

For a Second Time, Iran Fires Missiles at IS Targets in Syria

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Oct 1, 2018

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Brief Analysis

Tehran likely used the attack to demonstrate its unhindered regional reach, while flashing its enhanced deterrent posture through the testing of new military hardware.

In the early hours of Monday, October 1, according to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran launched six surface-to-surface missiles across Iraq at “*takfiri*” (apostate) targets in Syria east of the Euphrates River, in the Abu Kamal and Hajin regions of Deir al-Zour governorate. These were followed up by aerial strikes using seven Saegheh “stealth” armed drones aimed at “terrorist positions and support infrastructure.”

The strikes were intended as retaliation for events on September 22, when uniform-clad gunmen opened fire on a military parade in Ahvaz, in southwest Iran, killing some forty and wounding dozens more. Both Ahwazi (reflecting the local Arab versus the Persian pronunciation) separatists and the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack, although Ahwazi spokesmen later denied involvement and an IS website showed video messages recorded by the assailants. In response, on September 23, IRGC spokesmen vowed to deliver a “crushing act of revenge” in the near future “both within the region and beyond it,” while identifying the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates as the “main backers of the terrorists.”

The IRGC statement claimed the October 1 attack caused significant casualties among the very people who had facilitated the September 22 operation, while reiterating the Iranian charge of a link between the targeted group and the United States and “regional tyrants,” with this epithet referring to the Gulf states. A photograph purportedly showing one of the missiles on a launcher revealed the slogans “death to America,” “death to Israel,” and “death to the Saudis.” Iran may well stick to mere slogans against these three adversaries if it remains able to use its missile force against regional nonstate opponents. Meanwhile, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, chairman of Iran’s Armed Forces General Staff, asserted that this attack represented only a first phase of the operation, with more to come.

Assessing the Weapons Used

According to Iranian media, the six missiles employed in what has been named Operation Strike of Muharram were—as in the [first tit-for-tat strike against IS targets in eastern Syria, specifically in Mayadin in June 2017](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-missile-strikes-reveal-potential-military-weaknesses) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-missile-strikes-reveal-potential-military-weaknesses>)—of the Zolfaqar and Qiam types, with respective ranges of 700-750 and 750-800 km. Yet reports suggest the Qiam missiles used in the latest attack were an improved version, as first shown on Iranian TV days ago, with “maneuverable separating reentry vehicle and warhead.” The original Qiam-1 missile, as a baseline point of comparison, can deliver a 747 kg warhead.

These missiles were reportedly launched from the same base near Kermanshah as that employed for the Mayadin strike, at a range of 570 km from their ostensible targets. Notably, mobile phone videos taken by bystanders showed at least one of the missiles exploding in midair shortly after launch, thereafter hitting the ground near residential areas. This shows the persistent reliability problems experienced by Iran’s ballistic missile arsenal.

Nevertheless, the Qiam and Zolfaqar missiles used in the strike are among the most versatile types in the IRGC inventory. Because they have separating warheads, the missile bodies would have been automatically dumped midflight somewhere in the western Iraqi desert. Originally said to be designed to target U.S. bases within its 750-800 km range, the six-ton Qiam is also intended to reach Riyadh from secure positions in the Zagros Mountains, in southwestern Iran.

While the Zolfaqar and Qiam demonstrated poor reliability and underwhelming accuracy in the June 2017 strike, the September 9, 2018, attack using six Fateh-110 missiles on Kurdish targets in northern Iraq showed much-improved accuracy, if not sheer luck, hitting the very room where the leadership of the dissident Iranian Kurdish Democratic Party was then convening. To date, this is the closest Iran has come to what is known as a decapitation precision strike. An IRGC official later claimed a high-ranking Saudi intelligence official was also present at this meeting. As for the October 1 operation, Tehran noted that it followed ten days of extensive intelligence work. This investigation likely built on strengthened local positions by the Syrian army and Hezbollah, which in 2017 launched an offensive to retake Abu Kamal, the last IS stronghold in eastern Syria. Although that operation met heavy resistance, Syrian and Iranian forces now control Abu Kamal and therefore could have helped find targets for the strike.

As for the armed drones used in the attack, the jet-powered Saegheh is a smaller version of the Simorgh, which itself is a copy of the American RQ-170 Sentinel stealth surveillance drone. Back in 2011, Iran managed to get its hands on a relatively intact Sentinel that had crash-landed on Iranian soil. And exactly two years ago, in 2016, the Saegheh was unveiled carrying four small-diameter Sadid electro-optically guided bombs externally; by comparison, the versions used in the newest Syrian strikes took off from Iran appearing to carry only a single light bomb internally. Different versions of the weapon are available, including one for operation at night, and all have already seen extensive use by Iranian Shahed 129 drones over Syria in recent years. In February 2018, an Israeli Air Force fighter jet shot down what looked like a Saegheh over northern Israel. For its part, the IRGC Aerospace Force is known to operate Saegheh and Simorgh drones out of [the Shahid Karimi base southeast of Kashan](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israel-once-again-strikes-irans-uav-base-in-syria) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israel-once-again-strikes-irans-uav-base-in-syria>). The 980 km distance between this base and possible IS targets east of Abu Kamal falls within the Saegheh’s estimated 1,000 km radius of action.

Iran’s Next Steps

Following its hit on Islamic State targets, Iran could still choose, for the next phase of this operation, to target Ahwazi separatist groups by attempting to assassinate their leaders abroad, as it did in November 2017 by evidently killing one such leader based in The Hague. Iran will also likely set its sights on the few remaining IS

strongholds in eastern Syria to test its missiles or drones even further.

The accuracy and effectiveness of the latest attack has yet to be determined through independent analysis. But by launching a combined missile and drone strike, Iran wanted to show its preparedness and resolve in retaliating for any attacks against its self-perceived pillars of power. This is the case even though military officials took ten days to locate their targets. The move was also meant to flash the IRGC's offensive deterrent capabilities to its adversaries in Riyadh and the Abu Dhabi.

Furthermore, if the IRGC has indeed managed to verifiably repeat its Kurdistan performance in the eastern Euphrates, this could be a nightmare scenario for U.S.- and Gulf-allied forces in the region. Especially worrisome is the prospect of Yemen's Iran-allied Houthis being permitted to apply such technologies to their Burkan-2H missiles at a 1,000 km range.

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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