

Iran Seeks to Strengthen Its Deterrence by Showing Off Its Missile Force

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Brief Analysis

By test-firing a new ballistic missile and flaunting a secret underground tunnel complex, Tehran hopes to reassure hardliners at home while defiantly showing the international community that it is still pursuing active deterrence and missile development.

On October 11, the same day that Iranian legislators were passionately debating adoption of the P5+1 nuclear deal, Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan revealed that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) had tested a new medium-range ballistic missile -- the first act in a wider missile propaganda campaign. Although the test did not technically violate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), its timing and nature were clear signs of defiance, particularly given that UN Security Council Resolution 2231 calls on Iran to refrain from such activities while the still-binding Resolution 1929 formally prohibits them.

To make sure the message was unambiguous, military officials also took the unusual step of inviting local reporters on a tour of an extensive IRGC missile storage complex at an undisclosed underground location. State television footage of the tunnel complex, broadcast on October 14, showed what looked like operational Ghaadr-class missiles mounted on mobile launchers. Indeed, the Ghorb-e Nouh and Ghorb-e Ghaem construction conglomerates affiliated with the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbia Engineering Corps have built extensive tunnel networks for housing missile launchers in southern, western, and central Iran. Larger networks around Tehran reportedly hide missile production facilities. The Khatam al-Anbia's resources include 135,000 military and civilian employees and seventeen giant tunnel boring machines; each of these machines is capable of digging fifteen-meter-wide holes at a rate of up to fifty meters per day.

The military significance of the latest revelations might be limited. Even if the new missile incorporates mid-course and terminal guidance as claimed, and even if the so-called "missile city" is buried 500 meters underground or inside a mountain, the liquid-fueled missiles would still need to be driven out into the open, erected, and individually readied for launch -- a time-consuming and vulnerable process. Underground missile silos can also be detected and targeted preemptively. Nevertheless, the timing of the unprecedented demonstration underscores the Islamic Republic's quest to reinforce its strategic deterrence, much like four years ago when the IRGC unveiled underground ballistic missile silos and air force commander Gen. Amir-Ali Hajizadeh threatened that any would-be strikes against the nuclear program would be greeted with "an erupting volcano of fire."

The missile displays were almost undoubtedly ordered by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, at the same time that he reluctantly gave the Majlis a green light to conditionally approve implementation of the JCPOA. In other words, they were intended as a reminder to the world that despite Iran's show of "heroic flexibility" during the nuclear negotiations, its missile capabilities and regional standing should not be meddled with -- a position that President Hassan Rouhani seemed to agree with on August 2, when he ruled out any JCPOA missile limitations and boasted about his administration's accelerated expansion of national military strength. Similarly, Defense Minister Dehghan made clear on August 23 that Iran would develop and field whatever missile it deemed necessary to maintain deterrence, and that no limitations on range or other capabilities would be accepted. He also laid out Iran's ten-year space program -- in 2016, the military will conduct the first test of the Simorgh space launch vehicle (which can place a 200-kilogram satellite in low-earth orbit), followed by larger rockets in the future, raising concerns about an eventual intercontinental ballistic missile capability.

BUSINESS AS USUAL

The IRGC's "strategic" ballistic missiles form the mainstay of Iran's defense doctrine, and military leaders hope to influence enemy calculations with the arsenal's diversity, range, lethality, accuracy, and survivability. The Supreme Leader and the IRGC have made clear that they will never shy away from seeking regional hegemony and control over oil pricing, or countering U.S. interests in the Middle East and Southwest Asia, or fighting Israel, or consolidating Tehran's leadership role in the Islamic world -- in each case using their missile arsenal if necessary.

In remarks made on August 26, IRGC navy commander Adm. Ali Fadavi explained that Iran's fight with the United States is over values, not just interests, and the military must wage that fight beyond the Islamic Republic's boundaries. Khamenei had laid out this strategic vision in an August 17 speech, ordering the implementation of carefully planned yet unspecified offensive and defensive measures against American influence in the region using all available military, cultural, economic, and political means. And on June 30, he had decreed that the government and armed forces should prioritize the "deterrent ballistic missile program in proportion to the existing threats" as part of the next five-year development plan. Consequently, the IRGC -- the sole operator of the country's "strategic" missiles -- can be expected to play an even more prominent political role in Iran in the coming years.

While IRGC leaders have positioned the Pasdaran to gain from all possible outcomes to the nuclear deal, they have vocally blamed the West for trying to use the JCPOA to polarize Iranian society, even though hardliners and moderates sound quite united in opposing any continued restrictions on the country's future military procurements. Most hardliners believe that the West's ultimate objective is not only to dismantle Iran's nuclear program, but to alter its "Islamic" character. Similarly, Khamenei's October 21 conditional endorsement letter to the Supreme National Security Council, which called for continued vigilance over the JCPOA's "numerous weak points," also warned of the persistent existential threat from the United States.

Given this mindset, the nuclear agreement will likely accelerate the arms race in the Persian Gulf region. Iran is already on a shopping spree with Russia and China, reportedly seeking to purchase or jointly produce fighter jets, transport planes, helicopters, and space technology. The Gulf Arab states will likely follow suit, with Saudi Arabia

already announcing the purchase of four littoral combat ships from the United States.

ROOTS OF DETERRENCE IN THE IRANIAN PARLANCE

Before the 1979 revolution, Iran sought deterrence against regional foes and the Soviet Union by increasing its investment in sophisticated weaponry and training, seeking close partnership with the Western powers, and securing membership or participation in multinational military treaties. After the revolution -- whose leaders were hostile to both Cold War camps and actively purged the remnants of the imperial armed forces -- Iran's notion of deterrence shattered, spurring the opportunistic Saddam Hussein to order an invasion. It took the remainder of the decade for the Iranian armed forces to reestablish partial deterrence, at great cost.

Bearing the experience of that protracted, indecisive war in mind, the regime tried to bolster its battered military capability by emphasizing missile technology and a zealously loyal Revolutionary Guard. In 1998, Iran test-launched a Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile, its first such weapon capable of threatening Israel. This was the start of a long struggle against technological and diplomatic obstacles to create viable deterrence against enemies real and perceived -- a process that also gave Iran a first-strike offensive capability. This offensive threat is reflected in the missile tested earlier this month, which was named "Imad" in likely reference to Imad Mughniyah, the notorious Hezbollah commander assassinated in 2008 by an alleged Israeli operation. The new weapon seems intended to defeat Israel's Arrow defense system, and Dehghan's claim that the Imad is topped by a maneuvering warhead reinforces that suggestion.

In addition to these modern strategic trends, it should not be forgotten that the Islamic Republic's military ideology is rooted deeply in Islamic history. Iranian leaders often use the same analysis as the early medieval Islamic period, which is taught comprehensively at Iranian military colleges.

In the seventh century, the Prophet Muhammad's ascending Islamic government in Medina set its sights on the Persian and Roman Empires, which had both been weakened during the Byzantine-Sasanian War of 602-628. But Medina's Muslim forces first had to secure a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula amid opposition from powerful tribes based in Mecca, using a combination of military threats and peace agreements. The Meccans were demanding, so the Muslims chose to show flexibility in order to let the negotiations progress while focusing on the long-term objective of conquering the peninsula and the vast neighboring empires. They took advantage of the eventual ten-year peace accord with the Meccans in 628, the Treaty of Hudaibiyah, to deal with the weaker local opposition tribes, secure their supply routes, and send large armies to the borders of the Byzantine Empire. As described in a 2010 Iranian National Defense University textbook, all the Muslims had to do was wait for Mecca to violate the accord, which supposedly happened a year later -- they then annulled the treaty, conquered Mecca, and completed their victory in the peninsula and beyond.

About six years ago, Saeed Jalili -- Iran's chief nuclear negotiator at the time, and current chair of the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations -- wrote an article in which he argued that the Supreme Leader's "heroic flexibility" was analogous to the Treaty of Hudaibiyah as "a strategic turning point from war to peace." Although Jalili had previously noted that this ancient "flexibility" was only tactical in nature, some fellow hardliners nevertheless took issue with his wording. According to them, Muhammad had never changed his strategy from war to peace, but remained focused on continuous jihad, like the Supreme Leader today. In their view, Muslims used peace only as a temporary tactic to help them achieve grander strategic objectives.

Today, the Islamic Republic's concept of deterrence and military thinking may ultimately be defensive in nature. Yet knowing that such historical symbolism still resonates loudly in the minds of the military and political leadership, only time will tell whether they will settle for a lasting accommodation, or instead use the nuclear agreement as a delaying tactic until the next opportunity arises to challenge the status quo, as they have done repeatedly via regional

proxy wars.

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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