Short Briefing Paper on Iran's Missile Testing

February 2017

Does Iran Violate Agreements By Testing Missiles?

- **Twice in the fall of 2015 Iran violated UN Resolution 1929 when it tested medium-range ballistic missiles.** Since the JCPOA Implementation Day on January 16, 2016, the new operative UN Resolution 2231 only "calls upon" Iran not to test missiles "designed to be nuclear capable." Although Iran's test of a medium-range missile in January 2017 is inconsistent with the spirit of UNSC Resolution 2231, it has not been considered a "violation" of that resolution by the UN Security Council.

- **Would Iran's testing of medium-range missiles violate the spirit of the JCPOA?** The JCPOA does not address the testing or possession of ballistic missiles, and UN Resolution 2231 is ambiguous on what would constitute a violation.

- **Iran has not tested or developed intercontinental or intermediate-range ballistic missiles (ICBMs/IRBMs, respectively).** Iran is likely to test its new Simorgh space-launch vehicle, which appears to be designed only to place satellites into orbit. Although the development of such a launcher could be used eventually to build long-range ballistic missiles, the Simorgh is not a weapons system.

- **Iran's military establishment may have considered testing longer-range missiles in anticipation of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapon.** Iran's leaders may recognize that since they have foregone the nuclear weapon option there is now no "justification" for long-range missiles. President Rouhani reportedly said in 2016 that "Iran will constrain its ballistic missile forces to a range of 2000–2300 kilometers. Iran's strategic defense plan currently sees no justification for higher ranges."

- **Iran's missile testing is not comparable to North Korea's** since North Korea has fissile material that could be used to make nuclear warheads, has conducted nuclear tests, has conducted missile tests that threaten the territory of its neighbors, and has refused to negotiate on the nuclear threat it presents.

Why Does Iran Have Ballistic Missiles?

- **Iran's defense and deterrence posture relies heavily on ballistic missiles,** since the 1980's Iraq-Iran War, when Saddam used missiles to kill hundreds of thousands of Iranians.

- **With its missiles, Iran seeks to balance the longer-range and more accurate Israeli and Saudi missiles, but they are obviously not comparable to Israeli missiles, as Israel is believed to be able to equip its missiles with nuclear warheads.**

- **Because of its inability to acquire modern aircraft due to effective sanctions,** Iran has sought to offset that weakness with a large and diverse stock of short- and medium-range ballistic missiles for deterrence and defense. Iran is now reported to be seeking to purchase modern fighter aircraft from Russia.

Who Is Threatened By Iran's Missiles?

- **Iran's missiles without nuclear warheads, complicate but do not gravely threaten U.S. forces or partners in the region.** Under the JCPOA, Iran is prevented from acquiring a nuclear warhead capability for at least 15 years.

- **Iran has medium-range ballistic missiles with a range of less than 2,500 km that could strike Israel and the southeastern corner of Europe from Iranian territory.** The inaccuracy of Iran's missiles limits their military utility but Iran is making progress increasing accuracy. Continued testing could increase the threat they pose.
- **The United States has maintained an active missile defense presence and support for regional partners** for years in part to deal with this challenge.

What Should Be Done About Iran's Missile Testing?

- **Iran's continued missile testing is and must be a U.S. concern.** The challenge is how most forcefully to constrain Iran's missile testing while maintaining the U.S. and Iranian commitment to the JCPOA, the most assured way to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.
- **The U.S. should fully enforce existing sanctions and expand designations under current law to any entities found supporting, enabling and facilitating Iran's missile program.** Current law provides for such enforcement.
- **Any new legislation should focus exclusively on closing gaps in the U.S. sanctions** architecture (established prior to the JCPOA) that impede Iran's development of its ballistic missile program, including sanctions against any person or entity found to be cooperating with Iran on ballistic missiles.
- **U.S. actions, including sanctions, against Iranian behavior that fall outside of the scope of the JCPOA should avoid legislation that would, inadvertently or deliberately, undermine or violate the JCPOA.** Such actions would be seen by Iran and likely by the P5+1 as a U.S. violation of the JCPOA which has so far been effective at foreclosing all of Iran's pathways to a nuclear warhead.
- **U.S. military action against Iran would likely mark the end of the JCPOA, result in a division within the P5+1 on future measures against Iran, cause an unconstrained nuclear weapons effort and open up yet another dimension of the regional wars.** Such unilateral action taken in response to Iranian actions outside of the JCPOA would have consequences far beyond the effort to constrain Iran and return the U.S. to an active military player without allies or partners.
- **The most effective tools for limiting Iran's 35 year-old missile program will remain export controls and working with partners to interdict and seize shipments** that could be used to advance Iran's ballistic missile capabilities. The U.S. should also work with international partners to restrict Iran's access to such goods, in-line with UNSCR 2231 and other UN resolutions.
- **Over the long-term, the U.S. should support the development of a regional security arrangement among all nations of the Persian Gulf, including exploring limitations on the range of ballistic missiles and cooperation on missile defense.** If Iran remains non-nuclear, the U.S. should pursue the long-term goal of a regional security arrangement among all Gulf nations, including defense.

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