

Responding to Iran's New Weapons and Naval Drills in the Gulf

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Renewed naval exercises, missile tests, and other developments point to a broadening threat, but their muted nature indicates that Tehran is trying to avoid popular backlash at home.

On August 2, the air and naval arms of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps began a substantial, unannounced military drill in the Persian Gulf and strategic Strait of Hormuz. The move followed the latest round of threats and counter-threats between Iran and the United States regarding freedom of navigation through the strait, with Washington warning it will bring Iran's oil exports to a virtual standstill as part of reimposed nuclear sanctions, and Tehran saying it would close the narrow waterway to all other oil shipments in retaliation. At the same time, the IRGC has tested or deployed new weapons systems that could broaden the range of threats it poses to military and civilian targets in the Gulf and beyond.

FIRST MAJOR DRILL IN THREE YEARS

With the exception of an IRGC Navy review of around 110 speedboats in August 2017, Iran had not conducted a large-scale naval exercise in the Gulf since March 2015. Unusually, it launched the latest drill without any of the traditional domestic publicity. The U.S. Navy noted preparations for the exercise shortly before it commenced, but Iranian military officials did not confirm it until after it concluded. The IRGC called it a scheduled exercise on "controlling and monitoring the strait," with the aim of showing Iran's readiness to proportionally counter "any hostile act" in the Gulf.

Few details have been released on the nature of the four-day drill, though U.S. Central Command chief Gen. Joseph Votel told reporters on August 8 that its scope was in line with past large-scale exercises. He called it a "warning" to the United States, noting that "problematic" Iranian capabilities such as sea mines, explosive boats, and antiship missiles could raise concerns if the IRGCN ever attempted to close the strait.

ENTER FATEH MOBIN

At some point during the drill, the IRGC tested the Fateh Mobin, a new, versatile guided ballistic missile being developed in the Fateh-110 series. As with the drill itself, Iran did not publicly confirm the missile's existence until August 13, two days after U.S. media reported on it.

The IRGC claims the Fateh Mobin can penetrate enemy missile defenses using stealth and maneuverability, hitting land and sea targets with day/night terminal precision. [Video of the test](#) showed a missile hitting its target at a near-vertical angle, using what seemed to be imaging infrared homing head. If perfected into an operational system, it could heighten the threat against ships and coastal infrastructure in the Gulf.

Although the Fateh Mobin is not expected to have a range beyond 200-300 km, Defense Minister Amir Hatami recently hinted that its terminal guidance technology could be adapted for the Zolfaqr missile, which has a reported range of 700-800 km and was used in strikes against Islamic State targets in east Syria last summer. The Zolfaqr showed [accuracy problems](#) in those strikes, but the addition of Fateh Mobin components could theoretically improve its effectiveness. General Hatami also suggested the Fateh Mobin could be launched at sea—a potentially troubling claim given that its 9 meter length may allow it to fit in a standard 40 foot (12.2 meter) cargo container alongside a specially developed launcher.

NEW JETS AND CRUISE MISSILES

To strengthen its deterrence and offensive capability, the IRGC Aerospace Force announced on July 25 that ten ex-Iraqi Sukhoi Su-22 Fitter strike aircraft were entering into service after years of overhaul work, reportedly with the help of Syrian, Belarussian, and Ukrainian experts. Last December, the magazine *Combat Aircraft* reported that as many as sixteen to twenty-two of the jets could be brought back to operational status within the next few years, so more of them may be forthcoming.

The media ceremony accompanying last month's announcement highlighted a range of locally developed weapons the planes could be armed with, including 500-pound glide bombs, a locally developed targeting pod, Bina laser-guided missiles with a 500 kg warhead and 20 km range, and an Iranian version of the British BL-755

cluster bomb, named Simorgh. The IRGC also claims the Fitter can receive targeting data from drones operating in the vicinity.

Although the Su-22 is an aging system, it is a godsend for a country like Iran, which has been unable to acquire or develop modern combat aircraft for decades. The Aerospace Force has placed the new jets at its Sayyed al-Shohada base in Shiraz, and they can be forward-deployed to Bushehr, Bandar Abbas, Jask, or Konarak as necessary. The Su-22M-4 version of the Fitter can strike surface targets with a 2,000-kg payload as far as 600-700 km away on a low-altitude mission, and up to 1,150 km if only the attack part of the mission is flown at low altitude. Thus, even operating out of their mother base, armed Fitters can reach as far as Riyadh, a range that includes all U.S. Navy patrol areas, carrier stations, and bases in the Gulf.

Of course, Iran's new jets may not be able to evade the more advanced air defense systems, interceptor jets, and early-warning aircraft deployed by Gulf and U.S. forces. Yet in modern warfare, the weapons a jet carries can be more important than the jet itself, and the Fitter may be capable of serving as a range-extending platform for cruise missiles. At the jet's unveiling ceremony, the IRGC claimed to be developing an air-launched cruise missile with a range approaching 1,500 km for future use on the Fitter. If true, Iranian jets flown out of Bandar Abbas could someday place targets as far away as the Sinai, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the central Arabian Sea under threat of precision attack.

At present, though, none of the Iranian missiles known to be under development fits this description of an air-launched cruise missile with 1,500 km range. In March 2015, the country's Defense Ministry unveiled what it claimed to be a production line for the Soumar, a copy of Russia's Kh-55 cruise missile. This system can potentially reach targets up to 2,500 km away, but it is too large to be carried by a Fitter. The IRGC is also developing a smaller cruise missile named Ya-Ali, but it reportedly has a maximum range of 700 km, so it would need to be lengthened and extensively upgraded to reach the range claimed at last month's Fitter unveiling. For now, the new jets could be modified to carry C-803 Ghader antiship cruise missiles, which have a reported range of 200-250 km and have already been fitted onto F-4E Phantoms based in Bandar Abbas.

CONCLUSION

Although Iran's new Fitter jets give it some added capabilities, they will not be game-changers until the IRGC fields a long-range cruise missile for them to carry. More worrisome at the moment is the potential proliferation of precision-guided ballistic missiles like the Fateh Mobin, which can hit targets from land or sea.

Iran's quiet approach to its latest naval drills and Fateh Mobin test was also telling. Regime leaders and IRGC commanders may be concerned about large-scale military exercises angering the public, since many citizens are already frustrated by the manner in which Tehran's provocations abroad have affected their livelihood at home. This suggests that the U.S. government should actively draw the people's attention to any military maneuvers the regime seems keen on downplaying for the domestic audience.

Finally, the latest announcements show that Tehran can progressively advance its missile program even when it eschews the longer-range ballistic test launches that tend to spark international criticism and pressure. Its scientists are working on new technologies that could eventually upgrade its whole missile inventory. Therefore, any future missile negotiations with Iran need to emphasize accuracy as well as range, and factor air-launched missiles into range calculations.

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