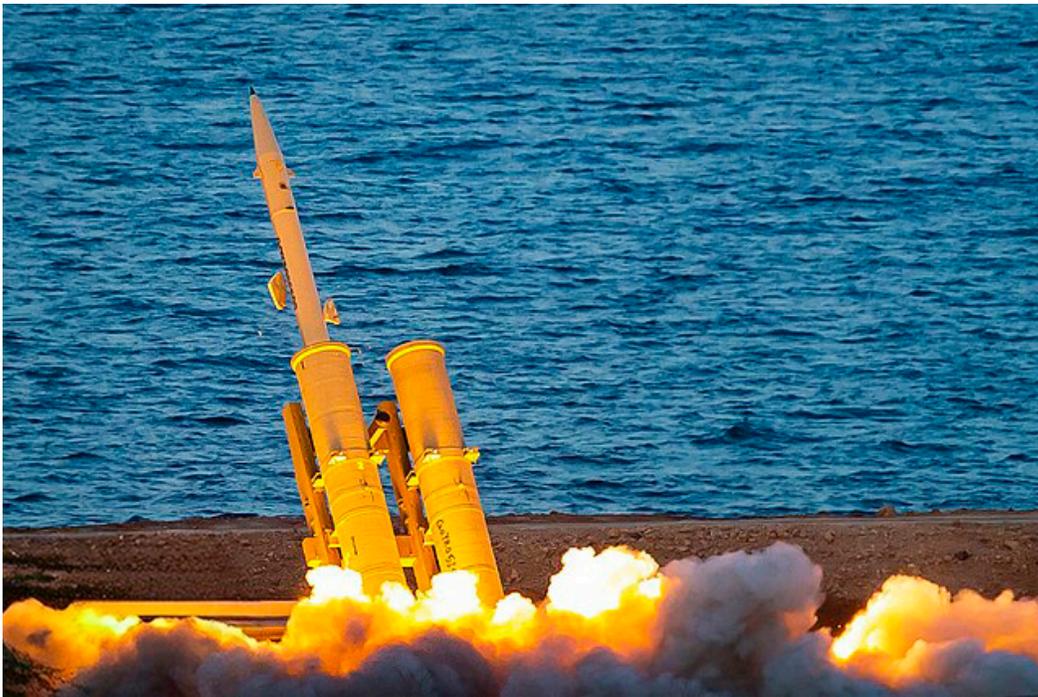


Iran's Evolving Missile and Drone Threat





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I. Executive Summary

The impressive surge of U.S. military might into the Middle East has yet to compel Iran to meet President Donald Trump's demands that it negotiate an agreement that finally ends its nuclear program, ballistic missile arsenals, support for terrorist proxies, and oppression of its own citizens.¹ Ahead of talks between the two countries, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei threatened that "more dangerous than the American warship is the weapon that can send it to the bottom of the sea."²

Much of Tehran's saber rattling comes from its impressive and evolving missile and drone capabilities that complicate Trump's preference for short, decisive military operations. While Iran clearly demonstrated the capabilities of its medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM) and drones in three rounds of fighting with Israel in the past two years, in a possible conflict with the United States it will be Iran's short-range ballistic (SRBM) and cruise missiles that likely will pose the greatest threat.

These weapons raise the specter of a much more destructive conflict than the 12-Day War last June. Iran's short-range arsenals enable it to hold at risk U.S. bases, forces, and partners around the Gulf, as well as the region's vulnerably small number of vital energy and other critical infrastructure chokepoints. These weapons have shorter flight times, and they face less robust air and missile defenses, than MRBMs fired at Israel. The proximity of such high-value targets to Iran means these projectiles can arrive in minutes and from multiple directions, complicating interception and increasing the likelihood that at least some weapons penetrate defenses, even when overall interception rates are high. And they were largely undamaged during the 12-Day War, meaning Iran has perhaps several thousand short-range missiles and drones at the ready.³

It also has much sharper urgency than ever before to execute large bolt-from-the-blue attacks. This is driven by the regime having been deprived of its nuclear trump card and facing an existential threat from within. With their backs to the wall, and no other leverage with which to demand deescalation, Iranian leaders have greater incentive to dispense with limited and telegraphed strikes and instead impose maximum costs on the United States, Israel, and Arab nations.

For all these reasons, Iran presumably can deal significantly more damage with these short-range capabilities than with a roughly equivalent number of MRBMs against Israel. As its most potent threat, Iran very likely will concentrate on generating high tempo SRBM, cruise missile, and drone fire against close-in Gulf targets, while preserving remaining MRBM launchers for select high-value strikes and to deter or counter Israeli operations. Iran also can be expected to adapt and adjust its strike packages and tactics during any prolonged conflict, to continually maximize their sustainability and effectiveness. In these ways, Iran amasses an overall threat to U.S. forces, assets, and partners that is greater than the sum of its projectile parts.

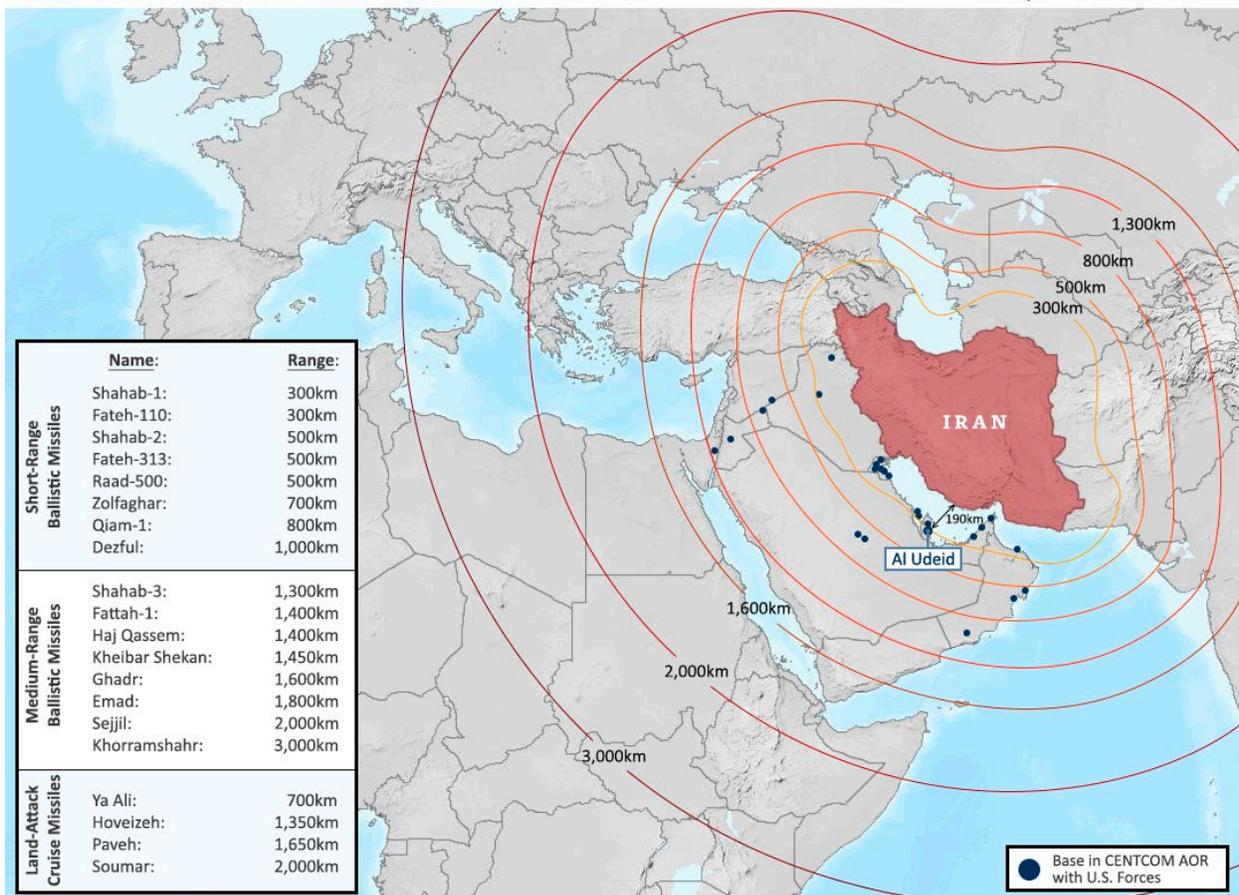
But Tehran's arsenals have vulnerabilities, too. The 12-Day War offers the largest sample size here, having exposed in particular how Iran's ballistic missile launchers form a chokepoint which, if properly targeted, can have outsized effects in degrading the size and rapidity of its salvos. Finding, fixing, and finishing Iran's aboveground mobile, and underground stationary, launchers—taking out the archers, not the arrows—offers the best prospects for deterring and denying Iran's most threatening military options.

II. Iranian Missile and Drone Capabilities

Iran relies on ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones to endanger and attack targets, including U.S. assets, across the Middle East and beyond.⁴ Missiles and drones serve as both short- and long-range precision strike forces, capable of straining and penetrating even the best regional defenses when fired in dense barrages, at single targets from multiple flight paths, and/or in strike packages that combine missile and drone systems. Missiles are particularly essential to the regime’s deterrence and warfighting. Many of Iran’s leaders believe these capabilities helped preserve the Islamic Republic, both in its existential struggle with Iraq in the 1980s and in what it perceived as a U.S.-Israeli attempt at regime change in the June 2025 war.

Iran disperses its arsenal across numerous sites, including underground “missile cities.” Before the 12-Day War, reporting identified at least 24 missile sites in western Iran, with major clusters around Kermanshah, such as the Konesh Canyon complex with extensive tunnel bunkers, and others extending into Lorestan and the Zagros region.⁵ Many facilities featured multiple tunnel entrances for quick deployment, and some include hardened silos like the Haji Abad complex in Hormozgan facing Gulf targets. Within this network, SRBMs are likely concentrated in western Iran, given their primary purpose for targeting Gulf nations, while MRBMs are likely dispersed nationwide. Cruise missiles appear oriented toward western and southern coastal areas, and drone infrastructure spans underground bases, airfields, and production sites across central, western, and southern Iran.⁶

Ranges of Iranian Ballistic and Cruise Missiles



A. Medium-range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM)

Despite having generally limited accuracy, the large payloads and ranges of Iran’s MRBMs make this arsenal one of the most dangerous conventional strike capabilities in the Middle East. They enable Tehran to threaten large-scale damage against U.S. forces, Israel, Arab nations, and critical infrastructure. Iran’s MRBMs, with heavy warheads, put the entire Middle East and parts of southeastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and northeast Africa within reach from Iranian territory.

Ranges of Iran's MRBMs



By enabling launches from deep in its own territory and from shifting locations, the layered range structure of its MRBM arsenal reduces Iran’s vulnerability to counterstrikes while still threatening targets across the entire Middle East. Such dispersal plays to Iran’s advantageous strategic depth as a much larger territory than Israel or Arab nations, most of whose military assets and critical infrastructure are concentrated in a relatively small number of locations. During the 12-Day War, for example, Iran attempted to disperse its launch points deeper into its interior, at or beyond the operational range of Israeli strike assets.

Iran also tailors its strike packages to maximize potential success against the air defenses it must overcome, and to maximize damage to its intended targets. Smaller MRBM warheads, such as Fattah-1 and Haj Qassem, are suited to hitting exposed point targets like runways, less hardened storage areas, and port infrastructure where even minimal impacts can jeopardize basic operations. Mid-weight systems such as Kheibar Shekan, Sejjil, Ghadr, and Emad can damage reinforced buildings, fuel tanks, and key base structures. Larger missiles such as Shahab-3 and especially Khorramshahr carry the heaviest warheads, which can cause major structural damage to hardened facilities or dense urban areas with fewer impacts. Through higher-velocity shrapnel and blast pressure, Iran’s larger warheads provide greater lethality against reinforced buildings and larger structures.

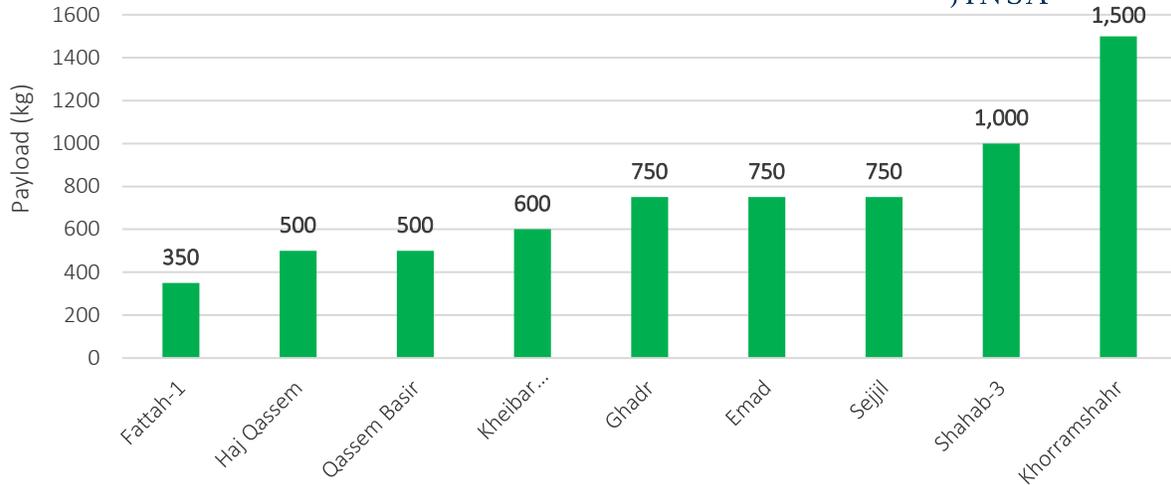
The Emad, and likely the Kheibar Shekan, have maneuverable reentry vehicles (MaRV) that enhance accuracy and survivability by enabling their warheads to alter trajectory in their terminal phase, giving Iran added ability to evade advanced U.S. or Israeli air defenses. Some MRBM variants can threaten larger area targets, including military bases and urban areas, by scattering cluster submunitions. Iran’s largest MRBMs, including Shahab-3 variants, Sejjil, and Khorramshahr, also could potentially accommodate a nuclear warhead.

Iran's Medium-range Ballistic Missile Arsenal



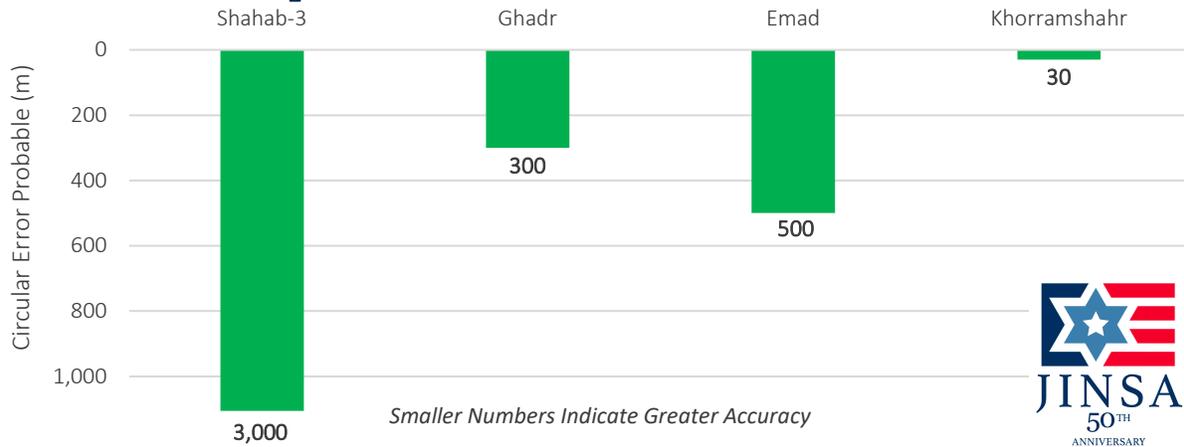
Name (range)	Key Targets within Range of Launch Zone(s)
Qassem Basir (1,200 km)	<p style="text-align: center;">Firing from Western Iran: All of the Gulf, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, and most of the Arabian Peninsula</p>
Shahab-3 (1,300 km)	
Fattah-1 (1,400 km)	
Haj Qassem (1,400 km)	
Kheibar Shekan (1,450 km)	
Ghadr (1,600 km)	<p style="text-align: center;">Firing from Central Iran: All of the Gulf, Iraq, Jordan, Israel, and most of the Arabian Peninsula</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Firing from Western Iran: Entire Arabian Peninsula, Suez Canal, and Central Egypt</p>
Emad (1,800 km)	
Sejjil (2,000 km)	<p style="text-align: center;">Firing from Eastern Iran: All of the Gulf, Iraq, most of the Arabian Peninsula, Jordan, Eastern and Central Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central Asia, and Northern Indian Ocean</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Entire Middle East (Khorramshahr only)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Firing from Central Iran: Entire Middle East and Horn of Africa</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Parts of Southeastern Europe (Khorramshahr only)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Firing from Western Iran: Entire Middle East, Eastern Mediterranean, Eastern Europe, and Northeastern Africa</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Central Europe (Khorramshahr only)</p>
Khorramshahr (3,000 km)	

Payload of Iran's MRBMs



In addition to helping overcome enemy defenses, Iran’s tendency to fire MRBMs in large barrages can compensate for these missiles’ limited precision. The Khorramshahr is Iran’s most precise MRBM, with a circular error probable (CEP) of 30 meters—meaning that half of the total missiles it fires will land within 30 meters of the target. Combined with its heavy warhead, this missile type poses a serious risk to even hardened targets. The smaller-payload, less-precise Ghadr and Emad often require larger barrages to ensure consistent damage, while the heavy Shahab-3 realistically is suited to attacking area targets like cities or broad base complexes, particularly in large barrages and/or multiple waves. Some of Iran’s targeting logic dates back to the War of the Cities in the late 1980s, when it sought to offset Iraq’s conventional military superiorities by firing barrages of Soviet-made SCUDs (the Shahab’s predecessor) against Iraqi urban areas.

Known Accuracy of Iran's MRBMs



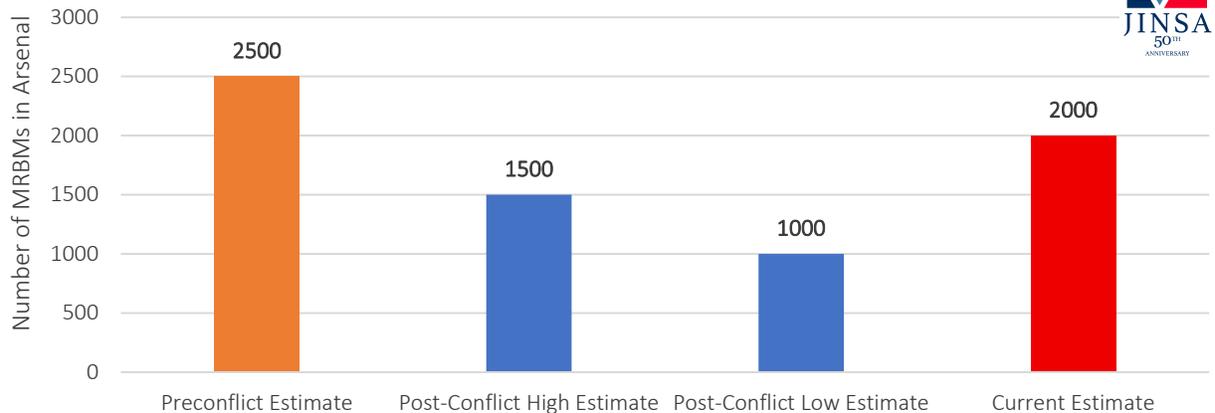
Compared to solid-fueled missiles (see below), the liquid-fueled Shahab-3, Ghadr, Emad, and Khorramshahr typically carry larger warheads over longer distances relative to their overall weight. This comes at the cost of longer preparation time and visible pre-launch aboveground fueling that reduce salvo rates and leave them more vulnerable to detection and preemption than solid-fueled missiles like Fattah-1, Haj Qassem, Qassem Basir, Kheibar Shekan, and Sejil. Iran’s longest-range solid-fueled MRBM, the Sejil, features a two-stage design that burns fuel in sequence so it can drop weight mid-flight and maintain

thrust for a longer duration. Fattah-2 combines these approaches, as a solid-fuel single-stage missile that can also carry a liquid-fueled MaRV that adjusts trajectory during the terminal stage.

Before the 12-Day War, Iran began accelerating production of solid-fueled missiles to such an extent that it could have grown its stockpile from about 2,000 missiles capable of reaching Israel at the end of 2024 to over 8,000 within the following two years. Iran’s decision to produce solid-fueled MRBMs at an unprecedented rate was a substantial contributor to Israel’s decision to begin Operation Rising Lion when it did.

Recently Tehran has prioritized reconstituting its MRBM infrastructure that Israel damaged or destroyed in the 12-Day War. After losing 40-60 percent of its MRBM stockpile during that conflict, Iran has reportedly reconstituted its arsenal to roughly 2,000 such systems today, close to prewar levels.⁷ Satellite imagery and intelligence assessments show reconstruction at missile-related industrial sites, including solid-propellant facilities damaged during the conflict.⁸ Reporting has also documented large shipments of materials used in solid-fuel missile production from China to Iran in 2025.⁹ According to reports, Russia also has assisted Iran in upgrading the lethality of its most dangerous Khorramshahr MRBM.¹⁰ Likewise, Iran has made concerted efforts to reconstitute its MRBM launch capabilities since the 12-Day War, including digging out the roughly 95 launchers that Israel blocked it from accessing, repairing launchers hit during the war, and building new ones. If Iran repaired or replaced 25 percent of the launchers Israel hit, on top of the roughly 95 MRBM launchers it had at the end of the war, it could now have roughly 200-260 launchers.

Iran's MRBM Capacity



Iran's MRBM Launcher Capacity



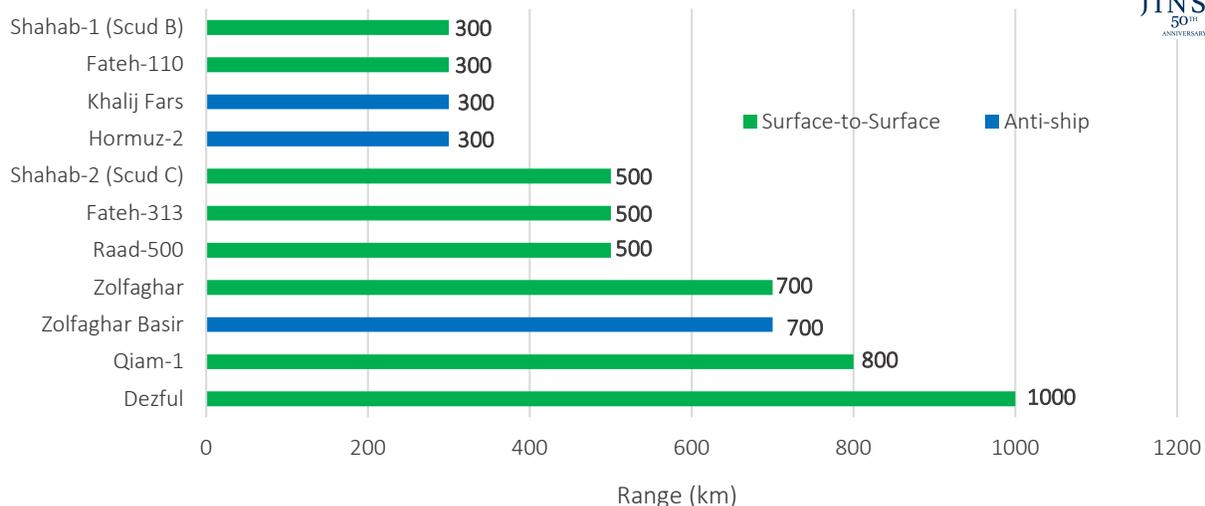
Iran’s operations in the war exposed certain weaknesses, including lengthy launch processes and reliance on launchers and stockpiles that can create vulnerable points of failure if properly targeted. Iran’s limited number of launchers relative to missile stocks was a chokepoint Israel exploited, reducing Iran’s ability to fire large salvos faster than the sheer attrition of missile stocks would suggest. Its salvo rates and capacity depend on a finite number of vulnerable launchers, both mobile aboveground transporter-erector-launchers (TEL) and hardened underground “missile cities.”¹¹ Though more expendable, truck-mounted TELs and their liquid-fueled MRBMs proved highly susceptible to detection and destruction, especially as air superiority in the 12-Day War enabled Israeli aircraft to follow TELs back to their stockpiles. Missile cities are better protected and concealed than road-mobile systems, but are also inherently less flexible, given their fixed locations and the fact that their narrow firing apertures provide fewer potential launch angles. Israeli strikes hit 293 launchers and blocked 92 launchers, leaving Iran with fewer than 100 working launchers by the end of the conflict. Israel’s severe degradation of Iran’s launcher capacity likely drove Tehran’s desire to end the fighting when it did.¹²

B. Short-range Ballistic Missiles (SRBM)

Iran’s short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) are the backbone of its ability to conduct large, and repeated, strikes with limited early warning and short flight times against vital energy infrastructure, shipping lanes, and U.S. and Arab partner military installations throughout the Gulf.¹³ Such “mass precision,” bolt-from-the-blue capabilities aim to deter the United States and its Arab partners by exploiting their limited strategic depth and sparsity of air and missile defenses, and by complicating the rapid decision-making required to operate these defenses effectively.

The ranges of these SRBMs enable Iran to threaten its immediate neighbors and all of the Gulf, including from positions well inside Iranian territory. Fateh-110 and Shahab-1 can strike Gulf targets from Iran’s coastal provinces, while Fateh-313, Raad-500, and Shahab-2 can do so from deeper inside southern Iran. Zolfaghar, Qiam-1, and Dezful can hold the full Gulf region at risk from hundreds of kilometers inside Iran, allowing Iran to shift launch activity across a wider set of interior locations.

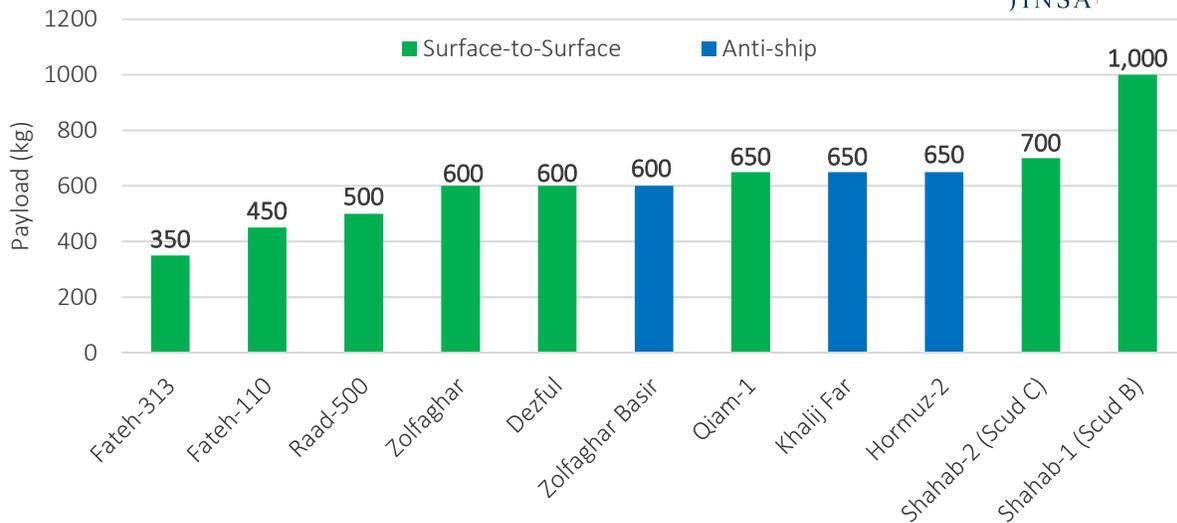
Ranges of Iran's SRBMs



Iran’s SRBM payloads give it the ability to damage military bases, strike civilian population centers, and disrupt critical infrastructure such as ports, energy facilities, and transportation hubs—sites that are often concentrated along coastlines and within relatively small geographic areas. Fateh-313 and Fateh-110 carry warheads large enough to crater runways, damage aircraft shelters, and strike exposed storage and fuel sites. Raad-500, Zolfaghar, and Dezful, with their larger warheads, increase fragmentation against

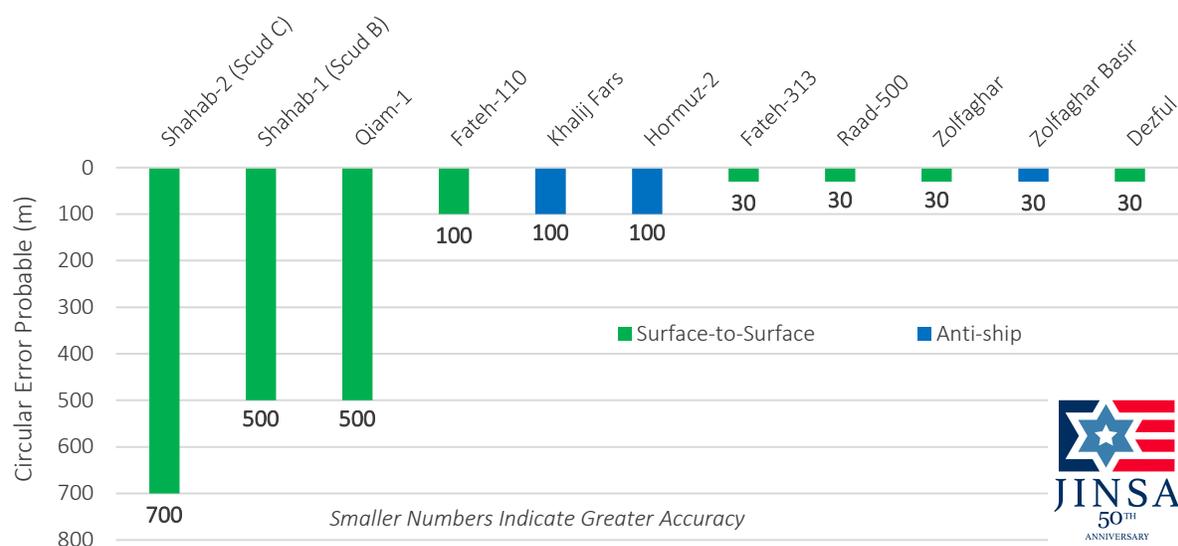
reinforced buildings and larger base structures. Qiam-1, Shahab-2, and Shahab-1 carry the heaviest SRBM warheads and can damage area targets like bases or port complexes with a single impact. Iran has adapted the Fateh SRBM family into anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBM) like the Khaliq Fars, Hormuz-2, and Zolfaghar Basir. Though unproven in combat, these systems incorporate maneuverability and terminal guidance features designed to strike moving naval targets in the confined waters of the Gulf and adjacent shipping lanes.

Payloads of Iran's SRBMs



Iran's SRBMs are generally more accurate than its MRBMs. Modern systems such as Fateh-110, Fateh-313, Raad-500, Zolfaghar, and Dezful are precise enough to threaten point targets like runways, radar sites, fuel depots, and command facilities. Shahab-1, Qiam-1, and Shahab-2 are better suited for large installations, cities, and other area targets, though their relatively poor precision can be offset to some degree by firing in salvos.

Accuracy of Iran's SRBMs



Unlike its MRBMs, Iran’s most advanced SRBMs, like the Fateh family, Raad-500, Zolfaghar, and Dezful, are solid-fueled. Because these systems store propellant internally and can forego lengthy pre-launch fueling, they can be readied and fired much more rapidly—and thus less detectably—than liquid-fueled Shahab-1, Shahab-2, and Qiam-1 SRBMs and similarly-fueled MRBMs.

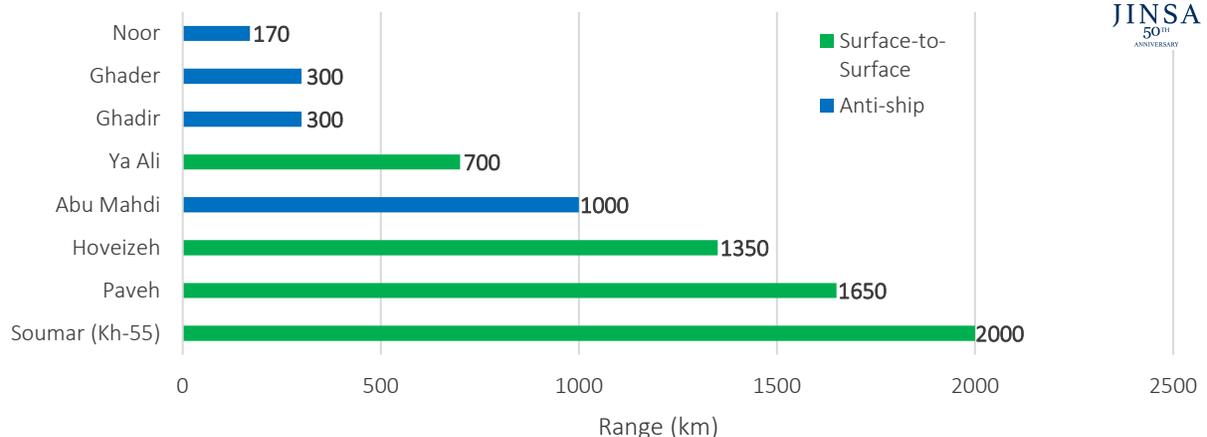
Currently Iran likely has several thousand SRBMs with which to conduct large barrages against Gulf targets. Israel understandably prioritized MRBM-related targets in the 12-Day War, likely leaving SRBM and cruise missile arsenals less degraded. Unclassified U.S. intelligence assessments in recent years suggest Iran has an estimated 100 SRBM launchers. Even if an underestimate, this still would be an even tighter chokepoint and larger vulnerability than its MRBM launch capabilities preceding the 12-Day War.¹⁴

C. Cruise Missiles

Cruise missiles offer Tehran a different, often complementary, option to threaten land and maritime targets across the broader Middle East. Flying low with highly maneuverable trajectories and approaching targets horizontally rather than descending on ballistic arcs, the flight profile of a cruise missile makes it harder to detect, with less early warning time, than a ballistic missile—especially when flying over water toward ports, coastal cities, bases, energy terminals, and ships.

Though little is publicly known about the CEPs of Iran’s cruise missiles, by improving precision, this in-flight guidance and maneuverability reduce the need for large warheads or wide blast effects to damage specific targets. Iran’s Ya Ali land attack cruise missile (LACM) can reach Gulf states from southern Iran, while its Hoveizeh extends that reach into Jordan and Israel. Paveh, with its 200 kg payload, and the Russian-derived Soumar enable Iran to fire from farther within its territory and still reach Israel. Though unproven in combat, Iran fields anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM) such as Noor, Ghader, Ghadir, and Abu Mahdi. These are designed to target specific parts of ships, particularly the bridge and the waterline of the hull, more reliably than ASBMs. There are no public estimates of Iran’s cruise missile launch capacity, though it is known to possess mobile launchers of various types, including for coastal defense ASCMs.

Ranges of Iran's Cruise Missiles



D. Drones

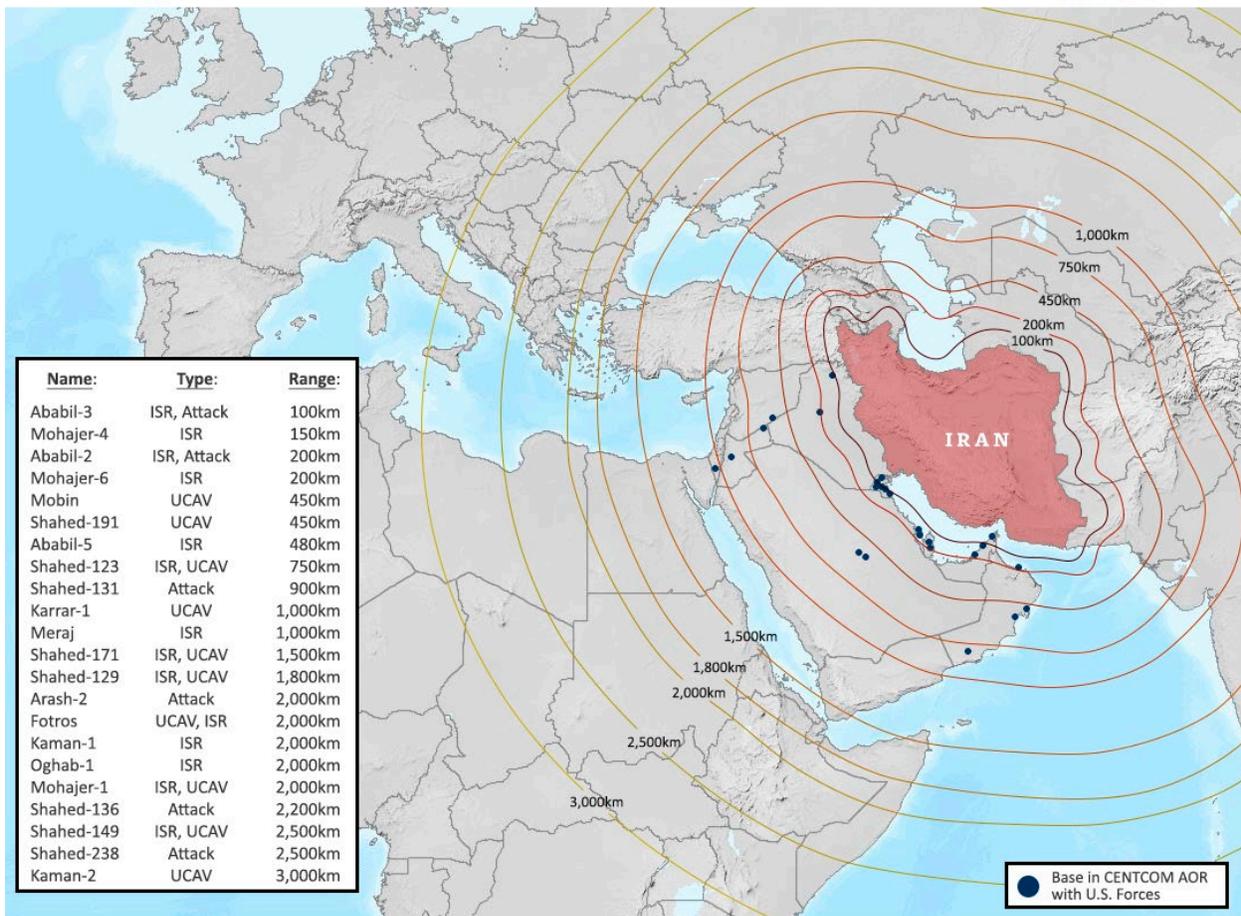
Iranian drones enable long-range attacks and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) across the Middle East and into parts of Europe, Africa, and Asia. Its one-way attack drones resemble cruise missiles by flying low, along hard-to-predict flight paths, and hitting targets directly. Like cruise missiles, these trajectories enable Iranian drones to target a ship’s most critical and weak points, especially commercial vessels that may lack advanced anti-drone technologies. Iran also has unmanned combat aerial vehicles

(UCAV) that can loiter over targets, fire missiles or release other munitions, and then return to base for repeated missions.

Iran’s ISR drones support long-range missile, and attack and UCAV drone, operations by providing target identification, aim-point confirmation, and post-strike assessment. By pairing these ISR drones with one-way attack drones and ballistic or cruise missiles, Iran and its partners can refine attack timing and precision, adjust targeting, and coordinate follow-on strikes from dispersed launch sites and across dispersed theaters, without relying solely on ground-based sensors. Since February 2025, Iran has operated a drone-carrier warship that can launch and recover drones at sea, extending the range of its surveillance and strike operations.

Iran likely fielded thousands of drones of all types before the 12-Day War, and today it continues growing that inventory to diversify and scale its strikes. In January 2026, Iran’s armed forces claimed to add 1,000 new drones to their inventories, which would replace nearly all those launched at Israel or otherwise lost in the June 2025 conflict.¹⁵

Ranges of Iranian Drones

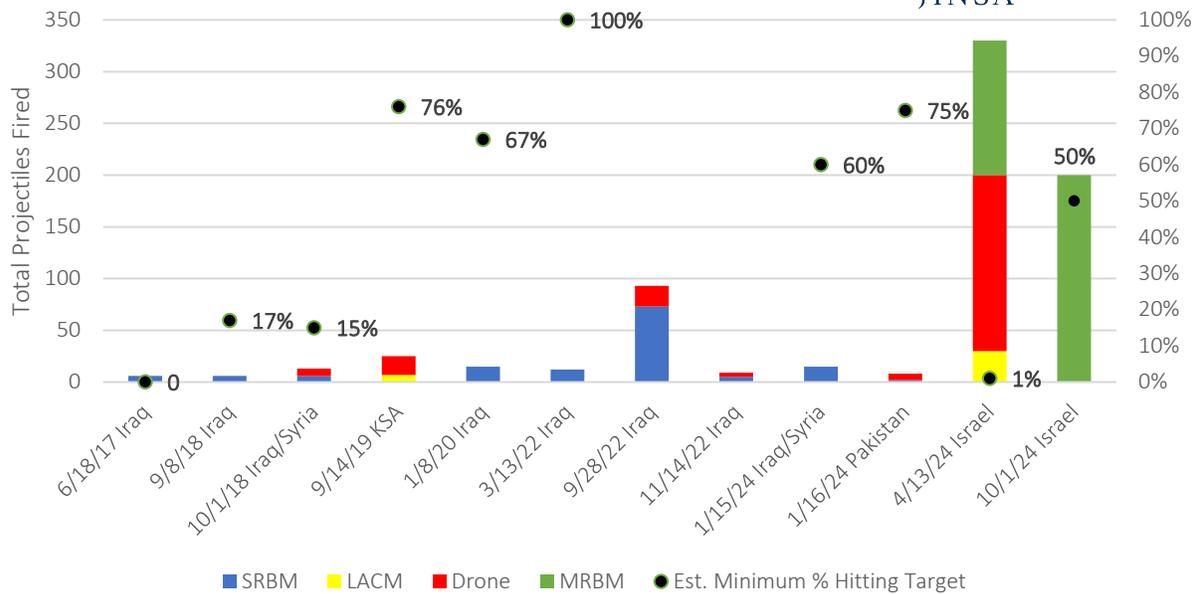


III. Performance and Lessons of Iranian Attacks

These arsenals are threatening in terms of their advancing technical capabilities, but also in how Iran employs them together in large, coordinated, and sometimes multi-vector attacks. Through the trial and error of repeated strikes, Iran has improved the overall lethality and scale of its missile and drone attacks over time by refining targeting procedures, experimenting with different strike packages, and upgrading missile components.

Iran’s first cross-border missile offensive since the 1980s, a June 2017 strike against Islamic State targets in Syria and in Iraqi Kurdistan, was a clear failure. Most or all of the 6-7 Zolfaghar SRBMs reportedly missed their targets by perhaps as much as several hundred meters. Since then, Iran has demonstrated general patterns of rising effectiveness and varying strike packages over the course of at least ten missile and drone attacks. In September 2019, Iran conducted its first mixed missile and drone strike—seven LACMs and 18 attack drones—by launching them in swarms that evaded air defenses to successfully hit specific high-value targets within the larger oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in Saudi Arabia. Iran’s most notable SRBM strike, a January 2020 attack against U.S. forces at Ayn al Asad Air Base and facilities near Erbil in Iraq, proved highly effective at hitting specific point targets like aircraft shelters and buildings. More than 100 U.S. servicemembers suffered traumatic brain injuries, and the damage could have been far worse if not for last-minute passive defense measures by U.S. servicemembers.¹⁶

Iran's Missile and Drone Attacks



Iran also learns from the Houthis and Russians that employ its missiles and drones. From Yemen, the Houthis have launched hundreds of Iranian-origin drones and missiles at Israel and shipping in the Red Sea, damaging vessels and buildings and disrupting maritime traffic.¹⁷ In prior years, the Houthis’ drone and missile strikes proved increasingly effective at hitting high-value point targets in Saudi Arabia, including energy hubs, runways, and military command and control facilities.¹⁸ Russia regularly employs massive waves of Iranian Shahed-136 and Shahed-131 drones, often in tandem with missiles, to overcome Western-supplied air defenses and inflict severe damage on Ukrainian power plants, residential areas, and industrial facilities.¹⁹

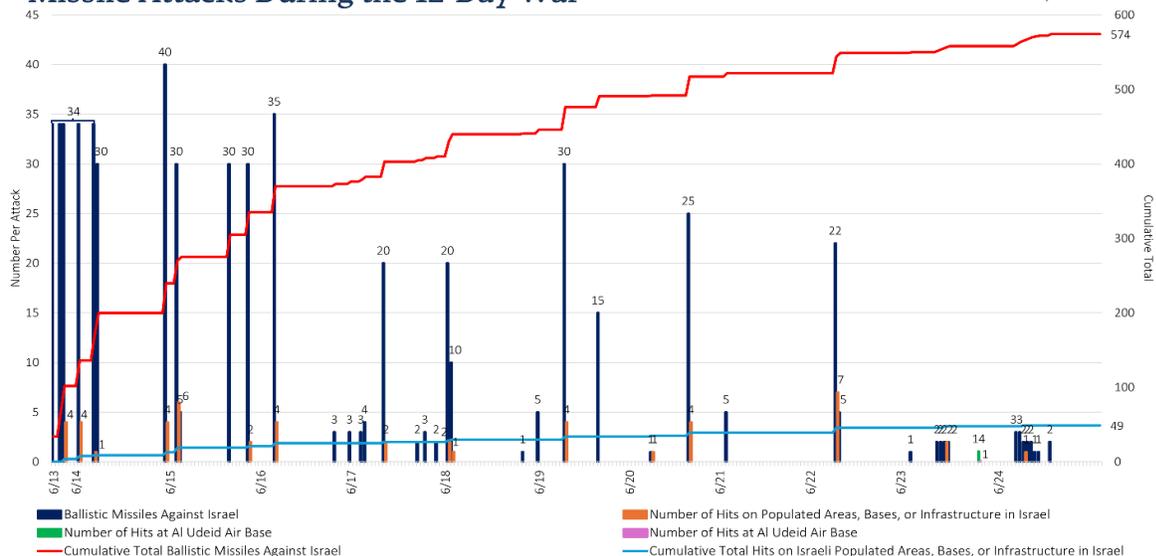
Tehran uses trial and error to adapt its longer-range strikes against Israel as well. Iran’s first direct attack on Israel, in April 2024, largely failed to hit its broad array of intended targets.²⁰ Iran relied heavily on its most numerous, but relatively imprecise, liquid-fueled Emad and Ghadr MRBMs, firing some 130 total, synchronized to arrive on target with 30 LACMs and 170 drones launched hours earlier.²¹ Many of the MRBMs failed mid-flight, and their time-consuming launch preparations—combined with ample early warning from the accompanying LACMs and drones—enabled U.S., Israeli, and partner air defenses to intercept all but between four and ten of the MRBMs that reached terminal phase. None of the LACMs or attack drones successfully hit their targets.²²

Iran’s second direct attack on Israel, in October 2024, proved more successful by applying lessons from these initial failures.²³ It did not use LACMs or attack drones, relying instead on roughly 200 advanced Fattah-1 and Kheibar Shekan MRBMs aimed at a small number of specific military targets.²⁴ This time around, roughly half of the missiles hit on-target, according to Israelis with knowledge of the operations.²⁵ Visual analysis of impacts at Israel’s Nevatim Air Base shows that, even without pinpoint accuracy, Iran’s MRBMs successfully hit multiple targets.²⁶

Iran adapted further during the 12-Day War. It did so despite being surprised tactically, suffering severe disruption to its command and control, and losing control of its own skies from nearly the outset of the conflict. After opting not to use such projectiles in October 2024, it fired some 1,084 drones in June 2025, in order to sustain pressure on Israeli and U.S. air defenses, while using its more capable MRBMs against selected high-value targets. Like in October 2024, Iran showed some ability to compensate for the relative inaccuracy of its MRBMs with massive attacks against important area targets. Though Israeli and U.S. air and missile defenses intercepted roughly 85 percent of the MRBMs and 99 percent of the drones they intended to shoot down, MRBMs still killed at least 31 people in Israel and injured more than 3,000.²⁷

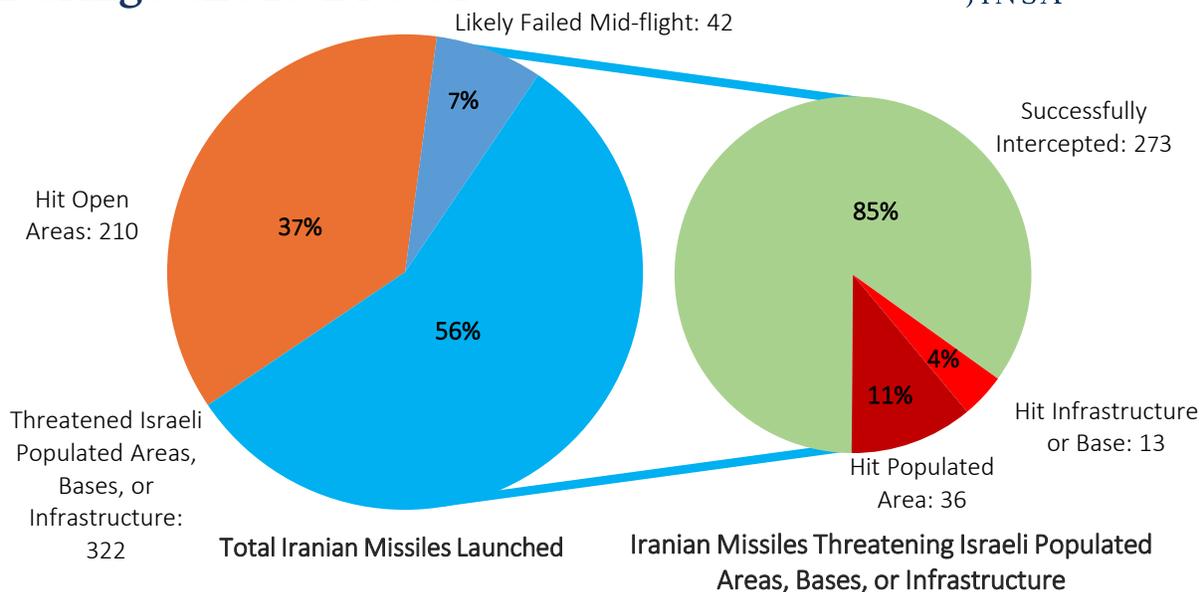
Iran also dispersed the tempo and locations of its launches throughout the conflict in response to attrition from Israeli airstrikes, especially against its mobile MRBM launchers. As the conflict progressed, Iran made a virtue of necessity, both by switching from concentrated salvos to smaller barrages spread out over time—thus imposing more prolonged disruptions to everyday life in Israel—and over distance, thus imposing greater strains on Israeli ISR and attack platforms. At the end of the war, Iran retaliated for U.S. Operation Midnight Hammer against its nuclear facilities by launching a combination of 14 MRBMs and SRBMs at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. This strike was notable as Iran’s first SRBM attack that faced active defenses. While U.S.-operated Patriot air defenses at the base intercepted most of the missiles, at least one impacted the installation and damaged a communications structure.²⁸

Size and Frequency of Iranian Ballistic Missile Attacks During the 12-Day War



It is difficult to discern the extent to which Iran’s attacks with short-range capabilities directly inform its MRBM strikes, and vice-versa. Yet presumably its use of progressively more advanced guidance systems and other components offers valuable insights to improve precision and survivability in general for each of Iran’s missile categories. It is also completely logical to assume Iran is modifying its short-range launch capabilities and procedures in light of its MRBM launch vulnerabilities exposed in the 12-Day War.

Estimated Interception and Hit Rates During June 13-24 War



IV. Defending Against Iranian Missiles and Drones

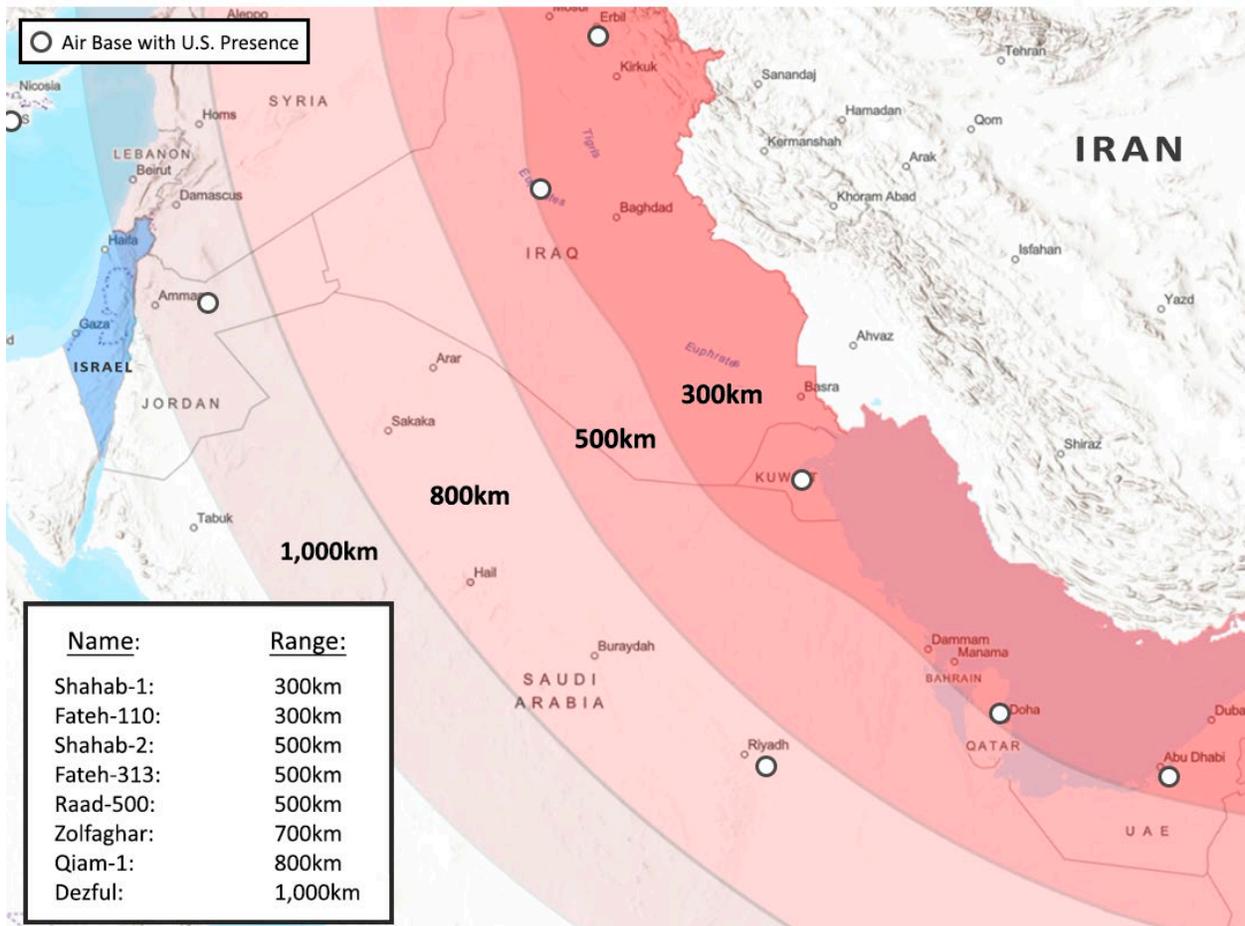
Air defenses around the Gulf and in Israel can blunt most attacks, yet their effectiveness depends on rapid reaction times and steady interceptor supply in a theater where distances are short and salvos can arrive quickly. The current surge of U.S. assets strengthens deterrence and expands coverage. Yet geography and finite stocks of valuable U.S.-made interceptors mean air defenses would still face significant strain in a sustained and/or large-scale conflict with Iran.

U.S. and partner air defenses in the Gulf operate under constant pressure because key bases sit only minutes from Iranian launch areas. Patriot batteries defend installations such as Al Udeid in Qatar, Ali Al Salem in Kuwait, and Al Dhafra in the UAE. American THAAD deployments add coverage against longer-range missiles, and Aegis destroyers in the Gulf and Arabian Sea provide additional interception capacity.²⁹ However, proximity to Iran compresses warning time and forces defenses to operate at a constant high alert. This posture provides strong point defense where systems are actually located, but leaves little geographic depth if attacks expand to multiple bases or other high-value targets at once.

The United States has surged air and naval forces in and around the Middle East over the past few weeks, including the USS *Abraham Lincoln* carrier strike group in the Arabian Sea, five Aegis guided-missile destroyers (DDG) in the Gulf area, two DDGs in the eastern Mediterranean, one DDG in Red Sea, roughly 200 forward-deployed tactical aircraft across EUCOM and CENTCOM bases, and the USS *Gerald Ford* carrier strike group, including with three more DDGs, sailing to the region via the Mediterranean.³⁰ During Iran’s 2024 and 2025 attacks against Israel, U.S. DDGs helped defeat MRBMs while U.S. aircraft helped neutralize cruise missiles and drones.

Israel's air defense architecture remains the most layered in the region, yet it now operates under the practical constraint of interceptor supply after the 12-Day War. Even with assistance from U.S. THAAD and Aegis systems, sustained Iranian barrages forced heavy use of Arrow, David's Sling, and Iron Dome interceptors, and replenishment has become a pacing factor as Israel rebuilds its stocks.³¹ Another prolonged campaign could again drive rapid consumption rates, especially against large mixed salvos of Iranian missiles and drones.

Ranges of Iranian Short-Range Ballistic Missiles



V. Implications and Recommendations

These missile and drone capabilities should be the center of gravity for developing credible U.S. military options that deter Iranian escalation and, if need be, limit its ability to conduct large, potentially devastating, strikes against U.S. bases, forces, partners, and the region's vital energy and shipping chokepoints. Given Trump's inclination toward short, decisive military operations, much of Tehran's ongoing willingness to test U.S. redlines and threaten massive retaliation stems from its confidence that its missile and drone capabilities make a limited conflict impossible.³²

Planning must account for Tehran's intentions as well as its capabilities. Its current readiness to brandish these weapons and execute large-scale, repeated bolt-from-the-blue attacks is markedly more pronounced than in prior conflicts and tensions with America and Israel. This is driven by the combination of Iran's much-reduced nuclear weapons breakout capacity and the regime's heightened risk acceptance after Trump's threats to support internal unrest that pose an existential problem for its rule.³³ With their backs to the wall, Iranian leaders have greater incentive to dispense with limited and telegraphed strikes, and instead threaten to impose maximum costs on the United States, Israel, and Arab nations.

Given evidence from the 12-Day War specifically, but also larger patterns over nearly a decade, crisis decision-making and coordination between the United States, Israel, and other partners should consider Iran's capacities for adaptation and surprise in both pre-conflict and real-time planning, timing, and tactical execution of its attacks.

The constraint on Iran's MRBM launch capacity, and its overt standoff with U.S. forces, likely pushes the center of gravity of any sustained campaign toward the Gulf. The 12-Day War showed that attrition of MRBM launchers limits Tehran's ability to generate repeated long-range salvos, but Iran retains at least as large, and a more responsive, capacity to fire SRBMs against nearby bases, ports, and energy infrastructure with little warning. That imbalance means Iran could concentrate operations against regional targets inside SRBM range, while preserving remaining MRBM launchers for select high-value strikes and to deter or counter Israeli operations.

Combined, these factors channel Iran's most sustainable strike activity toward the short-range battlespace in the Gulf, where it can impose continuous and shifting operational pressure. Sustained short-range salvos against Gulf bases, ports, and energy infrastructure could exceed the tempo and geographic spread seen during the 12-Day War, creating a larger and more persistent defensive challenge.

Beyond these immediate issues, the United States also must address underlying regional force posture concerns that pose real risks and constraints when it comes to deterring and denying Iranian aggression more generally. With the exception of naval assets in international waters, most U.S. deployments to the region as part of President Trump's ongoing buildup are to bases in host nations that restrict access and overflights for offensive operations against Iran and its threat network.

Located close to Iran along the Gulf, many of those host nations are within easy striking distance of Iran's formidable short-range arsenals. They also lack anything like Israel's robust multi-layered air and missile defenses. In a war with Iran, U.S. bases in the Gulf thus could be "rendered unusable by sustained Iranian attack," as former commander of U.S. Central Command and JINSA's Hertog Distinguished Fellow General Frank McKenzie Jr., USMC (ret.), detailed in a report about current U.S. basing in the region.³⁴ For this reason, during repeated periods of heightened tension with Iran, the United States has evacuated military assets from bases in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. Likewise, U.S. naval vessels have deployed farther from Iran's coastline, limiting U.S. deterrence and force generation. JINSA's recent report, *Basing for Success: U.S. Basing Options in Israel*, shows how a more dispersed force posture that explores U.S. basing options in Israel could reduce risks while also enhancing U.S. forces' strategic and operational freedom of action.³⁵

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