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## Regional Concerns: To what extent does Iran's missile program pose a real and lasting threat?

Security & military studies unit



# Studies

September 2025

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## Analytical Study



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### Abstract

The Iranian missile program is one of the most prominent pillars of strength and deterrence in Iranian strategy. It combines defensive dimensions to compensate for limited air capabilities and offensive dimensions aimed at strengthening regional influence and reshaping the balance of power in the Middle East. Iranian missiles are no longer merely a deterrent tool; they have become a means of establishing Iran's presence across conflict zones in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. It also highlights that Israeli, Gulf, and international concerns about this program are linked to its direct threat to national security and the security of vital energy routes. Despite attempts to contain it through sanctions or missile defenses, these efforts remain limited in effectiveness, opening the way for various scenarios: either reaching understandings that reduce the pace of escalation, the region slipping into an accelerating arms race, or the emergence of more complex deterrence equations that will shape the future of regional security.

### Introduction

The Iranian missile program is one of the most controversial issues in the regional and international arenas, as it represents a dual-use strategic tool for Tehran. On the one hand, it serves as a means of military deterrence, given Iran's awareness of the gap in conventional superiority between it and the major powers. On the other hand, it constitutes a political bargaining chip in its negotiations with the West and in reshaping the regional balance. This issue has gained double importance since Iran announced the expansion of its testing and development of advanced medium- and long-range missile systems, capable of reaching deep into Israel and parts of Eastern Europe, in addition to possessing increased capabilities to carry conventional warheads and possibly nuclear warheads in the future.

The seriousness of this issue is further embodied in light of recent regional developments, which have witnessed an escalation in the use of missiles as a tool in proxy warfare, whether through the Houthis, who launched ballistic missiles targeting Israel in August 2025, or through Hezbollah, which has continued to use precision missiles in its clashes with the Israeli army on the Lebanese border. These facts reinforce the conviction that the Iranian missile program is no longer the exclusive domain of the Iranian military establishment, but has become a distributed, cross-border structure, which Iran is feeding with technology and expertise as part of its strategy of "exporting deterrence".

At the international level, statements by Kaja Kallas, the European Union's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, indicate a shift in the debate from traditional economic sanctions to the activation of the "snapback" mechanism to reimpose UN sanctions on Iran, not only in light of the nuclear issue, but also clearly as a result of the "growing threat of the missile program." This qualitative shift in European discourse reflects a growing recognition that the Iranian missile threat is not limited to Middle Eastern balances, but extends to European security itself, especially in light of the war in Ukraine and the military cooperation it has revealed between Moscow and Tehran in the field of drones and missiles. In this context, the debate over the "extent" of the Iranian missile threat becomes a complex one that goes beyond purely military technical considerations to extend to geopolitical, security, and strategic dimensions.

## First: The Strategic Determinants of the Iranian Missile Program

An assessment of the extended risks of the Iranian missile program is incomplete without examining the strategic determinants that shaped its premises. This program was not merely a traditional military tool, but rather a pillar in building a national security doctrine intertwined with the nature of the Iranian political system, its perception of external threats, and its efforts to impose parallel deterrence equations in the face of Western and Israeli military superiority. These determinants range from security, political, economic, and ideological dimensions, making the program an existential option for Tehran rather than merely a technical or weapons option.

## National Security Concerns and a History of Wars

Iran's internal and external justification for clinging to its missile program is based on the memory of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), when its major cities, most notably Tehran and Isfahan, were subjected to intense missile attacks by Iraq with Western support. This event left a strategic scar on the Iranian security mindset, reinforcing the conviction that possessing an advanced missile system is the first, and perhaps only, line of defense against external threats, especially in light of the lack of Iranian air superiority comparable to that of Israel or the Gulf states allied with the United States. In this context, Iranian leaders view missiles as a "silent popular army" capable of rapid deterrence without the need for extensive conventional intervention.

## Compensating for the Regional Imbalance of Power

Iran suffers from a significant gap in air capabilities compared to the Israeli air force or the modern US-backed Gulf air defense systems. Therefore, Tehran seeks, through its missile program, to create an asymmetric deterrence balance, whereby missiles can be a tool to reshape adversaries' calculations by imposing a high cost on them for any military action. This is clearly demonstrated by the recent escalation in Yemen and Lebanon. The Houthis' experience launching long-range missiles toward Israel in August 2025, and the preceding use of precision missiles in the Gaza wars of 2021 and 2023, demonstrated that Iran is not only betting on quantitative superiority, but also on reaching a sensitive security flank of its adversaries.

## The Ideological Dimension and Revolutionary Legitimacy

Internally, the missile program is linked to the concept of "independence and sovereignty," a pillar of the regime's legitimacy since 1979. Official rhetoric links the possession of missile capabilities to resisting "Western hegemony" and protecting the Islamic nation, a discourse popular with the Revolutionary Guard Corps and conservative movements. Therefore, any retreat from developing the program is viewed internally as a concession that undermines the essence of the revolution and threatens the cohesion of the regime's front.

Indeed, statements by senior Revolutionary Guard commanders in the summer of 2025 emphasized that the missile program is a non-negotiable red line, even in light of European pressure to reactivate the "snapback mechanism" against Tehran.

## Using the Program as a Tool of Regional Influence

The missile program cannot be separated from Iran's expansionist strategy in its surroundings. The supply and development of ballistic missiles and drones has become a central component of Iran's support for its allies in the region, whether in Lebanon (Hezbollah), Yemen (Ansar Allah, the Houthis), Iraq, or Syria. This deployment reflects an Iranian vision of missiles not only as a national deterrent, but also as an extended geopolitical arm that allows Tehran to extend the confrontation lines beyond its borders. Recently, the Houthis' launch of a medium-range missile toward Israel in August 2025 revived debate within European circles about the program's seriousness, especially after it demonstrated its ability to bypass the multi-layered air defenses employed by the Israeli military.

## Sanctions and the Resistance Economy

Despite severe Western sanctions, Iran has been able to transform missile development into a "self-sufficiency" project, reflecting the "resistance economy" strategy advocated by the Supreme Leader. Rather than leading to the dismantling of this sector, economic pressures have strengthened Iran's motivation to rely on domestic military industries. Indeed, Tehran's success in testing new missiles, such as the Khorramshahr-4 (2023) and the hypersonic Fateh-2 (2024), reflects its direct challenge to Western containment policies. Hence, the program acquires a symbolic dimension, suggesting to its domestic audience that Iran is capable of achieving success despite the blockade.

## The International Context and Shifting American and European Calculations

The European debate has recently intensified following statements by Kaya Kallas, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, in August 2025, regarding the reactivation of

the "snapback mechanism" based on Iran's ongoing violations, not only on the nuclear issue, but specifically on the ballistic missile issue.

## Second: The Use of the Missile Program in Regional Balances

The Iranian missile program cannot be understood in isolation from its regional context. It goes beyond being a mere military deterrent to a multi-use strategic asset in shaping the balance of power within the Middle East. Iran is aware that the traditional balance of power—in terms of air power, advanced defenses, and technological capabilities—is tilted in favor of its adversaries, especially Israel and some US-backed Gulf states. Therefore, ballistic missiles and drones represent a means to compensate for this imbalance and consolidate its regional presence.

### Missiles as an Extended Deterrent

The missile program can be viewed as an "extended deterrent," not only deterring direct military threats against Iran's interior, but also deterring political and economic pressures by demonstrating Iran's willingness to threaten the strategic interests of its adversaries should the confrontation escalate. For example, during the rounds of escalation in the Arabian Gulf (2019–2022), Tehran and its allies used missiles and drones to send direct signals to Washington, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi about the fragility of regional energy security. The attacks on Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais provided a practical example of how these capabilities can be used to destabilize the global energy market and highlight the limits of conventional deterrence.

### Creating a Balance of Terror with Israel

Iran has employed its missile program as a tool to create a "balance of terror" with Israel, especially as the conflict has shifted from a conventional theater of operations to a "gray war" involving regional proxies. Supplying Hezbollah in Lebanon and armed groups in Gaza with short- and medium-range missiles gives Tehran the ability to exert indirect pressure on Israel without engaging in open confrontation.

This use was clearly evident during the rounds of escalation in Gaza from 2023 to 2025, where Iranian support was part of a strategic pressure system on Tel Aviv. As the scope of the clashes expanded after June 2025, Iran sought to strengthen its "multiple fronts" equation, leaving Israel surrounded by missile threats from both the north and the south.

## Reshaping the Balance with the Gulf

The missile program has indirectly contributed to reshaping the balance with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Gulf concerns about the missile threat have prompted them to increase military spending, expand security cooperation with the United States, and even open up to Israel in the field of air defense. Although this may appear to be a setback for Iran, from another perspective, it serves an indirect strategic purpose: it reinforces Tehran's image as the central threat, giving it a permanent bargaining chip at the negotiating table with major powers.

## Missiles as a Pressure Card Against the West

From a broader perspective, Iranian missiles have allowed Tehran to impose the equation of "the ability to disrupt international interests" if its red lines are crossed. Iran has exploited this issue in the context of tensions with the United States and Europe over the nuclear issue and economic sanctions, threatening more than once that any attempt to strangle it economically or target it militarily will not pass without a direct threat to vital shipping lanes in the Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Red Sea. These concerns intensified after the escalation of tensions in the Red Sea in 2024-2025, as Western reports circulated about the possibility of Iran arming the Houthis in Yemen with advanced missile systems capable of targeting international waterways.

## The "Indecisiveness" Strategy

The Iranian missile program's importance stems from its role as not just a military stockpile, but rather a multi-functional network: a deterrent, a means of pressure, a source of indirect threat, and a bargaining mechanism in negotiations with major powers.

Therefore, it can be said that the most prominent use of Iranian missiles is to maintain "indecisiveness" in the regional balance of power: they prevent Tehran's opponents from initiating a comprehensive war, but at the same time, they prevent Tehran from imposing absolute control. Rather, they keep the region in a state of constant tension, enabling it to exploit chaos and reshape the balance of power to serve its long-term strategy.

### Third: Applications for the Iranian Missile Program

The practical dimensions of Iran's missile program become more apparent when tracing its trajectories in regional arenas, which constitute a field laboratory for testing its capabilities and consolidating its influence. Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon have been pivotal arenas for this deployment, where the nature of the conflicts and the security fragility of central states have allowed Iran to expand its sphere of influence through its local proxies.

#### The Yemeni Case: The Houthis as a Testing Ground

Yemen represents the most prominent arena for testing and deploying Iranian ballistic missiles and drones. Since 2015, the Houthi group has emerged as an Iranian military arm capable of threatening Saudi and Emirati territory through repeated missile attacks. These missiles, which trace their roots to Iranian systems such as the Qiam and Shahab, have been locally modified versions such as the Burkan and Badr, providing the Houthis with the ability to target strategic sites such as Riyadh airports and Aramco's Abqaiq facility (2019). This situation demonstrates that Iran's missile program is not only a defensive deterrent for Iran, but also an indirect attack tool that allows Tehran to impose the "remote threat via proxies" equation, strengthening its regional negotiating position and making it more difficult for its adversaries to contain it. Furthermore, its deployment in Yemen has revealed Iran's ability to circumvent international sanctions by transferring military technology in parts or via technical experts, doubling the risk.

## The Syrian Case: Strategic Positioning and Rebalancing

Since the outbreak of the Syrian war, Iran has exploited the security and political vacuum to establish missile bases and weapons depots within Syrian territory, particularly around Damascus and the southern regions near the border with Israel. Despite repeated Israeli airstrikes against these facilities, the continued shipment of Iranian missiles to Hezbollah via Syrian territory reflects Tehran's insistence on using Syria as a strategic link in the "Tehran-Baghdad-Damascus-Beirut" axis. While Israel is trying to limit this presence, the reality is that Iran has succeeded in maintaining Syria as a strategic support platform, creating a double-edged sword for Israel: continuous airstrikes that are unable to completely eliminate its missile infrastructure. Syria thus serves as a model for Iran's insistence on long-range entrenchment and transforming politically fractured territories into permanent arenas of friction.

## The Iraqi Case: Integrating Militias into the Deterrence System

Iraq is a complex model for Iran's use of short- and medium-range missiles through armed Shiite factions such as Kata'ib Hezbollah and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. These factions, linked to the Revolutionary Guard, have developed a missile arsenal capable of targeting US bases in Iraq and Syria, a development that became evident after the assassination of Qassem Soleimani (2020) in the bombing of Ain al-Assad base.

The Iraqi experience reveals an additional dimension to Iran's missile program, namely the integration of militias within the state and the transformation of their capabilities into part of a "complex regional deterrence." Iraq has become a dual arena: a transit hub for Iranian missiles heading toward Syria and Lebanon, and a proxy attack platform against the US presence, making the missile program as much a tool of political influence as it is a military one.

## The Lebanese Case: Hezbollah and the Balance of Deterrence with Israel

Lebanon represents the clearest and most advanced example of Iran's use of its missile capabilities through its strategic ally, Hezbollah. Since the 2006 war, the party has doubled its missile arsenal, exceeding, according to Israeli estimates, 150,000 short- and medium-range the missiles.

It has also attempted to improve its accuracy through the "precision missile project."

This situation translates into the "mutual deterrence" equation between Hezbollah and Israel, where both sides realize that any comprehensive confrontation will lead to widespread destruction. This gives Iran a crucial strategic asset: a direct threat to Israel's interior from outside its territory, thus transforming Lebanon into a front line in the battle for regional influence.

Overall, these four cases demonstrate that Iran's missile program is not limited to defensive deterrence, but rather extends to a comprehensive offensive strategy that includes technology transfer, the construction of logistical networks, and the employment of local proxies to perpetuate the conflict. Most importantly, these arenas allow Iran to negotiate from a position of strength, through the constant threat of opening multiple fronts simultaneously. This increases the concern of regional and international powers about the "spreading of the threat" rather than its confinement within Iran's borders.

#### **Fourth: The 12-Day War as a Strategic Sign of the Iranian Missile Threat**

The outbreak of the military confrontation between Iran and Israel in June 2025, known in the media as the "12-Day War," occurred within a highly complex regional and international context. The war was preceded by a series of mutual attacks in both Syria and Iraq, where Israel intensified its strikes on sites suspected of belonging to the Quds Force and the Revolutionary Guard, in an attempt to limit the flow of weapons and precision missiles to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In response, Iran responded through its regional proxies, particularly in Iraq and Yemen, creating a cumulative state of tension. The immediate spark for the war was a widespread missile exchange targeting Israeli territory, and Tel Aviv responded with concentrated air and missile strikes against Iranian military infrastructure. This escalating interaction embodied the transition of the conflict from "shadow wars" and indirect attrition to an overt, albeit limited, confrontation.

### **The missile dimension and its strategic implications**

What is striking in this war is the pivotal role played by the Iranian missile program, which constituted the primary weapon in the confrontation.

Over the course of 12 days, Iran launched hundreds of ballistic and cruise missiles and attack drones toward Israel, some directly from its territory and others via platforms in Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Although Israeli defense systems—particularly the Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow-3—successfully intercepted a high percentage of them, some missiles managed to penetrate the defenses and hit strategic targets, representing a clear message from Tehran about its ability to impose a "missile deterrence equation." The most prominent indication here is that the missile program is no longer merely a traditional tool for regional maneuvering, but has become a direct pillar in the war equation with Israel and a means of conveying political messages to the United States and the West.

## The War's Regional Implications

The 12-day war reshuffled the cards in the Middle East, particularly as it emerged as the first direct confrontation of this magnitude between Iran and Israel, outside the traditional proxy arenas. On the one hand, the war reinforced Gulf fears of growing Iranian military influence and its ability to employ missiles to threaten Gulf security and energy corridors. On the other hand, it revealed the fragility of the balance of power in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, as these countries appeared to be open arenas for conflict between the two sides. The war also impacted maritime security in the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf, with tankers and warships being subjected to drone attacks, reinforcing the conviction among international powers that any Iranian-Israeli escalation would have cross-border dimensions.

## International Dimensions and Reactions

The conflict took a significant international turn when the military confrontations between Iran and Israel escalated into direct intervention by the United States, which launched deep airstrikes on sensitive nuclear sites in Iran using precision-guided bombs and strategic bombers, setting a precedent in the relationship between Washington and Tehran. While the strikes did, in fact, impact Iran's nuclear timetable, intelligence reports indicate they did not completely destroy the capability.

The European Union, in its response, found itself facing a new strategic dilemma. It continued to call for dialogue with Iran, but at the same time, it recognized that the timeframe for the nuclear program's capability was not short, and it must review its diplomatic tools. For their part, Russia and China strongly criticized the US attack, considering it a violation of international law and a rush to exploit it to strengthen their position on the global stage. The United Nations warned of the potential for the tension to escalate into an open crisis that could spread to neighboring regions, while major economic powers emphasized the need to avoid further impacts on energy supplies and global markets.

## Fifth: The Implications of the Iranian Missile Program for Regional and International Security

The implications of the Iranian missile program go beyond being a conventional arms issue to being a fundamental determinant of reshaping the security environment in the Middle East, and its impact extends to international balances. The issue is not limited to Iran's ability to possess a long-range and diverse missile arsenal, but rather lies in the geopolitical pressure tools, strategic negotiating cards, and asymmetric deterrence that this arsenal provides, reshaping the calculations of regional and international actors alike.

### An Escalating Gulf Arms Race

At the regional level, the Iranian missile program has deepened an already existing arms race. Concerns about the Iranian missile threat have prompted the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries to expand their multi-layered air defense systems, such as THAAD and Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3), while simultaneously strengthening defense cooperation with the United States, Britain, and France. These developments reflect a Gulf realization that conventional deterrence is no longer sufficient in the face of Iran's qualitative missile development, especially after the attacks on Aramco facilities in 2019, which highlighted the effectiveness of Iran's direct and proxy strike capabilities.

These concerns have also contributed to pushing some Gulf states toward security normalization with Israel, particularly in the areas of defense cooperation and early warning systems.

## Consolidating Iranian influence through proxy arenas

In Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, the Iranian missile program has become a tool for consolidating Tehran's indirect influence, turning these countries into testing grounds for short- and medium-range missiles. This deployment has not only served to create a deterrent balance with local or regional adversaries, but has also contributed to reshaping deterrence equations in the region as a whole. In Lebanon, for example, Hezbollah's possession of a massive missile arsenal (estimated to exceed **150,000** diverse missiles) presents Israel with a strategic dilemma regarding the actual feasibility of any large-scale military operation in southern Lebanon. In Yemen, the Houthis have demonstrated that Iranian missiles and drones are capable of crippling vital energy facilities in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, raising the cost of any direct confrontation with Iran and its proxies.

## Continuing Threats to Regional Deterrence Equations

The Iranian missile program poses a growing threat to the Turkish and Israeli deterrence equation. Ankara and Tel Aviv are now forced to adapt their defense strategies to the reality that any direct confrontation with Tehran or its proxies could expose their strategic depth to precision or mass strikes. This explains the implicit balance in the policies of the two countries, which is based on combining limited engagement in Syria or Iraq with avoiding a comprehensive escalation that could unleash Iran's missile capabilities.

## The Russian-Iranian Dimension in Missiles and Drones

The overlap between the Iranian missile program and Russian-Iranian relations has added a sensitive international dimension. Iranian drones have played a pivotal role in the Russian-Ukrainian war, while speculation has grown about Moscow supplying Tehran with advanced missile technology in exchange for continued military support.

This overlap reflects how the Iranian missile program has become part of the grand game of balances between the West, Russia, and China, transcending its regional nature to influence global security equations.

In sum, the repercussions of the Iranian missile program on regional and international security are evident on three interconnected levels: First, by pushing the countries of the region toward a more intense defensive and offensive arms race; second, by consolidating Iran's presence as an influential regional actor through its proxies and asymmetric capabilities; Third, the program is being incorporated as an influential element in the international security equation, whether through its connection to global energy security or through its alliances with major powers like Russia. These levels make it difficult for any political or diplomatic approach to address the program in isolation from its intertwined regional and international dimensions.

## Sixth: International and Regional Approaches to Containing Iran's Missile Program

The Iranian missile program has not only been a subject of internal or regional controversy, but has also become a focal point in interactions between Iran and the international community, as it is one of the most sensitive tools in the balance of power in the Middle East. This has been reflected in the multiplicity of international and regional approaches to contain it, whether through diplomatic channels seeking to include it in the nuclear agreements, through economic and security pressures, or even through indirect military deterrence policies.

### The American and European Approach

Since the Trump administration, the United States has adopted a policy based on separating the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) from the missile issue. Washington considers the inclusion of the missile program in any nuclear negotiations a necessary condition for restoring any framework for understanding. This trend continued under the Biden administration, albeit with greater flexibility.

Washington attempted to revive the nuclear agreement through negotiations in Vienna since 2021, but stipulated that the ballistic missile issue be addressed simultaneously with the Iranian drone issue, whose role in the Ukraine war has been prominent since February 2022. For its part, Europe followed the same path, but in a more diplomatic manner. The European Union linked regional stability to limiting Iranian missile expansion and repeatedly called for its inclusion within new negotiating frameworks, especially with the increasing pressure from the Gulf states and Israel.

The United States and Europe also employed sanctions extensively, including entities affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps on sanctions lists, while directly targeting supply networks linked to missile and drone programs. These sanctions took on an escalating dimension following UN and Western reports that Iran had supplied attack drones to Russia, which were used in attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure, giving the crisis transregional dimensions.

## The Russian and Chinese Approach

By contrast, Russia and China view Iran's missile program as an important counterweight to US hegemony. Moscow has used military cooperation with Tehran as a leverage over the West, both through Iranian drone deals and through implicit signals of possible cooperation in ballistic missile development. Beijing, despite its apparent commitment to non-proliferation principles, has adopted a more pragmatic approach, preferring to capitalize on its extensive economic ties with Iran (especially after signing a 25-year strategic cooperation agreement in 2021), while overlooking aspects of the missile program as long as it does not directly impact its commercial interests and energy security. This approach reflects what might be called a "cautious balance": political and economic support for Iran without overt involvement in the program's development.

## The Israeli Approach

Israel considers Iran's missile program an existential threat, sometimes exceeding the nuclear challenge in terms of immediate danger.

Iran's missile system is directly connected to Tehran's network of allies in Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, which translates into the possibility of threatening Israel on multiple fronts simultaneously. Therefore, Israel focused on strengthening its defensive capabilities (such as the Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow-3 missile defense systems), while developing its offensive capabilities in the form of precision strikes against missile depots and development sites in Syria. Tel Aviv also sought to internationalize the issue by pressuring Washington and Europe to consider the missile program as an item no less important than the nuclear issue in any negotiations with Iran, in addition to the ongoing threat of a military option if the program reached a level that threatened the strategic balance in the region.

## The Gulf Approach

The Gulf Cooperation Council countries were the most exposed to the Iranian missile program, especially after the targeting of Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in **2019**, which marked a shift in perception of the magnitude of the threat. Hence, the Gulf countries adopted two parallel paths: the first is diplomatic, by urging international powers to include the missile issue in any negotiations with Iran, and the second is security-related, by strengthening their air defense systems, whether through partnerships with the United States or by diversifying partners (as in arms deals with France and South Korea). Despite the relative calm following the Beijing Agreement between Riyadh and Tehran in March **2023**, the missile issue remained a postponed issue, indicating a Gulf awareness that political understandings do not mean Iran will retreat from developing its missile capabilities.

## The United Nations' Approach

The United Nations approached the program from the perspective of Security Council resolutions, particularly Resolution **2231 (2015)**, which accompanied the nuclear agreement and called on Iran to refrain from developing missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

However, the legal ambiguity in the texts allowed Tehran to exploit loopholes to continue developing its program, while the Council was satisfied with periodic reports that did not carry direct binding force. With the regional and international dimensions of the program becoming apparent, especially after the use of Iranian drones in the Ukrainian war, discussions within the United Nations renewed around the need to formulate a more stringent legal framework, but international divisions prevented the adoption of new binding resolutions.

This section makes clear that international and regional approaches to containing Iran's missile program vary between strict pressure (America and Europe), pragmatic support (Russia and China), and defensive mobilization (Israel and the Gulf). This places the issue at the heart of regional and international balance equations and lays the foundation for a future phase characterized by complexity and overlap between diplomatic and security tracks.

## Seventh: Future Scenarios for the Iranian Missile Program

Exploring the future of the Iranian missile program is a crucial endeavor in light of the complexity of the regional and international landscape, and the intersection of military, political, and diplomatic considerations with economic and deterrence determinants. Assessing potential scenarios requires examining current trends, including the escalation of the Iranian-Israeli confrontation across multiple fronts, and the involvement of the United States and Europe in imposing renewed forms of sanctions, in contrast to indirect Russian-Chinese support for Tehran. This opens the door to several major paths that the missile program could take in the coming years.

### Scenario One: Continued Quantitative and Qualitative Enhancement

This scenario suggests that Iran will continue to develop its missile system at an accelerated pace, focusing on improving accuracy and range, and integrating drone technology and hypersonic capabilities. This trend reflects Tehran's insistence on viewing missiles as an alternative deterrent to its declared nuclear capabilities, especially given the weak possibility of concluding a new nuclear agreement in the foreseeable future.

This scenario is supported by field indicators, such as continued missile testing in 2025, long-range drone experiments, and the transfer of some of these capabilities to allies in Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria, consolidating the program's role as a strategic arm extending beyond its borders.

### Scenario Two: Partial Containment Through International Understandings

This path raises the possibility that Western diplomatic pressure—with relative Russian and Chinese support—could succeed in imposing a limited understanding that restricts some aspects of Iranian ballistic missile development, particularly those with a range capable of reaching Europe or US bases in the Gulf. However, the chances of this scenario remain limited given the loss of trust that has accumulated since the collapse of the nuclear agreement in 2018 and the Iranian leadership's refusal to link its missile program to any negotiations, emphasizing that it is a "sovereign red line." If achieved, containment would be partial and temporary, while Iran's regional capabilities would remain intact.

### Scenario Three: Direct Military Explosion

In light of the ongoing escalation between Iran and Israel and the potential expansion of proxy war fronts, the possibility of the situation escalating into a direct missile confrontation remains present. This scenario means that Israel—with American support—might launch widespread preemptive attacks on Iranian missile development and launch sites, prompting Tehran to launch a comprehensive response targeting Israeli territory and Gulf facilities. The repercussions of this scenario would be disastrous for global energy security, especially given the threat to the Strait of Hormuz. This makes it a viable possibility, but it would be fraught with high costs that could deter parties from engaging in it unless a critical strategic infrastructure within Iran is targeted.

## Scenario Four: Rebalancing the Region Through "Flexible Deployment"

Iran may move to reduce the need to launch long-range missiles from within its territory by enhancing the capabilities of its regional allies with advanced missile systems and drones. This path would mean shifting the centers of military gravity from the Iranian heartland to the vicinity of Israel and the Gulf, increasing the cost of confrontation for its adversaries and preventing the focus of pressure on the Iranian interior alone. This scenario already appears to be underway, with the strengthening of Hezbollah's arsenals in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, as demonstrated by intermittent confrontations in the Red Sea and the Gulf during 2025.

By comparison, the most likely scenario in the near term appears to be a combination of the first and fourth scenarios: Iran continues to develop its advanced missile capabilities, while distributing the burden of deterrence across its network of regional allies. The third scenario (direct confrontation) remains a viable option in the event of a strategic provocation or miscalculation. The second scenario (international containment) remains subject to major shifts in the American or Iranian position, which is unlikely at the present stage.

## Conclusion

It can be argued that the Iranian missile program has gone beyond being a mere defensive tool linked to domestic sovereign considerations, becoming one of the most important pillars of Iran's regional influence and an effective tool in reshaping the balance of power in the Middle East. By combining the deterrent dimension against traditional adversaries (Israel, the United States) with the ability to employ it within a network of regional proxies, Tehran has been able to impose new equations of mutual deterrence, not only at the state level, but also through non-state actors who represent an extension of its policies.

The implications of this program for regional and international security appear intertwined and complex. On the one hand, it represents a direct threat to Washington's allies in the Gulf and Israel, while on the other, it provides Iran with an umbrella that allows it strategic maneuvering in the face of Western sanctions or pressure.

This situation has contributed to pushing international and regional powers to seek diverse approaches, ranging from strict military deterrence policies to attempts at containment through partial agreements or integrating the missile issue into broader settlements that include the nuclear issue and other regional issues.

The future path remains open to several possibilities, from indirect military escalation through Iran's proxies in the conflict zones to the possibility of engaging in conditional settlements that link the development of the program to security and economic guarantees for Tehran. However, the most likely outcome is that the program will remain a thorny issue that will be difficult to reach a comprehensive settlement on in the foreseeable future, given that it touches on the core of Iran's security doctrine.

Based on the above, regional and international decision-makers are advised to develop a multi-layered approach that combines military deterrence, security coordination, and openness to realistic negotiation channels. This approach balances containing threats and reducing the likelihood of sliding into open confrontation. The absence of a balanced strategy would further undermine regional stability and open the door to a missile arms race, posing unprecedented security challenges to the region.

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