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# Tehran's Terror Traffic

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## TOPLINE POINTS

- Iran's weapons program progressed from what began as a defensive program in the Iran-Iraq War into a global proliferator of missile and drone technology, leveraging decades of foreign assistance from North Korea, China, and Russia to build a self-sufficient and advanced weapons enterprise that Tehran uses to gain influence far beyond its own borders.
- Tehran has defied U.N. embargos and sanctions, developing resilient covert networks to supply its proxies with weapons, components, and operational support.
- Through the systematic arming of the Houthis, Hezbollah, Shi'ite militias, and the former Assad regime, Iran has established a distributed deterrent network that enables indirect escalation and multi-front pressure on U.S. forces, Israel, and other regional governments.
- By extending arms transfers to Russia, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Venezuela, Tehran demonstrates a strategic shift toward global power projection and widening the geographic scope of its influence.
- Recent U.S. and Israeli military operations have degraded Tehran's proxy networks and strained its production and logistics capacity, yet the enduring strategic importance of these regions makes it likely that Iran will rebuild and resume its transfer network.

## Introduction[1]

Over the past two decades, Iran has transformed itself into one of the world's leading proliferators of missile and drone technology. Its arsenal now ranges from medium-range ballistic missiles, some of which Tehran claims can achieve supersonic speed and mid-flight retargeting, to low-cost unmanned aerial systems (UAS) that can be mass-produced and easily deployed.

[1] A special thanks to Fred Fleitz for his contributions from his own work on the early developments of Iran's missile program in the Iran-Iraq War and its support from partners such as Libya and North Korea.

The danger lies not only in Iran's possession of these weapons but in the extensive export network it has developed. Through this network, missiles and drones find their way into the hands of proxies and allied regimes across the Middle East and beyond, extending Iran's reach far outside its borders.

Iran began its ballistic missile program in the 1980s in response to Iraq's missile and air superiority during the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988). Although Tehran initiated this effort as a small program to develop short-range missiles with conventional warheads to fire at Iraq, the program evolved into greater efforts that included longer-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

Tehran's missile program received a wide range of support from international partners, which significantly advanced its development. In 1985, Iran reportedly acquired from Libya Soviet Scud-B missiles, which are short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) with an approximate range of 300 km (Missile Defense Project, 2024d).

After Iran fired a small supply of these missiles against Iraq, they then turned to North Korea. In 1987, North Korea reportedly reached a $5 million agreement to sell roughly 120 Scud B's and other military hardware to Iran (Missile Defense Project, 2024d). Iran would rename this missile the Shabab-1. This marked the beginning of decades of military sales and collaboration between the two countries. Iran would use these early transfers of missile technology, missiles, and missile parts to develop its indigenous missile program.

Iran's missile program also benefited from similar assistance from China and Russia. Over time, Tehran established a robust domestic manufacturing base capable of sustaining large-scale production of advanced missiles and drones. This self-reliance has enabled Iran to supply armed groups in the region with the means to threaten U.S. forces and partners.

Despite embargoes and international pressure, Tehran has continued to find ways to circumvent such restrictions and distribute weapons both directly and indirectly. In doing so, Iran has expanded its influence beyond the Middle East, extending support to regimes in Venezuela, Sudan, Ethiopia, and, most recently, Russia.

What emerges is a picture of a state that has leveraged missiles and drone proliferation not only for regional control through distributed deterrence and extended strike capability but also as a tool of global power projection.

### *Defiance of International Law*

The international community has repeatedly sought to constrain Iranian proliferation through legal mechanisms, but these efforts have proven largely ineffective. In 2015, United Nations Resolution 2231 barred Iran from importing and exporting certain categories of missiles, drones, and related technologies without prior approval from the Security Council (Davenport, 2023). In practice, this measure had little impact on halting Tehran's exports.

That same year, Resolution 2216 placed an arms embargo on the Houthis in Yemen, a group that is central to Iran's regional strategy and one of the largest recipients of Iranian weapons (UN Resolution 2216, n.d.). Reports indicate that Iran not only ignored the embargo but also increased its support, demonstrated by Iran's adaptive approaches to deliver systems through direct and indirect channels.

Iran has shown itself to be steadfast in its arming of proxies and partners around the world despite international laws and pressure. Rather than deterring proliferation, embargoes have pushed Tehran to refine its methods of covert delivery and deepen ties with groups willing to act as intermediaries. The result is that the transfers and support have become harder to track and appear to be escalating as their partners build systems of their own, sharing a near identical resemblance to the Iranian counterparts. Tehran views the benefits of continuing its arms sales to outweigh any costs imposed by the international community.

## Key Destinations

### *Yemen: The Houthis*[2]

Among Iran's proxies, which are still actively escalating regional attacks, the Houthis are likely the most strategically significant today. Since 2017, Iran has provided the Houthis with Qiam-1 ballistic missiles, which they rebranded as Burkan-2H (Missile Defense Project, 2024a). In defiance of international law, 25 of these missiles are known to have been transferred from Iran to the Houthis during this period (SIPRI, n.d.). The Qiam-1 is considered a short-range ballistic missile, but it has one of the longest ranges among the short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) in Iran's arsenal, capable of reaching a range of 800 km (Missile Defense Project, 2024a).

In 2017, a number of Burkan missiles were fired by the Houthis against Riyadh, the first likely occurring on November 4, 2017. At a press conference on December 14, 2017, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley displayed parts of a Burkan missile and drones fired against Saudi Arabia by the Houthis. Ambassador Haley contended this debris proved Iran was arming the Houthis with these missiles in violation of a U.N. arms embargo against Iran and the Houthis. She also noted that a piece of the missile debris was stamped with the logo of "Shahid Bagheri Industries" (also known as Shahid Hemmat Industrial Group), which produces Iran's ballistic missiles (Department of State, 2017).

In January 2018, the U.N. Panel of Experts on Yemen issued a report that concluded missile debris from Houthi attacks against Saudi Arabia in July and November 2017 "almost certainly" were of Iranian origin and based on Iran's Qiam-1 missile (United Nations Security Council, 2018). The panel also determined that Iran was in non-compliance with an arms embargo imposed by U.N. Resolution 2216 for failing to prevent the Houthis from acquiring missiles and missile technology.

Tehran is also known to have delivered another SRBM to the Houthis in 2022, the Ra'ad 500, that has a shorter range than the Qiam, at 500 km, but houses a much larger payload of 1,750 kg (Missile Defense

[2] Another thanks to Fred Fleitz for his contributions from his own work on the UN's conclusion regarding the missile debris from the attack on Saudi Arabia in 2017.

Advocacy Alliance, 2021; SIPRI, n.d.). Despite only two being known to have been delivered, the Houthis revealed their own variant of the missile, the Tankeel (DIA, 2024). The likeness of the two suggests that the Houthis might have been a recipient of this missile at some point. The missile provides both surface-to-surface and anti-ship capabilities.

Reporting suggests that Tehran may have also delivered one of its longest-range missiles to the Houthis, the Ghadr. The Ghadr has a range capable of reaching up to 1,950 km. Iran's state media added that in 2024, Tehran had provided the Houthis with a sea-launched variant of this missile (Reuters, 2024). Besides the extended range of this missile, it reportedly has the capacity to hold a variety of warheads, including submunitions, chemical, high-explosive, and even nuclear warheads (Missile Defense Project, 2024b).

In addition to these examples of direct support, it is more than likely that Iran provided some form of indirect support in the Houthis' domestic weapons development. In 2022 and 2023, the Houthis unveiled the Hatem and Toofan ballistic missiles, both of which resemble Iranian designs, such as the Khaibar Shekan and Shahab-3, respectively (DIA, 2024). Both are medium-range ballistic missiles, with the Shahab-3 reaching a range of 1,300 km, and the Kheibar Shekan reaching as far as 1,800 km (Missile Defense Project, 2024c; Pierce, 2025). It is unclear whether the Houthis' variants provide the same range or if Tehran had directly provided the Houthis with such missiles. Much as with the Qiam above, the likeness of these Houthi missiles to Iranian counterparts suggests that the Houthis might have been recipients of the Iranian weapon at some point.

Cruise missiles and drones further amplify Houthi capabilities. Since at least 2019, Iran has been providing components to the Houthis to produce the Quds-4 (DIA, 2024). Quds-series cruise missiles, modeled on Iranian designs, have enabled long-range strikes such as the 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia's Abha Airport (Pasandideh, 2019). Tehran has also supplied the Houthis with Shahed-131 and Shahed-136 suicide drones (SIPRI, n.d.). Given that they are inexpensive and easy to use, the Houthis can conduct sustained long-range strikes on a variety of targets.

These systems enable the Houthis to strike U.S. naval vessels in the Red Sea, U.S. bases in Djibouti and Bahrain, and critical infrastructure across Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel. Cruise missiles and drones launched from Yemen bypass traditional missile defenses and threaten freedom of navigation in chokepoints like the Bab al-Mandeb Strait.

### *Lebanon: Hezbollah*

Hezbollah's forces have significantly deteriorated due to Israel's recent military campaign across the region. However, Hezbollah is Iran's oldest proxy and provides a critical advantage given its geographical proximity to Israel. During the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon also served a strategic purpose of connecting Iran through a "land bridge" to the Mediterranean and coordinating training and attacks with various Shiite militias and Assad regime elements in Syria.

Since the early 2000s, Hezbollah has amassed a diverse arsenal of Fateh-110 variants and potentially Ghadr-class missiles from Tehran (Shaikh & Williams, 2018; GlobalMilitary.net, 2025). The Fateh-110 is an SRBM with a reported range of only 300 km. However, since at least 2007, Hezbollah has received a steady flow of these munitions, giving it the capacity to blanket northern Israel with precision strikes.

Hezbollah has also expanded into unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), beginning with reconnaissance operations using Iranian Mohajer-4 drones in 2004 and progressing to strike-capable Shahed-129s by 2024 (GlobalSecurity.org, 2023). Hezbollah can consistently enter Israeli airspace, scrambling aircraft and depleting anti-air munitions.

Unlike the Houthis, Hezbollah's strength today lies mainly in its geographical proximity to Israel. The strategic implications of Hezbollah's arsenal are significant. Its ability to open a northern front against Israel – although diminished due to Israel's cross-border operations, covert action operations, and military strikes against Hezbollah leadership and fighters – still provides Tehran with a powerful deterrent, complicating both Israeli and American military planning. Its presence in Lebanese politics and within the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) remains a priority for U.S. engagement with Lebanon's new leadership. Israel's recent efforts in combating these militants have proven to be effective. If they are allowed to rebuild, Tehran's support would be likely to persist given the group's strategic value for Tehran's goals.

### *Iraq: Shi'ite Militias*

Since the fall of Saddam's regime, Iraq has served as fertile ground for Iranian influence, particularly through Shi'ite militias. In 2018, Tehran supplied these groups with Zelzal, Fateh-110, and Zolfaghar missiles – short-range ballistic missiles that rely on solid fuel, making them more difficult to preemptively strike (Irish & Rasheed, 2018). The Zolfaghar provides these militants with the longest range of the bunch, reportedly capable of striking targets as far as 700 km.

These militias also acquired Shahed-136 suicide drones, which were implicated in the May 2019 strike on Saudi Arabia's Aramco pipeline (Knights & Almeida, 2022). Providing further flexibility, Tehran delivered Mohajer-6 multi-use drones to Iraqi groups, providing them with reconnaissance and short-range strike capabilities.

The presence of these systems has two primary effects. First, they threaten U.S. personnel and bases in Iraq, al-Tanf in Syria, and Gulf infrastructure, creating persistent pressure on U.S. operations. Second, they undermine the sovereignty of the Iraqi state by empowering militias over Baghdad's central government. This dual dynamic allows Tehran to apply constant pressure on U.S. forces while maintaining a destabilizing influence within Iraq's domestic politics.

### *Syria: The Assad Regime and What's to Come*

Before Bashar al-Assad's regime was toppled in December 2024, Iran had played a central role in sustaining the regime with military support. Between 2007 and 2017, Tehran reportedly delivered roughly 1,000 Fateh-110 missiles to Damascus, along with support for Scud-B and Scud-C systems (SIPRI, n.d.; Abedine et al., 2012; NTI, 2021). During the civil war, Syrian forces employed

these weapons directly, with Iranian assistance evident in both the construction of missile bases and operational deployments.

Despite the fall of one of Tehran's closest allies, Bashar al-Assad, the substantial and sustained support of ballistic missiles to Syria throughout his reign demonstrates how central the country is to Iran's goals. Iran's transfer of weapons is one of its primary arms in achieving these goals, and any future transfers to the country should not be overlooked.

From Syrian territory, these systems enable Tehran to project power against U.S. bases in northeastern Syria, threaten Israeli population centers, and challenge NATO's southern flank through Jordan and Turkey. Unlike non-state proxies, Syria had provided Tehran with a sovereign ally willing to host Iranian weapons infrastructure. This created an institutionalized threat, anchoring Iranian power projection along NATO's periphery.

### *Global Partners*

Iran's influence extends beyond its immediate region. In Sudan, Tehran supplied Mohajer-6 drones in 2023–2024, directly supporting the Sudanese Armed Forces during civil conflict (Marks, 2024). In 2025, reports highlighted the deployment of Mohajer-6s in Ethiopia (Sayeh, 2025). In Venezuela, Iran provided Mohajer-2 assembly kits as early as 2007 and has since expanded to include Mohajer-6 drones, which were spotted during a presidential address in 2020 (Lipin, 2022).

These transfers expand Iran's global footprint. While Sudan and Ethiopia create opportunities for Tehran to gain leverage in East Africa and the Red Sea corridor, Venezuela provides a symbolic foothold in the Western Hemisphere, demonstrating that Iranian UAV technology can reach beyond the Middle East and directly challenge U.S. interests in its own region.

Iran's arms transfers reached a new global dimension in 2022 with deliveries to Russia. Tehran supplied Mohajer-6 drones and large quantities of Shahed-131 and Shahed-136 suicide drones, with Russia reportedly ordering thousands (SIPRI, n.d.). These systems have been extensively used in the war in Ukraine, targeting energy infrastructure and cities.

Although not a direct threat to U.S. bases in the Middle East, this demonstrates how Iran's drone program has become a pillar of global destabilization. By enabling Russia's war in Ukraine, Tehran has cemented itself as a global arms exporter, indirectly undermining U.S. interests in Europe while showcasing its ability to evade sanctions.

## Implications

The significance lies not only in the sophistication of the weapons but also in where they choose to send them. Given the limited resources of Iran, the fact that they still choose to invest in these regions demonstrates the strategic interests the regime has in these regions.

Recent efforts by Israel, with support from the United States, have further depleted Iranian resources and have diminished the capacity of Tehran's partners, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. Despite these efforts, Tehran has substantially increased its support in recent years. Iran will likely continue such efforts in these regions, hoping to rebuild its proxies, expand its influence, and repair its extended deterrence.

By providing weaponry to multiple allied groups, Tehran can create a dispersed deterrent network. Attacking one proxy, or Iran itself, poses the risk of triggering retaliation from the others. This creates an environment in which the United States and Israel must account for multiple fronts of escalation. This makes strategic planning more difficult as U.S. and Israeli forces cannot just account for attacks coming from one direction. It can also strain defensive resources as they are used to fend off multiple waves of attacks.

Proliferation also undermines central governments in fragile states such as Iraq, Yemen, and Syria by empowering non-state actors. These groups often operate outside legal frameworks and undercut national command structures, eroding sovereignty and fostering persistent instability. This instability creates vacuums that Tehran exploits to entrench its influence and resist international pressure.

The rise in the number of exports and the escalation of proxies' development of their own systems, which share close to identical features to those of Iran's, demonstrates how Tehran is not deterred by international sanctions or pressure. This shows that they value the strategic importance of these locations more than any of the fiscal or political capital losses that occur.

Tehran's transfer network also poses a direct threat to the U.S. and U.S. interests beyond Iran's own periphery. By exporting drones and missiles to partners in Sudan, Ethiopia, Venezuela, and especially Russia, Tehran positions itself as a reliable arms supplier to regimes opposed to U.S. interests. This not only broadens Iran's geopolitical reach but also accelerates the formation of informal anti-Western coalitions that can share technology, tactics, and political support. Such networks exacerbate the strategic costs of directly confronting Iran.

## Conclusion

Iran's missile and drone proliferation and dissemination of such systems is not only a peripheral security challenge, but also a central pillar of Tehran's grand strategy. What began as a regional effort to counter superior conventional forces has evolved into a global network reshaping the balance of power across multiple theaters. Through persistent defiance of international law, Tehran has embedded itself in conflicts from the Middle East to Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America, leveraging technology transfers to gain influence where direct military presence would be unsustainable.

Efforts by Israel and the United States to degrade Iran's network have yielded historical successes, and a different challenge looms: Iran is now a self-sufficient and globally connected arms proliferator. Its ability to regenerate proxy power, evade sanctions, and extend deterrence through distributed

capabilities adds another layer of complexity in countering a steadfast regime that seeks to achieve its goals.

Iran is likely to continue rebuilding its proxies, expanding its influence, and eroding the existing security architecture. In doing so, it will transform the global landscape of conflict, normalizing state-sponsored proliferation as a viable tool of power projection and ensuring its place as a central disruptor in the international order.

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