

An hourglass-shaped graphic with a globe inside. The top bulb is dark blue, and the bottom bulb is light blue. The globe is centered in the narrow neck of the hourglass. The text is overlaid on the graphic.

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February 2, 2009

Congressional Research Service

Report RS22758

Iran's Ballistic Missile Programs: An Overview

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July 21, 2008

Abstract. Iran has an active interest in developing, acquiring, and deploying a broad range of ballistic missiles. This was spotlighted in mid-July 2008 when Iran launched a number of ballistic missiles during military exercises, reportedly including the mediumrange Shahab-3. On July 18, 2008, a Pentagon spokesman said Iran was "not testing new technologies or capabilities, but rather firing off old equipment in an attempt to intimidate their neighbors and escalate tension in the region." Subsequent analysis of the July 2008 missile launches also shows Iran apparently digitally altered images of those launches. This report seeks to provide an overview of the reported or suspected variety of Iranian ballistic missile programs. Because there remains widespread public divergence over particulars, however, this report does not provide specificity to what Iran may or may not have, or is in the process of developing.

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Iran's Ballistic Missile Programs: An Overview

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January 23, 2009

<http://wikileaks.org/wiki/CRS-RS22758>

Congressional Research Service

7-5700

www.crs.gov

RS22758

Summary

Iran has an active interest in developing, acquiring, and deploying a broad range of ballistic missiles. This was spotlighted in mid-July 2008 when Iran launched a number of ballistic missiles during military exercises, reportedly including the medium-range Shahab-3. On July 18, 2008, a Pentagon spokesman said Iran was “not testing new technologies or capabilities, but rather firing off old equipment in an attempt to intimidate their neighbors and escalate tension in the region.” Subsequent analysis of the July 2008 missile launches also shows Iran apparently digitally altered images of those launches. This short report seeks to provide an overview of the reported or suspected variety of Iranian ballistic missile programs. Because there remains widespread public divergence over particulars, however, this report does not provide specificity to what Iran may or may not have, or is in the process of developing. This report may be updated.

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Iran's ballistic missile program dates to the late 1970s after the Shah was overthrown and the Islamic Republic of Iran established. The new Iranian government embarked on a ballistic missile program marked by considerable secrecy. Many consider that Iran's ballistic missile development was in full force by the mid-1980s during its protracted war against Iraq, during which Iran reportedly launched more than 600 ballistic missiles.

Today, there is little disagreement among most experts that Iran has acquired some number of ballistic missiles from other countries and has developed other ballistic missiles indigenously or in cooperation with others. Iranian ballistic missile proliferation has been a matter of U.S. and international concern. At the same time, however, there has been considerable public disagreement over precisely what kinds of ballistic missile systems Iran has or is developing itself or in cooperation with others. This is because there is little transparency in Iran's ballistic missile programs, which has led to some degree of a lack of confidence in Iran's public assertions of its activities. Finally, details about Iranian ballistic missile programs remain classified in the United States. Because of the secrecy inherent in the development of weapon systems, especially in less open societies, open-source analyses reflect a wide-range of technical views and assessments.

This report provides a brief description of what is publicly discussed regarding Iran's ballistic missile programs¹; it does not discuss Iranian cruise missiles² or rockets.³ These latter weapons were a source of concern when some reportedly Iranian-made rockets and other missiles may have been used by Hezbollah against Israel in 2006.⁴ Charges of Iranian military support to Iraqi insurgents do not include Iranian-made rockets or missiles, however. This report first examines Iran's long-range ballistic missile programs because those efforts generally drive the greatest concerns within the United States, especially when coupled with concern over the development of Iran's nuclear capabilities. A brief overview of Iran's medium and short-range ballistic missile programs then follows.

Long-Range Ballistic Missiles

Traditionally, the United States has defined long-range or Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) as those ballistic missiles capable of ranges greater than 5,500 kilometers (about 3,400 miles). To date, five countries have deployed operational ICBMs (all with nuclear weapons): the

¹ After an initial powered phase of flight, a ballistic missile leaves the atmosphere (about 100 kilometers) and follows an unpowered trajectory or flight path before reentering the atmosphere toward a predetermined target. Ballistic missile ranges can vary from a hundred or so kilometers to more than 10,000 kilometers.

² A cruise missile is a guided missile that normally uses some form of jet propulsion system to allow sustained flight within the atmosphere toward its target. Cruise missile ranges can vary from a few hundred to more than 1,500 kilometers.

³ After an initial powered launch, a military rocket will head toward its intended target without leaving the atmosphere. Military rocket ranges are relatively short range and can be guided or unguided.

⁴ For instance, see CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman, and "The Rocket Campaign Against Israel During the 2006 Lebanon War," by Uzi Rubin, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, no. 71, June 2007. There remains uncertainty over the extent of Hezbollah's rocket and missile inventory and what was actually fired during the 2006 war. This includes the Chinese-built anti-ship missile (C-802), which Iran imported in the early 1990s. At least one such C-802 may have been transferred to Hezbollah and used to nearly sink an Israeli naval corvette ship in July 2006. Reports of a "Fajr-3" Iranian-made artillery rocket used in the 2006 war are sometimes erroneously confused with an Iranian medium-range ballistic missile.

United States, Russia, China, France, and Britain. Other countries, such as Iran, are believed by some observers to have ICBM programs in varying stages of development.

In 1999, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that at some point the United States would probably face ICBM threats from Iran.⁵ This remains the official U.S. position, that “Iran *could test* an ICBM in the last half of the next decade using Russian technology and assistance” (emphasis in the original). A similar report was issued in 2001.⁶ This assessment is often interpreted that Iran will have ICBMs by 2015, but the unclassified intelligence statements place various caveats on that potential capability.

These intelligence statements serve as the official U.S. basis for assessing the Iranian ICBM threat to the United States and its friends and allies. These assessments drive U.S. military efforts designed to respond to such threats, such as the U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) program in general and the U.S. proposed missile defense system in Europe specifically, as well as U.S. diplomatic efforts to curb Iranian long-range ballistic missile programs.⁷ These assessments, in conjunction with official U.S. assessments of Iranian nuclear weapons development, contribute significantly to ongoing U.S. concerns over Iranian threats to U.S. and international security.

These assessments do not mean, however, that there is universal agreement within the U.S. intelligence community on the issue of an Iranian ICBM. According to these unclassified statements, some argue that an Iranian ICBM test is likely before 2010, and very likely before 2015. Other U.S. officials believe, however, that there is “less than an even chance” for such a test before 2015. Furthermore, U.S. assessments are also conditional in that an Iranian ICBM capability would have to rely on access to foreign technology, from, for example, North Korea or Russia.⁸ Finally, it is argued that an Iranian ICBM could develop from an Iranian space program under which a space-launch vehicle program might be converted into an ICBM program. Some have argued that Iran could develop and test such a space launch vehicle by 2010.

Some observers argue that although the U.S. position may be based upon a realistic assessment, it is also a worst-case analysis of the potential threat from Iran. They argue that “with rare exception this level of threat has rarely turned out to be the historical reality.”⁹

Beyond these general U.S. public statements about Iranian ICBM developments, there are few unclassified details. Further, non-official public sources reflect little technical or program consensus regarding an Iranian ICBM program. Some have referred to a program called the Shahab-6 (or Kosar in some instances) as a potential ICBM development program, perhaps

⁵ National Intelligence Council, “Foreign Missile Developments and the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States through 2015,” September 1999. This unclassified National Intelligence Estimate was provided in open testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on September 16, 1999, by Robert D. Walpole, National Intelligence Officer for Strategic and Nuclear Programs, Central Intelligence Agency.

⁶ National Intelligence Council, “Foreign Ballistic Missile Threat Through 2015,” December 2001, Unclassified Summary of a National Intelligence Estimate.

⁷ See CRS Report RL34051, *Long-Range Ballistic Missile Defense in Europe*, by Steven A. Hildreth and Carl Ek, and CRS Report RL32048, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, by Kenneth Katzman.

⁸ See National Intelligence Council, “Foreign Missile Developments, 1999,” and Robert D. Walpole, “The Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States,” Statement Before the Senate Subcommittee on International Security, Proliferation and Federal Services, February 9, 2000.

⁹ For instance, see Charles P. Vick, “North Korean, Iranian, and Pakistani Common Russian, Chinese Nuclear Weapons Heritage and Tests, What does it Reveal about the Missile Borne Warhead Development Status?” Part 1, March 20, 2007, at <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/dprk/nuke-warhead-dev1.htm>.

derived from North Korean or Russian missile technology, or both.¹⁰ Although Iran continues to declare it has no plans to develop an ICBM program, there appears to be considerable public uncertainty and debate as to whether the Shahab-6 is an actual design study concept, or an active or abandoned Iranian ICBM or even space-launch program. And in January 2004, Iran's Defense Minister reportedly announced that Iran would launch a satellite within 18 months, which launch did not occur. Statements from other Iranian officials indicate they do have a space launch program underway. In August 2008, U.S. defense officials said an Iranian missile test aimed at putting a dummy satellite into orbit failed shortly after launch.

Medium and Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles

Many experts believe that Iran's Shahab-3, which sometimes appears also to be called the Zelzal-3 ballistic missile, is a derivative of the North Korean No-Dong 1 ballistic missile. It has a reported range of about 1,000 to 1,500 kilometers. This could reach potential targets throughout most of the Middle East. Some have speculated that North Korea, Iran, and Pakistan entered into a cooperative effort at one point to develop a missile of this range and capability. Other observers have alleged Russian assistance in Iranian development of this missile. Some reports suggest that Iran has already deployed a number of medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs). Of all Iranian ballistic missile programs, there seems to be more publicly available information in relative terms about this particular missile system than others.¹¹ Even so, there remains considerable and varying differences in open sources about this system.

Longer range versions of the Shahab-3, variously referred to as Shahab-3 variants, the Shahab-3A, Shahab-3B, and Shahab-4, and a BM-25, may have range capabilities of 1,500-2,500 kilometers. These missiles potentially could reach targets throughout the Middle East, Turkey, and into southeastern Europe. Some have reported that perhaps several dozen or more of these missile types may be deployed and operational. Some Chinese, North Korean, or Russian involvement is suspected. In 2006, Iran announced the successful test of a Fajr-3 MRBM comparable to the Shahab-3, although U.S. and Israeli intelligence analysts reportedly expressed skepticism.

In mid-July 2008, Iran launched a number of ballistic missiles and rockets of varying ranges during military exercises. Some observers noted the missile launches were in direct response to long-range Israeli air force exercises at the time. Iran claimed it flight tested a 2,000 km version of the Shahab-3 that could carry a 1-ton warhead. If accurate, this missile could hit targets throughout the Middle East and Turkey. But some analysts are skeptical of these Iranian claims pending further technical analyses of these recent military exercises, and others have cited Iranian exaggerations of its missile capabilities in the past. Various major international media retracted initial images of the missile launches because they were reportedly digitally altered. Bush Administration officials said Iran did not test new technologies or capabilities, but said the missile launches were evidence of the need for its proposed missile defense system in Europe. Secretary of State Rice stated the exercises were not helpful and that Iran should refrain from such activities.

¹⁰ See, for instance, "Shahab-6 IRSL-X-4," at <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/missile/shahab-6.htm>, and "Shahab-6," at http://www.missilethreat.com/missiles/theworld/id.110,css.print/missile_detail.asp.

¹¹ See, for instance, the Federation of American Scientists: <http://www.fas.org/nuke/guide/iran/missile/shahab-3.htm> and http://www.missilethreat.com/missiles/theworld/id.107,css.print/missile_detail.asp.

Iran said it successfully test fired a 2-stage solid-fuel missile with a 2,000 kilometer range in November 2008. At the time, a Pentagon spokesman said he could not confirm the launch occurred, but that this was consistent with the fact that Iran continues to develop a ballistic missile program that poses a threat to Iran's neighbors in the region and beyond.

Other reports have also surfaced over Iran's development of a much longer MRBM with ranges of 4,000-5,000 kilometers, or even a space launch vehicle derived from these efforts that some refer to as the Shahab-5. The degree to which this effort might be actually underway also is highly uncertain.

Short-Range Ballistic Missiles

Iran is widely believed to have deployed a number of short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs)—those with ranges less than 1,000 kilometers. In addition, Iran is believed to have various other SRBMs under development, either indigenously or in varying degrees of cooperation with countries such as China, North Korea, or Russia.

Beyond these speculations, however, open source materials do not reflect a consensus over technical capabilities and performance. Additionally, there appear to be considerable differences in descriptions of the numbers of systems operational or deployed and even the agreed-upon names of SRBMs ascribed to Iran. Some of the more commonly referred to Iranian missiles are discussed briefly.

Some believe that Iran may have imported perhaps 200 Chinese CSS-8 (or Tondar-69) SRBMs in the late 1980s, as well as a number of associated launch systems for their operational deployment.¹² The CSS-8 may have a range of about 150 kilometers.

Iran may have developed an SRBM in the 1990s called the Fateh A-110 (also apparently referred to as the Mershad or Zelzal-2 variant). According to various reports, this missile may have been developed with Chinese, Syrian, and North Korean involvement. This missile may have a range of about 200 kilometers and may have become operational around 2004.

Some believe that Iran acquired several dozen Chinese M-11 or CSS-7 SRBMs and associated launch vehicles in the mid-1990s, although China has denied this. The M-11 reportedly has a range of around 280 kilometers.¹³

Iran may also possess a number of SRBMs with ranges of 200-300 kilometers that it might have acquired from Libya or North Korea. Some may have been produced or modified indigenously. These have variously been referred to as the SCUD-B, SCUD-B variants, or Shahab-1 SRBMs.

Iran might also possess a few hundred SRBMs with a range of about 500-700 kilometers or so. These SRBMs have sometimes been referred to as the SCUD-C and Shahab-2. Analysts have expressed uncertainty over whether the Iranians developed and built these missiles on their own, or had help from China and North Korea.

¹² The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2007*, p. 224.

¹³ http://missilethreat.com/missiles-of-the-world/id.66.css.print/missile_detail.asp.

Finally, there are some reports of an operational SRBM with a range up to 800 kilometers, which may possibly be referred to as an M-9 variant, DF-15, or CSS-6. Reportedly, the PRC produced the M-9 for export and Iran has acquired some number of them.

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