

How Iran's Revived Weapons Exports Could Boost Its Proxies

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

Given Tehran's noncompliant track record and the UN Security Council's imperfect arms restrictions, the nuclear deal could allow Iran to offer its allies a growing range of weapons systems designed to increase survivability and lethality in asymmetric warfare scenarios.

The nuclear deal will open up opportunities for Iran to export arms, though exactly when and under what conditions is a matter of dispute. This raises the question of how the upsurge in arms exports could affect the Islamic Republic's allies and proxies in the Middle East and beyond. In the past, UN Security Council resolutions have done little to prevent Iranian arms deals; in February 2014, for example, Tehran signed a \$195 million agreement to sell arms and ammunition to Iraq, in clear violation of Resolution 1747 (2007). It is therefore important to assess what types of weapons Iran might export and to whom -- whether it decides to exploit gaps in Resolution 2231 (the Security Council document approving the nuclear deal and extending the arms embargo), flout the UN entirely, or simply wait until sanctions and other restrictions are lifted in the coming months and years.

A SIZEABLE INDUSTRY

Iran's military-industrial complex has been growing rapidly since the mid-1990s. Today, it reportedly exports weapons to fifty-seven countries, many in conflict areas, in violation of UNSCR 1747. According to the arms-transfer database maintained by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Iran exported at least \$200 million worth of arms and ammunitions between 2010 and 2014; the real figure is probably much higher and is expected to rise even further as various restrictions are relaxed and eventually lifted. Iran's traditional arms customers are believed to be Middle Eastern, African, and South American countries, but its market share may grow gradually in emerging markets if it can keep offering cheap, reliable weapons.

For obvious reasons, Iran closely guards its annual military export figures and customer identities, and very little is reported about them. Yet the Islamic Republic has been identified as a major exporter in most available databases, and ten separate independent investigations have found Iranian weapons and ammunition in service with a variety of nonstate entities, including foreign-backed insurgents, rebel forces, Islamist armed groups, and warring civilian communities in Cote d'Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Kenya, Niger, Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda, not to mention primary beneficiaries such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iraqi Shiite militias. While encouraging Tehran to disclose details of its arms exports once international sanctions are lifted would be ideal, there is no guarantee that it would comply.

Iranian military equipment suitable for regional proxies and other customers includes but is not limited to small arms and ammunition, explosively formed penetrators (EFPs), communications equipment, night-vision goggles, thermal scopes, high-power sniper rifles, long-range mortars, man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), and artillery rockets. A more detailed review of this product list reveals major potential threats to regional security if such equipment ends up in the wrong hands -- such as terrorist and extremist groups in the Middle East, West Asia, and Africa -- once Iran is allowed to more freely export its arms.

MISSILES AND ROCKETS

Iran currently produces advanced antitank guided missiles, some of which have been used in conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza. Yet its newest missiles and guided projectiles have more advanced tandem warheads and guidance systems, making them more lethal against up-armored vehicles and even low-flying helicopters. These include an increasing array of electro-optical and laser-guided missile systems such as the Sadid (which appears to be based on the Israeli Spike), Tondar, Qaem, Dehlaviyeh, and Toufan-5 (a copy of the American TOW-2A), with 4-5 km maximum range. These missiles can be difficult to counter if used effectively. Iran has also begun manufacturing its own version of the versatile RPG-29 rocket-propelled grenade, used during Hezbollah's 2006 war with Israel. Named "Ghadir" in Iran, this weapon uses either a thermobaric or armor-piercing warhead and has a range of 500 meters.

Also manufactured in Iran are local versions of the Chinese QW-1 and QW-1M MANPADS, which go by the names Misaq-1 and -2 and are capable of quickly engaging aerial targets flying up to 4,000 meters high from a range of 5 km. Iran can offer even more in terms of mobile guided anti-aircraft defense. The so-called "Herz-e-Nohom" is a relatively compact radar and electro-optically guided mobile air-defense system mounted on a medium truck chassis and capable of operating in densely populated urban areas. Such systems can set up air-defense ambushes and engage low-flying aircraft as far away as 10 km. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the army are also attempting to develop three rapid-fire Gatling guns -- the three-barrel 23 mm Assefeh, and the six-barrel 7.62 mm Akhgar and 12.7 mm Moharam and Nasir -- to shoot down cruise missiles. Obviously some of these are just research projects, but others could eventually end up in militant hands somewhere in the Middle East. Iranian defense officials are very hopeful that they can export their indigenously developed air-defense systems in the coming years once sanctions are lifted.

Mortars can also be very useful in urban warfare and other asymmetric environments, and they are not covered by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or UNSCR 2231. In addition to smaller versions, Iran manufactures the 120 mm Razm and 160 mm Vafa mortars with claimed ranges in excess of 16 and 20 km respectively. If true, this is a formidable capability for mortar systems; compared to field artillery, mortars are easier to move and operate from concealed positions, making them suitable for asymmetric scenarios.

Iran also famously produces and proliferates the Fajr family of artillery rockets. Iranian rockets are spreading all over the world in both legal and illicit ways, according to the Geneva-based Small Arms Survey. Iranian military leaders have already spoken about supplying friendly countries and "resistance movements" with rocket manufacturing techniques that use local materials and tooling. For example, recent reports from Yemen suggest that

Houthi forces have produced and used their own Shooting Star-1 and -2 rockets with claimed specifications similar to the Iranian Fajr-3 and -5. The Fajr-3 has a range of 43 km, and its 85 kg warhead can cause considerable damage to a radius of 50 meters. The larger Fajr-5 can reach 75 km with its 178 kg warhead; Iran has also tested a newer two-stage version with a range of 180 km and a destructive radius of 100 meters, as well as a guided version resembling a miniaturized Fateh-110.

Other widely exported Iranian rockets are the shorter and very flexible 240 mm and 333 mm Falaq-1 and -2, which can be fired from small pickup trucks against targets up to 10 km away. These rockets have been seen in widespread use by Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.

The most worrisome short-range missile system, though, could be the fourth-generation Fateh-110D1, which can deliver a 750 kg warhead up to 300 km with better accuracy than Iran's other missiles and can be fired from multiple launchers. This missile has been seen in action in Syria; moreover, despite substantial Israeli interdiction efforts, some reports indicate that several Fateh-110s (or electro-optical-guided or anti-radar derivatives) may have already reached Hezbollah territory in Lebanon. If these reports are true, and if Fateh and its derivatives can indeed deliver on their promise, they open up a whole new range of options to Hezbollah and other operators. For example, IRGC commanders predicted two years ago that the "resistance" missiles would soon achieve a range of 400 km and pinpoint accuracy.

SNIPER RIFLES

One line of products that Iran finds very promising -- and which would be very dangerous in the wrong hands -- is high-power sniper rifles. A string of recent unveilings highlight this trend, including the 12.7 mm AM50, 14.5 mm Shaher, 20 mm Arash, and 23 mm Baher anti-materiel sniper rifles with effective ranges approaching 1,200, 3,000, 1,800, and 4,000 meters respectively. When used by a trained operator, these weapons can bring down a low-flying helicopter by knocking out its powertrain or other sensitive parts using special armor-piercing ammunition developed in Iran. The AM50 (a copy of the Austrian Steyr HS .50) has been seen in the hands of Syrian and Iraqi government forces and militia, as well as Hamas militants.

These are not the only weapons that Iranians claim they have developed to counter helicopters. They also recently showed the J-AHM "anti-helicopter" fragmentation jumping mine, which can be controlled from as far away as 5 km with an effective radius of 50 meters. The Sayad anti-helicopter cluster mine and Remit remotely controlled roadside bomb are similar products whose development was based on Iranian operational experience in Iraq.

DRONES

Iranian unmanned aerial vehicles have been proliferating across the Middle East at an alarming rate. Hezbollah has been operating Iranian attack and reconnaissance drones for years; the group is also reportedly running its own production line. Hamas has fashioned its own drones as well, probably with technical help from Iran.

Yet Iranian drones face increasing competition from Chinese models. A recent video released by the Iraqi Shiite militia Kataib Hezbollah showed what appeared to be a strike against an ISIS target using a Chinese CH-4 armed drone. Nigeria is also known to have deployed cheap armed Chinese drones. The lifting of sanctions will allow Iran to confront such competition head on, as in South America where it has already sold Mohajer drones to Venezuela and Ecuador.

ELECTRONICS

Defense electronics is another area where Iran has made noticeable advances. Some of the products made by the conglomerate Iran/Shiraz Electronics Industries (now desanctioned by the JCPOA) have already found their way to Tehran's Hezbollah and Syrian allies, but many more customers might be interested when sanctions are lifted.

Equipment such as portable frequency-hopping radios with encryption capability, data terminals, cellular and fiber-optic networks, laser range finders, thermal cameras, and night-vision goggles can all contribute greatly to the effectiveness and lethality of asymmetric operations.

Iran will almost certainly offer its proxies cheap radars such as the IRGC's Tareq man-portable short-range surveillance radar (which has a range of 8 km against helicopters and vehicles and 4.5 km for humans), or vehicle-mounted combined passive/active electro-optical and radar surveillance and targeting systems with ranges of up to 50 km. The 2006 Lebanon war also showed Hezbollah's Iranian mentors the value of automation, so one can expect to see a trend of automated anti-aircraft and anti-personnel guns, armed drones, and remote-controlled exploding boats coming out of Iran's development bureaus in the future, gradually replacing young, martyrdom-seeking zealots.

CONCLUSION

As shown above, Iran can offer proxy groups and third-world countries a wide range of force multipliers designed to increase survivability and lethality in asymmetric warfare scenarios, especially since most of these systems are not even covered by UNSCR 2231. The lifting of sanctions will also enable Iranian firms to more easily obtain the critical components and materials needed to develop even more effective systems.

The international community should therefore encourage Tehran to assume a more responsible role in limiting the proliferation of lethal arms in conflict zones in the absence of sanctions, and to adopt more transparent arms export policies. Iran and other actors should also be reminded that expanding the use of sophisticated weaponry in urban conflicts will have escalatory effects that increase civilian casualties, which already comprise 80 to 90 percent of all deaths and injuries caused by armed conflicts, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

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