



Iran's Ballistic Missile Launch Criteria: Change or Continuity?

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What is ViTTa?

NSI's Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) provides rapid response to critical information needs by pulsing a global network of subject matter experts (SMEs) to generate a wide range of expert insight. In support of US Central Command (J3), ViTTa was used to address four questions regarding geopolitical stability in Iran. ViTTa reports are designed to provide highly customizable and compelling analyses, reports, and briefings that consider varied perspectives across disciplines, challenge assumptions, provide actionable insights, and highlight areas of convergence and divergence.

Question of Focus

[Q2] Based on recent events (Accords, Soleimani, COVID), how has ballistic missile launch criteria changed? Other impacts on military readiness and response?

Subject Matter Expert Contributors

Mr. Behnam Ben Taleblu (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies), **Mr. Christopher Bidwell, JD** (Senior Fellow for Nonproliferation Law and Policy, Federation of American Scientists), **Mr. Michael Eisenstadt** (Kahn Fellow, Director, Military & Security Studies Program, Washington Institute for Near East Policy), **Dr. Michael Connell** (Principal Research Scientist, Center for Naval Analyses), **Dr. Kenneth Katzman**¹ (Specialist, Middle East Affairs, Congressional Research Service), **Mr. Vernie R. Liebl** (Middle East Expert, II Corps Consultants, Inc.), **Mr. Alireza Nader** (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies), **Mr. Ian Williams** (Fellow, International Security Program and Deputy Director, Missile Defense Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies).

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The experts interviewed for this study do not see Iran's recent operational use of its ballistic missiles as signaling a fundamental change in its foreign policy, which they characterize as deliberate, defensive, and with a long time horizon. Additionally, domestic conditions are increasingly constraining the ability of the regime to either expend resources or absorb costs, making military conflict an untenable option. Both Iran and the United States, Behnam Ben Taleblu, of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, contends, have an interest in keeping the lid on escalation. Similarly, several contributors agree that, if nothing else, Iran is going to limit its aggression in the short-term until it has a better sense of the direction the Biden administration will take (Bidwell, Liebl, Nader).

Despite this strategic consistency, the expert contributors note changes to Iran's approach to testing its missiles, and its willingness to use them. Since 2017, Iran has demonstrated increasing willingness to deploy its missiles operationally, culminating in the January 2020 strikes against US bases in Iraq. While its battlefield use has become bolder, Iran's approach to testing has, conversely, become more discrete; a change some experts ascribe to increased Western attention and pressure (Nader, Taleblu).

¹ Dr. Katzman was interviewed for this study in his personal capacity. His comments do not reflect the views of the Congressional Research Service or the Library of Congress.

Role of Iran's Missile Program

Two overarching and interconnected motivations were put forward to explain the role of Iran's missile program: security from external threats and the domestic survival of the regime. Consideration of the role missiles play in Iran's foreign and security policy can shed light on the reasons for the apparent inconsistency between Iran's increased willingness to use its missiles and the decreased publicity given to its continued testing.

Security From External Threats

Strategic Depth

Ballistic missiles are characterized as “a poor man's air force”—a cheap alternative to a bomber fleet (Bidwell, Connell). In addition to economic considerations, Iran's experience of missile barrages against its cities during the Iran-Iraq war has shaped its missile program (Bidwell, Taleblu). “The lessons they learned from the '80s was to build that world-class missile capability. And now they end up having the most significant—or sophisticated—inventory of short-, medium-, and long-range missiles, including the first UAV attack drones in the region” (Bidwell). Combined with its support for proxies such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, missiles provide Iran with strategic depth (Bidwell). They allow Iran “to impose costs on its perceived enemies, particularly Israel and the Gulf States and Saudi Arabia” (Bidwell). As Iran has developed its missile capabilities—both in range and accuracy—it has reached the point where it can credibly threaten military targets. Ian Williams, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, suggests that Iran's aim is to “achieve a capability to be able to at least take on Saudi Arabia in a conventional war and not lose.”

Deterrence

Even before its missile capabilities reached the level of military utility, they played a key role in Iran's deterrence posture (Connell, Taleblu, Williams). Taleblu highlights a pattern in Iran's behavior where rhetoric emphasizes its willingness to act in its own defense, and capability is signaled by footage of missiles. He notes that “they hope that, together with the threat and actually having you see the capability, that is enough to deter you.”

Regime Survival

Williams considers that, in addition to serving as a deterrent against foreign aggression, the use of missiles in exercises and in parades is also seen by the regime as a way of boosting its legitimacy domestically. He notes that “there is a propaganda element to it as well.” This view is shared by Taleblu, who also notes that there is a status component to this too, with tests providing a means for the IRGC to “flex more muscle at home” and launches giving the responsible faction a political advantage domestically. Taleblu goes on to note that “the two macro forces of status and security” are advanced through Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, and that although there is battlefield use of missiles, their role is “more political, psychological.” This view is consistent with Williams' observation that Iran's strikes against ISIS, while retaliatory, also played a domestic propaganda and messaging function. They showed the regime striking back; “it was symbolic for Iran to have that kind of retaliation and vengeance against the ISIS attack,” Williams notes.

Pattern of Ballistic Missile Testing and Operational Use

Figure 1 below shows the change in Iran's strategic use of its ballistic missiles. Prior to 2017, Iran's missiles played a dominantly deterrent role for Iran's security. Since 2017, Iran has on numerous occasions used its missiles, but always in situations when their deployment could be couched in terms of retaliation, and thus consistent with its defensively-oriented military doctrine (Connell, Eisenstadt, Taleblu, Williams). Iran continued its program of missile testing after the finalization of the JCPOA, despite the imposition of direct sanctions by the United States. After the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, however, Iran did stop publicizing its tests and exercises. This change in behavior is attributed by Taleblu in part to a desire to avoid drawing international attention to its missile program at a time when the United States was pushing for greater constraints on these activities.

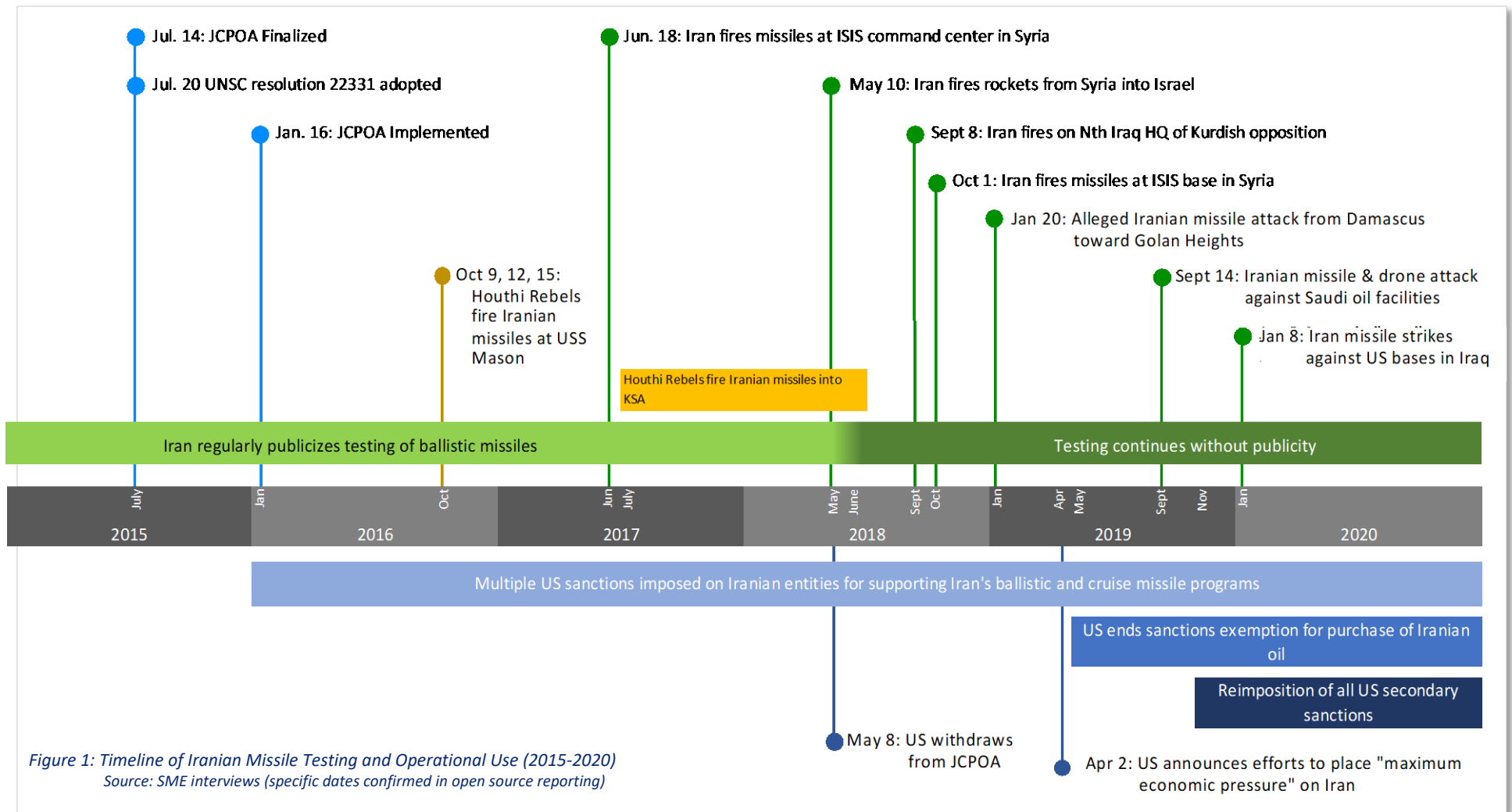


Figure 1: Timeline of Iranian Missile Testing and Operational Use (2015-2020)
Source: SME interviews (specific dates confirmed in open source reporting)

Changes to Missile Use Criteria

Williams identifies the combat use of its missiles as the “big change” in Iran’s launch criteria, and both he and Dr. Michael Connell, of the Center for Naval Analyses, attribute this change primarily to the increasing accuracy of those missiles, not an increased sense of external pressure on the regime. Supporting this assessment, Dr. Kenneth Katzman, of the Congressional Research Service, notes that Iran’s strike in response to the killing of Soleimani was much more accurate than many predicted it would be, and its 2019 strike against Saudi oil facilities was “incredibly accurate.” However, in considering how Iran is now using its missiles, and to what end, the expert contributors do not consider this to indicate a fundamental change in Iran’s foreign policy principles.

Use by Proxies

Strategic Depth with Deniability

In October 2016, Houthi rebels fired Iranian missiles against the USS Mason in the Bab el Mandeb. Between June 2017 and July 2018, Houthi rebels fired Iranian missiles into Saudi Arabia on multiple occasions (Williams). Hezbollah has engaged in similar actions against Israel, and, as Christopher Bidwell, of the Federation of American Scientists, points out, they do not have to be that accurate to create panic among Israeli citizens. Furthermore, while Israel has designed a sophisticated missile defense system to protect against such attacks, “...it costs them \$40,000 per interceptor against a \$500 or \$2,000 rocket...versus a more sophisticated Iranian missile, a Fateh-110, they’ve used the Arrow interceptor, and that’s \$2 million per rocket.” So, although Iran’s military revenue is falling, not only will its ballistic missile forces be prioritized (Connell), but the “calculus of attrition” is on Iran’s side. (Bidwell). While agreeing with Bidwell’s basic premise, Williams does note that, at the moment, the Iron Dome system only has to engage a fraction of incoming rockets (those that are headed for populated areas). Williams argues that “what would really change the equation is if Iranian advancements in precision guidance start to trickle down to the proxies,” and a greater proportion of projectiles had to be engaged, “then the system could easily get overwhelmed.”

As discussed, one of the ways in which Iran has sought to increase its strategic depth is through the use of proxies, in particular Hamas and Hezbollah to counter Israel and the Houthis to counter Saudi Arabia (Bidwell). Advancements in its missile program has allowed Iran to supply these groups with Iranian missiles. For Iran, this provides the opportunity to strike against adversaries while maintaining “some degree of separation, some level of deniability” (Williams). On a more pragmatic note, in the case of the Houthis, Williams suggests that it has also allowed Iran to see “how well its anti-ship missiles worked against US destroyers” without the risk of direct confrontation with the United States.

Use by Iran

More recently, Iran has demonstrated its willingness to use these weapons as part of its own foreign and security policy. As shown in Figure 1, Iran has escalated from attacks against targets that are highly unlikely to draw any opposition (ISIS), to allies of the United States (Israel, Saudi Arabia), to the United States itself (US airbases in Iraq) (Connell, Katzman, Williams). Additionally, these attacks have been combined with drones and mortars (Taleblu). Such operational use signals the credibility and capability of Iran’s deterrence (Connell, Taleblu, Williams) to an international audience, and allows the regime to demonstrate strength to its domestic audience (Williams).

Deterrence Credibility

These missile strikes serve to re-establish Iran's deterrent credibility by demonstrating not only readiness to follow through, but the capability to do so (Eisenstadt, Williams). Michael Eisenstadt, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, suggests that strengthening its deterrence posture in this way also strengthens Iran's ability to act in the gray zone. Williams notes that this deterrence reinforces not just the security of the country, but the survival of the regime itself. Effectively, it is signaling that "a war with Iran would be more trouble than it is worth;" not that Iran would win, necessarily, but that the damage caused would outweigh any benefit (Williams). Katzman considers Iran to have been successful in this respect: "They've been able to intimidate the Gulf states much more than they were able to before. UAE, Saudi Arabia, they've really been able to intimidate them more into being much more hesitant to confront Iran than they were previously."

Retaliation Without Escalation

Both Taleblu and Williams note Iran's greater confidence in using its missile capability as an extension of its foreign policy. Neither considers, however, that this change yet reflects a fundamental change in Iran's strategic approach, which has long been defensive in nature. William explains that:

At least from an Iranian perspective, they've seen these launches as responding to some act of aggression against them, whether it's the ISIS attack on Tehran or the killing of Soleimani, it's been, from the Iranian perspective, retaliatory actions...I think they want the international community to just kind of say, 'Well, Iran is doing this because of the United States, because the United States withdrew from the JCPOA and violated their agreements, and this is the result of this unilateralism by the United States.'

Connell's assessment that the Iranians have been "testing the waters" to see how far they can go without suffering retaliation themselves is consistent with this. Iran, he contends "isn't looking to get into a shooting war with the United States." Nor does Iran think the US wants a war with it, he notes. In a similar vein, Bidwell argues that Iran's response to the Soleimani killing was restrained, because the regime cannot currently afford a miscalculation that leads to open conflict. Vernie Liebl, of II Corps Consultants, Inc., too sees conflict with the United States as contrary to the interests of Iran's leadership, as the costs would threaten domestic stability and ultimately the regime's survival.

Changes to Missile Test Criteria

In early 2018, Taleblu notes Iran's approach to missile launches moves away from the hype and publicity noted by Williams above. Taleblu proposes two possible reasons for this shift: the purpose of the tests and international scrutiny. The changes the experts note in Iran's use and testing of its ballistic missiles reflects its increasing confidence in the precision and effectiveness of those missiles. While missiles still play a crucial role in Iran's deterrent posture, its eschewing of publicity around tests suggests the technical and military aspects of testing are taking priority over the more strategic, signaling aspects.

Purpose of Testing

Iranian strikes against ISIS (June 2017), and those by its Houthi proxies against Saudi Arabia (June 2017-July 2018), demonstrate the advances Iran has made in the functionality and accuracy of its missiles since the early

2000s (Connell, Katzman, Williams).² Bidwell's assessment suggests that Iran's long-term investment in development and testing is now paying off: "They can't afford to go too fast, but they have sophistication and educated infrastructure...We can't underestimate their sophistication. They've built indigenously, and continue to build indigenously, a robust system of missiles." In addition to improving the accuracy of their missiles, Liebl notes that the Iran has been working on its sea-launch capabilities, as well as missiles that can be launched from a road mobile launcher.

However, Bidwell does not consider Iran's more sophisticated mid-range missiles to be ready to go online. This view is not entirely shared by Connell, who notes that a few, such as the Qiam, used by Iran and the Houthis have been fairly accurate, and the LACMs used in the attacks on Saudi infrastructure were highly accurate. Consequently, the technical motivation for testing remains, while the domestic and international signaling function has been eclipsed by Iran's battlefield deployment. As a result, publicizing tests became less important after 2017 and, by early 2018, the risk inherent in drawing any attention to its missile program became evident (Taleblu).



Figure 2: IRGC Missile Exercise, eastern Alborz heights, March 10, 2016 (Photo by Mahmood Hosseini) Tasnim News Agency

International Scrutiny

During the first months of 2018, prior to the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, Taleblu contends that Iran became aware that its ballistic missiles were drawing more attention from the United States, and that "our interest in their ballistic missile calculus changed their decision calculus." Secretary of State Pompeo's "12 points," or conditions for returning to a deal with Tehran, would have been a significant expansion of the JCPOA and included limitations on Iran's development and use of missiles. At the same time, media coverage of launches in both Persian and Western sources ceased, and IRGC accounts "quickly left the open source space" (Taleblu). In an attempt to decrease the potential for the United States to generate unified Western support for an expansion of the JCPOA, and pressure against the Iranian regime, publicity of any launches dropped considerably (Taleblu).

So, What Next?

The Iranian regime is currently in a vulnerable position domestically, which is constraining its foreign policy options; it simply cannot afford conflict at this time. Domestically, economic hardship and political dissatisfaction continue to grow in response to the ongoing pressures of sanctions and a global pandemic, and the question of succession is capturing the focus of the Supreme Leader, as he works to consolidate the regime internally. Internationally, a new US administration brings potential for a return to negotiation, but, in the interim, potentially greater risk and uncertainty. Given the current conditions, the expert contributors consider it most likely that Iran will continue to avoid escalating tensions. However, as the experts consistently remind us, and events such as the killing of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh last week demonstrate, in the Middle East, predictions of even the near-future all too easily go awry.

² Liebl was the only SME to question the advancement of Iranian missile functionality and accuracy, suggesting that "mostly they're throwing telephone poles, and they mostly miss."