehran can be expected to continue its provocations amid Western pressure on its missile activities, issuing further threats against U.S. allies and showing off new systems.

**W**ashington is not alone in calling for a more resolute international stance against Iran's missile program. On February 4, the European Union expressed grave concern about the regime's ballistic missile development in a rare joint statement on Iran, calling on the country to refrain from further launches. Ten days prior, French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian warned Tehran that firm sanctions would be imposed if multilateral talks on the missile issue failed, suggesting that the negotiations France had been pushing for since at least last summer were already underway.

In addition to triggering denials from Iran's Foreign Ministry, Le Drian's revelation seemingly spurred the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to issue its boldest rhetoric against Europe yet. During a February 2 television broadcast, IRGC deputy commander Hossein Salami warned that Iran would soon make a "strategic leap" in its missile program by changing important technological and geographical "variables"—in other words, that it would improve the accuracy, lethality, propulsive power, and range of its missiles so they can reach continental Europe.

Iranian officials have issued similar threats to Gulf rivals. In a March 13 speech, Supreme National Security Council secretary Ali Shamkhani implicitly accused Saudi Arabia of "spending oil dollars to develop a suspicious nuclear program...that can potentially drag the region, if not the entire world, into a dangerous crisis...Undoubtedly, those new threats will force us to alter our strategy and arm our forces accordingly." The same day, Gholamali Rashid, commander of the Khatam al-Anbia Central Headquarters, declared that Iran should destabilize "hostile" powers

such as Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel by “crushing their belief system” while strengthening Iran’s own. Israel has been singled out by other officials as well. Earlier this month, Salami told Israelis that they could not rely on U.S. military protection because “they will be destroyed before Americans could arrive to their aid.” He delivered the threat in reaction to a joint U.S.-Israeli ballistic missile defense exercise.

Over the past few months, Iran has limited its ballistic missile tests to a pair of **unsuccessful satellite launch attempts** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-continued-push-for-a-nuclear-ready-missile-capability>). Yet the escalation and nuances evident in recent IRGC rhetoric indicate that such activity might soon ramp up. For example, the IRGC could use the latest brawl with Europe to galvanize domestic support for developing longer-range missiles, as part of what military leaders call “changing the deterrence calculus” (a theme that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself **spoke of more generally** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-most-important-speech-of-the-year-in-iran-hostile-to-the-west-no-conces>) during his recent Nowruz address). Tellingly, both Salami and IRGC Aerospace Force commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh have talked about a “fluid” missile strategy that can change depending on how other players behave.

## UNVEILING A NEW CRUISE MISSILE

**T**he fortieth anniversary of the 1979 revolution gave Iran a high-profile opportunity to unveil a series of weapon systems and military equipment, some of which bear a closer look. On February 2, it revealed the Hoveizeh cruise missile, a variant of the existing Soumar missile (itself a copy of Russia’s Kh-55 nuclear cruise missile).

Externally, the two Iranian missiles look identical with the exception of their engine pods. Hoveizeh’s is almost twice the length of Soumar’s, allowing it to house a new version of the Tolou engine (a copy of the French TRI-60) with a longer exhaust pipe and perhaps more compressor and turbine stages. Hoveizeh should also be more fuel efficient, allowing for longer range. To compensate for the increased engine weight, its popup wings seem to have been moved slightly back.

According to IRGC officials, Hoveizeh has a range of 1,350 kilometers, a significant improvement over Soumar’s reported 700 kilometers. It is unclear whether the new missile has actually been tested: the Iranian state television broadcast that claimed to show the Hoveizeh’s first launch actually showed a Soumar. In any case, a cruise missile with a 1,350-kilometer range could threaten naval targets in the East Mediterranean if fired from northwest Iran, or almost the entire Arabian Sea if fired from Iran’s southern coasts.

Iran also claims that Hoveizeh has a sophisticated navigation system that enables it to be used as a highly accurate land-attack missile. Yet the publicly revealed version seems to have an active-radar homing head in its nose, making it more suitable against naval targets.

Compared to ballistic missiles, cruise missiles fly lower, are more difficult to counter, and can potentially be moved much closer to their targets before launch. At present, Hoveizeh and Soumar are designed to be launched from trucks, but they could theoretically be fired from submarines, surface vessels, or even converted shipping containers on merchant ships. Such configurations would give Iran a viable second- or even first-strike capability, assuming their crews were able to transport and position them undetected.

## NEW VERSIONS OF BALLISTIC MISSILES

**O**n February 3, the IRGC unveiled what it claimed to be the second generation of the Khoramshahr ballistic missile. Called Khoramshahr-2, the weapon is supposedly armed with a variant of the maneuvering warhead seen on the existing Imad missile, though this claim cannot be verified at present. An associated **video** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9zgk2aCZs4>) appeared to show the missile being launched at the Semnan

test site in central Iran, though it is unclear whether the Fars News Agency's cropped [photograph of the missile \(https://media.farsnews.com/Uploaded/Files/Images/1397/11/14/13971114000758\\_Test\\_NewPhotoFree.jpg\)](https://media.farsnews.com/Uploaded/Files/Images/1397/11/14/13971114000758_Test_NewPhotoFree.jpg) bearing the name "Khoramshahr-2" showed a new weapon or merely a repainted Imad.

Another "February surprise" was the IRGC's unveiling of an underground production line for a new ballistic missile called Dezful. The latest member of the Fateh/Zolfaqar solid-fuel family, it has the claimed capability to quickly deliver precision-guided strikes at a range of 1,000 kilometers. If true, this would allow Iran to hit targets deep inside Saudi Arabia (including Riyadh and missile defense sites) as well as northern Israel. And if such missiles were deployed to Iraq or Syria, they could theoretically reach more of Saudi Arabia and the entirety of Israel.

## CONCLUSION

Iran's diverse missile arsenal forms the pillar of its defensive and offensive strategies, and the regime has gone to great lengths to showcase these weapons—not only as its winning card in deterring enemies and pursuing its regional ambitions, but also as a signal that it will not be swayed from pushing forward with missile development. Yet if the Iranians have indeed achieved the capability to inflict precision strikes on faraway targets using smaller and more versatile solid-fuel missiles, then they might be willing to negotiate with Europe over some aspects of their larger and/or liquid-fuel missiles.

Iranian military commanders also seem to be closely following the latest reports on Saudi Arabia's nuclear activities. Some of them have hinted that Riyadh is pursuing covert development of a nuclear weapons capability—and that Iran should do the same. If Tehran truly believes the kingdom is taking that route, it would take the region and perhaps the world further down a risky long-term proliferation path.

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