Is Iran's Recent Muscle Flexing More Than the Usual Show of Force?

by **Farzin Nadimi (/experts/farzin-nadimi)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Farzin Nadimi (/experts/farzin-nadimi)

Farzin Nadimi, an associate fellow with The Washington Institute, is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region.

Brief Analysis

Tehran continues to boast about military capabilities that bolster deterrence, but ambiguities in its definition of national interests raise concerns about how it will wield its new offensive weapons and increasingly assertive policies.

Every year at the end of summer, the Islamic Republic highlights the sacrifices and (often questionable) choices it made during the protracted conflict with Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the 1980s. In commemorating the start of that war, political and military leaders also put the spotlight on the Iran's perceived "enemies" -- which in Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's parlance denotes Israel and the United States (and lately Saudi Arabia as well). This year, the regime seems more focused than ever on visibly strengthening its deterrence against these enemies, whether by parading its increasingly formidable weapons systems in the streets, exercising its military capabilities ever closer to U.S. vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, or shouting down any elements within the government that attempt to counsel a less belligerent course.

RECENT MUSCLE FLEXING

During the annual military parade on September 21, Iran showed off its recently delivered Russian S-300 long-range air defense system, as well as the new liquid-fuel Imad and solid-fuel Zolfaqar surface-to-surface missiles with claimed ranges of 1,650 and 750 kilometers respectively. If those ranges are accurate, the former is capable of reaching Israel, while the latter gives Iran the capability to more accurately hit strategic targets deep inside eastern Saudi Arabia for the first time, including Riyadh, al-Kharj Air Base, and King Khalid Military City. The Zolfaqar is a versatile missile with suppressed trajectory characteristics, so it could be more difficult to track and intercept; it is also said to include a cluster area-denial warhead developed with North Korea's help. The Imad is said to incorporate

a maneuvering warhead for improved accuracy and survivability against missile defenses. Medium-range ballistic missiles also played a prominent role in the parade and accompanying speeches.

In addition, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) flew two refurbished Iraqi Sukhoi Su-22 attack aircraft over Bandar Abbas port as part of the commemorations. They plan to arm the planes with Nassr-1 antiship missiles boasting a range of around 35 kilometers, potentially posing a greater threat to U.S. Navy assets and other foreign vessels in the Persian Gulf.

Meanwhile, the IRGC has been increasing its hostile tone not only against the United States and its allies, but also against domestic factions aligned with President Hassan Rouhani's government. Speaking at the parade, the new chairman of the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS), Gen. Mohammad Bagheri, joined other IRGC commanders who have repeatedly accused the government of being intimidated by foreigners. He also asserted that Iran needed long-range missiles to maintain its sovereignty and avoid the fate of countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In March, another IRGC commander, AFGS vice chairman Gen. Masoud Jazayeri, described missile power as an important factor in Iran's national defense doctrine against the United States and Israel. Three months later, he openly yearned for an opportunity to "rid the world of America's imperialistic policies" once and for all in a direct battle.

Iran has also been waging a psychological campaign aimed at delegitimizing the U.S. presence in the Gulf, increasingly harassing American warships and reconnaissance aircraft outside its waters and airspace while attempting to pass such incidents off as normal activity. This behavior risks exacerbating tensions in the Gulf at a time when the IRGC has stubbornly refused any means of emergency contact offered by the U.S. Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain. Former Fifth Fleet commander Vice Admiral John Miller mentioned this refusal at a September 27 Atlantic Council event. And on September 21, IRGC Maj. Gen. Gholam Ali Rashid -- the newly appointed head of the Khatam al-Anbia Joint HQ, an entity that coordinates IRGC and national army operations -- ruled out any proposed hotline with the U.S. Navy, calling for America to withdraw from the region completely.

Similarly, on September 24, the Supreme Leader's representative to the IRGC warned against signing a SALT-style arms control agreement with Washington, saying it would be the beginning of the end of the Islamic Republic. Such rhetoric stands in sharp contrast to Rouhani's policy of detente, suggesting more trouble ahead between the confrontational IRGC and more conciliatory civilian elements, though the full significance of this deepening rift is yet to be determined.

Hardliners have made it a point to harshly criticize a March 23 Twitter message attributed to former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a relative moderate who heads the Expediency Council. The tweet called for a negotiated settlement of differences with other countries instead of missile rattling; he even suggested a nonconfrontational path similar to that taken by Germany and Japan after World War II. Not surprisingly, his remarks infuriated Iran's militarist hardliners.

Those reactions are in keeping with the IRGC's pattern over the past few months of brushing aside domestic and foreign voices advocating a shift in posture. Specifically, Tehran has been asked repeatedly to halt its missile tests and deployments, cease its belligerence in the Gulf, and reconsider its highly interventionist military policies in the region. Yet deputy IRGC commander Hossein Salami declared on March 10 that his organization's "increasingly versatile and more accurate and powerful" missiles are intended to secure not only Iran, but the whole Islamic world. Such statements follow Khamenei's lead in calling for a more offensive posture in order to strengthen deterrence, an approach likely rooted in two developments: the string of conciliatory gestures Rouhani's camp has made to the "enemy" since reaching the P5+1 nuclear deal last year, and the increasing confidence and aggressiveness that Saudi Arabia has shown through its actions in Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere. On October 5, for example, the IRGC Navy issued a harsh statement criticizing the kingdom's weekend military exercises in international waters off Iran's coast, seemingly surprised that Riyadh would be so bold. They also denied the drill participants innocent

passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

DRIVING FORCES BEHIND IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY

In broader terms, Tehran's recent moves may signal a growing effort to emulate Mao Zedong's 1930s strategy of "offensive defense" (i.e., ensuring national defense through decisive actions instead of strictly passive measures). Through this lens, the regime will likely view any attempt to place limitations on its ballistic missile program as an obstacle to Iran's legitimate self-defense.

The international and domestic reaction to Iran's missile tests (at least nine of which have been conducted since the nuclear deal) also highlights the Islamic Republic's everlasting debate about whether ideology or national interests should be the principal driver of foreign policy. This debate is escalating at a time when Iran needs to open up to the world -- at least in theory -- so that it can improve its economic prospects and international standing.

The history of the Islamic Republic is rife with misinterpretations and misrepresentations of Iran's national interests. Khamenei's predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, never mentioned "national interests" when spearheading the revolution or leading the country. Rather, he decried nationalism and emphasized an ideology that transcended Iran's borders. Only in the past decade or so has the notion of "regime expediency" (*maslahat-e nezam*) brought nationalism back to the fore, as a useful tool for Ayatollah Khamenei to galvanize domestic support against perceived foreign threats.

This year, Iranian leaders have begun to use "national interests" more often as a foreign policy term. And during an April 10 address before a group of high-ranking service members, Khamenei made a vague but notable comment that the main duty of the armed forces is to defend the "borders of national security" rather than Iran's recognized geographical borders.

Such thinking helps Tehran justify its costly and seemingly superfluous missile program. While one can argue that any country is entitled to strong armed forces, Iran's latest efforts to expand its long-range missile arsenal do very little to serve its national interests -- but quite a bit to serve the revolutionary interests of the regime's radical core and military elite. This is likely why the more secular national armed forces (the Artesh) have never been entrusted with long-range missiles.

A PATTERN OF OVERREACH

Despite Iran's efforts to justify its recent behavior in strategic terms, many of its actions since the Islamic Republic's founding have clearly harmed the country's national interests. Regarding the Iran-Iraq War, for example, senior figures in Tehran often overlook the fact that aside from Saddam's hostile intentions, it was their own misjudgments -- about Iran's weaknesses and the capabilities of its enemy -- that directly contributed to starting the conflict and prolonging it into eight years of misery and despair for the Iranian people. Astonishingly, the head of the IRGC at the time, Mohsen Rezai, did not publicly acknowledge any such errors until this year, more than three decades after the fact. And while Iran has improved its diplomatic skills considerably since the 1980s, it does not seem to have learned much from its most glaring strategic mistakes. This apparent blind spot, coupled with the Islamic Republic's uncertain long-term intentions and expanding missile capabilities, make its recent muscle flexing particularly worrisome.

Farzin Nadimi is a Washington-based analyst specializing in the security and defense affairs of Iran and the Persian Gulf region. ❖

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