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Iran Makes Giant Strides in Missile Programs

Monday, 27 Jun 2011 04:56 PM By Ken Timmerman

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Iran has made dramatic progress in its ballistic missile programs over the past year, unveiling three new missiles it claims are already in production, including an innovative design that could be a "game-changer" if used against U.S. aircraft carriers, an Israeli expert widely considered one of the world's top authorities on Iranian missile programs says.

Also significant were three unannounced tests of longer-range missiles most experts believe were designed to carry a nuclear warhead.

In the past, Iran has announced all of its missile tests, often with great fanfare, even when they were a failure, said Uzi Rubin, the father of Israel's "Arrow" anti-missile program.

One of the unannounced missile tests involved a variant of the Shahab-3, which has been successfully test-fired many times since it was first flown in 1998 and is now in active deployment with Revolutionary Guards Air Force units.

Because the missile has been tested successfully so many times, Rubin believes failure was not why the longer-range missile tests were kept quiet. "I believe it was policy," he told a breakfast meeting on Capitol Hill hosted by the National Defense University Foundation.

The latest United Nations Security Council resolution imposing sanctions on Iran, which passed in June 2010, expressly forbids Iran from conducting tests of "nuclear-capable" missiles.

"The fact that Iran did not disclose those tests is tantamount to admitting they were of nuclear-capable missiles," Rubin said.

In October 2010, Iran carried out an unannounced test of its Sejil-2 missile, sometimes known as the "Ashura." The Sejil is a solid propellant missile with a range of approximately 2,000 kilometers (1,200 miles) that was first flown successfully in November 2008.

"Experts note that Iran is the only country to have developed a missile with Sejil's capability, in terms of range and payload, without first having developed a nuclear weapon," a United Nations panel of experts concluded in a groundbreaking May 2011 report that has been leaked to the press after at least one - and possibly two - Security Council members sought to suppress it.

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The U.N. experts report was the first to publicly reveal the October 2010 test of the Sejil, as well as two follow-up tests that took place in February 2011, one of the Sejil and the other of a

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modified Shahab-3.

“Both the modified Shahab-3 and Sejil-2 are believed to be nuclear-capable ballistic missiles,” the U.N. experts report said.

The Shahab-3 is a liquid-fueled missile based on the North Korean Taepodong series and uses rocket motors some experts believe were imported from former Soviet-era SS-5 nuclear missiles. It reportedly has a range of approximately 900 kilometers, bringing northern Israel into Iran’s range.

An upgraded version, known as the Ghadr, can reach targets up to 1600 km distant from the launch point, the U.N. panel said.

For Israeli expert Uzi Rubin, the rapid-fire pace of the tests, and the fact that the two missiles are based on dramatically different technologies and propulsion systems, “shows the urgency of the test program and the expansion of their infrastructure and human resources.”

Carrying out three tests in just five months, with two different missile systems tested in the same month, “is a remarkable achievement,” Rubin added.

The U.N. experts panel said it learned of the unannounced Sejil tests from a “member state,” a code phrase for intelligence information provided officially to the panel on condition its source not be further identified.

At the same time it has been secretly improving its nuclear missile capabilities, Iran announced successful tests of three new shorter-range missiles over the past year, missiles that appear aimed at giving Iran’s Revolutionary Guards the ability to launch precise saturation attacks against U.S. bases in Iraq and Afghanistan and against U.S. aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.

The new shorter-range missile systems include:

- Qiam-1 (“Uprising”), a SCUD-C knock-off with no fins and a new guidance package and warhead. Israeli expert Rubin said the Qiam was “an original design” not seen in any other country. “It’s definitely not some copy of a North Korean missile,” but a new design showing “good technical work” and “good systems engineering.” The first test-launch of Qiam-1 was shown on Iranian state television on Aug. 20, 2010, with commentary by the Iranian defense minister. Its design features and range make it a perfect and accurate battlefield weapon, Rubin said.
- Kerrar, a 1000-kilometer range armed drone that can deliver two 250-pound bombs or a single 500-pound bomb. The word “kerrar” is a Koranic reference meaning “Angel/Messenger of Death.” Rubin noted that the Iranian official media showed an open production line for this new weapon, which appears to combine elements of the U.S.-made MQM-107 target drone, and the South African SKUA system.
- Khalije Fars (“Persian Gulf”), an anti-ship ballistic missile that reportedly can hit naval targets up to 350 kilometers away from its launch point. Like the Fateh-110 shorter-range rocket from which it was developed, Khalije Fars uses solid propellant, making it easy to store and hard to detect before launch, unlike liquid fuel rockets that often need hours to be fueled. Some reports show this missile uses tracking information provided by an airborne surveillance aircraft so it can hit maneuvering targets such as aircraft carriers, a capability the Chinese successfully demonstrated in 2009 using a Shanxii Yo7 (Antonov 12) aircraft equipped with a Synthetic Aperture Radar. Rubin tells Newsmax that this capability of hitting aircraft carriers is “a game-changer.”

According to the U.N. experts report, U.N. member states believe that “Iran is self-sufficient in the production of solid propellant fuel, though as evidenced in a reported case involving the procurement of aluminum powder, it relies on foreign suppliers for some key materials.”

The U.N. panel traveled to Singapore earlier this year, where the local customs authorities briefed panel members on the seizure of 18 tons of aluminum powder sold by a Chinese

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company to Iran.

“This quantity of aluminum powder would yield approximately 100 tons of rocket propellant, or enough for the production of approximately 50 systems,” the U.N. panel concluded.

Both China and Russia are believed to have intervened with the U.N. Security Council to suppress the report by the U.N. experts panel investigating violations of U.N. Security Council sanctions on Iran.

Uzi Rubin believes the Obama administration has abstained from revealing Iran’s recent long-range missile tests “in support of Russia’s claim that Iran cannot threaten Europe.”

The lack of an Iranian missile threat was a key justification used by the Obama White House to cancel plans in early 2009 to deploy missile-defense radar and ground-based interceptors in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Cancelling U.S.-made missile defense in Europe was a major demand of the Russian government, and was touted by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton as a key factor in her “reset” of U.S.-Russian relations.

Rubin also speculated that the Obama administration “wants to say that sanctions are working, so if they say that Iran’s missile tests have been successful, they wouldn’t look too good.”

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