



Iranian tank, Karrar Wikimedia Commons/Tasnim News Agency

Lack of modern technologies hampers Iran's defense industry

IranSource by **Robert Czulda**

Iran belongs to a relatively small group of states with an indigenous defense industry. It serves as an important element of Tehran's official strategy of economic, military and industrial self-sufficiency. However, this defense industry is largely confined to the modernization of Cold War-era equipment.

Iran's industrial base was established under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and later reorganized and enlarged during the Islamic Republic. While, in many countries,

defense companies are private, they are state-owned in Iran. Because of the Islamic Republic's long pariah status, interaction with the outside world has been limited. Currently, Iran can produce various systems domestically and, to a limited extent, modernize and copy by reverse engineering some advanced sub-components, such as engines, electronics, and older types of avionics.

The industry's greatest achievement has been to repair and overhaul old equipment. The majority of Iran's military hardware was acquired during the time of the shah or in the 1980s and 1990s. To keep these systems operational has been a truly impressive accomplishment. This includes antiques such as the F-14 twin-engine variable-sweep wing fighter aircraft, known as the Tomcat, and AH-1J assault helicopters—both purchased from the United States in the 1970s. Some spare parts are produced locally, while others are, reportedly, [smuggled](#) in from other countries.

Due to logistics shortfalls, an important source of spare parts is cannibalization, which is a process of removing usable parts from other systems, such as tanks and aircraft, to replace broken parts on others instead of using parts from inventory. However, these systems—aircraft, tanks, and armored vehicles—cannot be maintained forever. This particularly applies to Iranian jets, which are in poor condition. Since 2003, at least twenty crashes due to technical failures were reported. Every airframe has a maximum lifespan—at some point irremovable micro cracks appear. Iran's defense industry has no capability to replace them with modern airframes.

What the Iranian defense industry can do is offer limited modernization of Cold War-era equipment. This includes upgrades of FV101 Scorpion light reconnaissance tanks, M-47/48/60 tanks, and T-54/55 tanks, as well as Type 59 and T-72 tanks. Although some were equipped with slightly newer sub-components, such as the Slovenian Fontana EFCS-3 fire control system or Russian Kontakt reactive armor, none of these vehicles meet the requirements of the twenty-first century battlefield. There are no credible sources to assume that Iran has acquired better smoothbore guns, able to fire a full range of modern ammunition, nor guided missiles. The same applies to vehicles

providing support to infantry, such as Ra'ad, a local variation based on the US 155 mm M109A1 self-propelled howitzer, fielded in the early 1960s. Both for offensive and defensive purposes, Iran desperately needs precision-guided munitions, which are a highly advanced technology that its indigenous defense industry has been unable to develop thus far.

Strong limitations of local industry are visible when “new systems” are taken into account. In recent years, Tehran stated numerous times that new, indigenous aircraft were developed. This included jets such as the Azaraksh or Saeghe I/II. Another example is the Kowsar “new domestically built fighter jet.” This aircraft, presented in 2018, is a copy of the F-5 supersonic fighter. (The F-5A made its maiden flight in 1959 while the F-5E debuted in 1972.) Iranian fighters—due to their age and fatigue—need to be retired as soon as possible and replaced by new aircraft meeting modern requirements in terms of range, survivability, and detection capabilities. That includes new active electronically scanned array radars, which just a few countries around the world can produce.

Given financial and technological constraints, the proposals the Iranian defense industry offers from time to time are impressive. However, if the requirements of modern warfare are taken into account, they are simply not good enough. For instance, the “new tank” Tiam, revealed in 2016, is a combination of a chassis from the M-47 tank—a 1950s design—with the turret of an only slightly newer Chinese Type 59/69 tank. It is equipped with the M68 105-mm gun, which was fielded by the West in the late 1950s. The Owj engine, proudly revealed in 2016 as the “first indigenous turbojet engine,” is nothing more than a modified copy of the General Electric J85-GE-21 single-shaft turbojet engine, which was designed in the 1950s.

However, it would be a mistake to totally disregard local design skills. The Iranian defense industry can offer less advanced indigenous systems, such as the Safir 4x4 utility vehicle, the Kaviran 3.4-ton tactical vehicle and the Neynava family of all-terrain general purpose 4x4 military trucks. This includes the Karrar, a promising modernization

package for the T-72 tank. But, in order to produce a truly useful modernization, local industry would need access to modern, foreign technologies of armor, munitions and guns, engines, fire control system and observation sensors.

Even less advanced systems can significantly increase military capabilities—that applies to various missiles. In the past, Iran demonstrated guidance kits for Fateh-110 short-range surface-to-surface missiles. Similar projects have also been carried out for unguided surface-to-surface rockets. One precision guidance system, Labeik, was unveiled in Tehran in November 2019. It is believed that Labeik was developed for the Zelzal-class 610 mm short-range artillery rockets, which Iran has proliferated to its allies in the region, such as the Syrian government and Lebanese militant group [Hezbollah](#). If produced in large numbers, those systems would increase the tactical advantage of Iranian forces and their proxy allies at the expense of Israeli and US troops.

The scheduled lifting of the UN arms embargo in October would theoretically make more advanced technology available for purchase, but lack of funds and political pressure from the United States will be major constraints. Modern systems are usually very expensive, particularly, if Iran wants to do some production domestically. What is more, Russia does not have all the technology that Iran needs. For instance, Russian tanks are equipped with a thermal-imaging fire control system from Thales, a French company, which would likely remain embargoed. Not all Chinese technologies are compatible with Iranian equipment.

Iran can reportedly manufacture equipment of a previous generation (i.e. those of Cold War [origin](#)). This includes anti-aircraft systems, such as the Shahin, based on the MIM-23B Hawk, the Misagh, based on the Chinese QW-2, and the Herz-9, based on the French Crotale/Chinese HQ-7/FM-80. Regarding antitank systems, it is believed that the Iranian defense industry reverse engineered US-made systems as well as Soviet-guided missiles. Iran has also created indigenous versions of the AH-1 assault helicopter, known as Panha 2091, Toofan, HESA P4, and Toofan 2. It is believed that Iran can also produce about fifty types of ammunition and artillery shells, including older generation tank ammunition and missiles of various calibers. Iran manufactures the

majority of its own light weapons—mostly unlicensed versions, including Heckler & Koch G-3 7.52-mm assault rifles, Heckler & Koch MP5 9-mm submachine guns, Rheinmetall MG 3 7.62 machine guns, and the Steyr HS .50 BMG antimateriel rifles. The list also includes mortars as well as air-to-air and ground-to-ground missiles of different ranges.

Iran's defense industry has been attaching great importance to unmanned drones (UAVs). Iranian engineers are very skillful in designing and manufacturing various types of drones, including combat (armed) types and kamikaze-style drones (known as loitering munitions). A strong portfolio of local industry is part of Iran's asymmetric doctrine; cheaper and less technologically advanced systems, including anti-ship missiles, can strike even large surface vessels and Saudi Arabia's Aramco oil [facility](#) at Abqaiq. Many of them are based on foreign technologies (Chinese and Soviet/Russian). Indigenous engineers successfully adopted and modified them. Iran produces the anti-ship Kowsar (C-701), Ghader (C-802), Nasr (C-704), Karus (C-801), Tondar (C-802), Zafar (C-701AR), and Noor (HY -2) missiles. It also makes the Meshkat land-attack cruise missile, which is believed to be based on ex-Soviet, air-launched, nuclear-capable Raduga Kh-55 cruise missiles, reportedly [delivered](#) from Ukraine. Some of these systems were used to strike Abqaiq.

A major problem is the lack of up-to-date military technologies, which are digital, modular, and network-centric. Another is limited production capacity. Even if Iran acquires licenses to locally manufacture some modern systems, such as tanks and armored vehicles, it would take many years before the needs of its military are fully met. Just a few states around the world are capable of producing major hardware in large quantities. Any enlargement of production capacity would be very expensive, especially, given relatively low export opportunities even if the arms embargo is lifted. The same applies to ballistic missiles, cruise, and anti-ship missiles. Even if Iran is able to design them, it does not mean that it has a capacity to produce all parts and field these systems in large numbers.

In summary, although the efforts of Iranian engineers are very impressive given the severe constraints they have to face, the capabilities of their indigenous defense industry are limited and cannot meet the operational needs of the Iranian armed forces in the longer term.

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/un-arms-embargo-on-iran/lack-of-modern-technologies-hampers-irans-defense-industry/>



Britain's Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini take part in meeting with Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Brussels, Belgium, May 15, 2018. REUTERS/Yves Herman/Pool

The European approach on the arms embargo on Iran

IranSource by **Michel Duclos**

On the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, the European approach has been, to a large extent, inspired by legal concerns and a commitment to a rules-based international order. Europeans simply believe that the United States should respect the treaties or the agreements they have signed on to. It is likely they will follow the same approach as far as the UN arms embargo is concerned. The Iranians have embarked on a dangerous course of breaking with their obligations vis-à-vis the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action (JCPOA), but they have not withdrawn from the accord. Hence, there are no reasons to reject the lifting of the arms embargo as foreseen in UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 2231.

Political realities also matter. On the one hand, Iranian expansionism in the Middle East through proxies, whether it be the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or missiles transfers, is undoubtedly a source of concern. If the Iranians were to add to their current toolbox—arsenal of tanks, modern aircrafts, and anti-missile systems—that would only make the situation worse for their neighbors. Some reports indicate that a long list of contracts have been signed off on or are being negotiated, specifically, with Russia and China. The money could come from assets currently frozen abroad. On the other hand, the chance to get an agreement to extend the UN arms embargo from Russia and China is close to zero. This is the heart of the problem.

How to deal with Russia and China

The only way to get around this difficulty is to find an arrangement inside the P5+1—the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany—or in a larger format. In such an understanding, the arms embargo would be left to die of its natural death in October, but Moscow and Beijing would accept to refrain from transferring destabilizing weapons to Iran—at least in the immediate future. That could be called a “double restraint” understanding; the US accepting the lifting of the embargo and the other big powers giving up the idea of transferring weapons to Iran for the time being. In the past, there have been precedents where it took an exceptionally long time for Russia to hand over military systems that the Islamic Republic had purchased, such as the S-300. Along the same line, China, [reportedly](#), deems that Iran is not a particularly attractive customer due to the re-imposition of US sanctions on Tehran. And, for China, as well as for Russia, their interest in some degree of stability in a very unstable region would be best served by the avoidance of further fueling a regional arms race. It could be envisaged that such an arrangement takes place in the framework of a P5+1 summit—probably virtual—such as the one [proposed](#) by Russian President Vladimir

Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron. It is clear, however, that this would hardly be consistent with the current climate of hostility between Washington and Beijing—as they are still aggravated by the coronavirus pandemic—and with the deep distrust existing between Russia and the US.

The threat of snapback sanctions

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is agitating the [idea](#) of triggering United Nations snapback sanctions on Tehran. One possible interpretation of Pompeo's declarations is that the Trump administration intends to close any option for a potential Democratic administration in 2021 to return to the JCPOA. If the snapback mechanism were to be implemented, Iran would probably denounce the nuclear deal—hence, making it impossible for a new administration to try to salvage the JCPOA. Another interpretation would be that the secretary of state is using the threat of snapback to advance his agenda of getting an extension on the arms embargo. In both cases, from a European viewpoint, Pompeo's approach is leading to a political disaster. There is no way that Europe—and, of course, Russia and China—could support such a course of action. The US would be left completely isolated—more so than when the US invaded Iraq—while the balance of forces in the world is much less favorable to the West than was the case in 2003.

What Europe can do about the crisis in October

In that context, what can the E3—France, Germany, the United Kingdom—and their partners in Europe do? Their position has not been decided yet. It is likely that they will ultimately push for a “double restraint” formula. The details of such an understanding will be complicated to craft, such as the duration of the arrangement, types of systems, verification, connections with the JCPOA and so on. There is also no doubt that the hardliners in Tehran would do everything possible to prevent big powers from arranging on those lines. Which means that the Europeans should be very proactive in reaching out to a broad range of Iranian officials. They should stress to them that the “double

restraint” arrangement would not compromise the right for Iran to acquire new weaponry.

But the question remains: how to influence Russia and China on one side and the US on the other?

The reasons why Moscow and Beijing could be interested in a “double restraint” approach have already been mentioned. But European diplomats could also plead that such a formula is necessary to preserve the possibility for a future Democratic administration to return to the JCPOA. Abstaining to arm Iran further would also be an opportunity for Russia and China to advance their interests in the Arab Gulf countries, which are becoming more and more important in the eyes of Moscow and Beijing. In the US, everything is now dominated by the November presidential election. US President Donald Trump is already [taking](#) a strong anti-China stance in his campaign, in part, due to the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on the US economy. The point which should be raised when talking to the Trump administration is that a showdown on Iran in the context of the campaign is a risky business. Before the COVID-19 crisis, the Chinese would have kept a low profile on Iranian matters, in lieu with Russian views. It may be different this time, with much more assertive Chinese diplomacy. Beijing could see the opportunity to inflict damage to the Americans and take the lead in an international opposition to Washington. The Europeans could point out to Washington that this is not the time to hand over an easy diplomatic victory to China.

Conversely, Saudi Arabia and Russia were recently at war on the oil market at the expense of American interests. It has been an important success for President Trump to conclude an oil deal with Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Mexico, and close the file—which was done in a surprisingly discreet way. It shows that President Trump, when he wants to, is maintaining an impressive capacity to settle difficult issues through a few phone calls. The same method should be applied, with the help of other parties and, notably, the Europeans, to find a way out of the UN arms embargo and snapback Iranian conundrum.

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-european-approach-on-the-arms-embargo-on-iran/>



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks at a news conference in Jerusalem September 9, 2019. REUTERS/Ronen Zvulun

Removing the UN arms embargo on Iran will reward Tehran's malign actions

IranSource by **Colonel Udi Evental**

Israeli policymakers unequivocally [support](#) the US demand to extend the United Nations arms embargo on Iran that will expire in October. Israel considers the embargo's extension a rightful demand based on strategic, diplomatic, legal, and moral reasons.

Removing the embargo will amount to a capitulation to Iran, rewarding the regime for gross violations of international law. For years, Tehran has repeatedly disobeyed—flagrantly and systematically—UN Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs) forbidding Iran to export all types of weapons and related materials to other countries, non-state actors, and terror organizations.

The Security Council resolutions that Iran has violated over the years include resolutions addressing specific countries, such as Lebanon (UNSCR 1701) and Yemen (UNSCR 2216), and resolutions dealing exclusively with Iran, which forbid it, among other things, to import or export arms; e.g. UNSCRs 1747 in 2007 and 1929 in 2010. Both were replaced in 2015 by UNSCR 2231, which included a five-year international arms [embargo](#).

Over the past decades, in violation of UNSCR 1701, Iran has supplied Lebanese Hezbollah with advanced weapon systems and military technology. Currently, Iran is exploiting the civil war in Syria to entrench itself militarily in the country, endeavoring to build-up a war machine just as it did in Lebanon. Simultaneously, Iran is arming the murderous regime of Bashar al-Assad. Following the “Hezbollah model,” and in blatant [violation](#) of UNSCR 2216, Iran is transferring missiles and weapon systems to the Houthis in Yemen to not only keep the war going, but also to pose a direct threat to Saudi Arabia and to project power along the Bab al-Mandab Strait. In Iraq, as well, Iran is deploying missiles and arming the Shia militias as an independent force beyond the reach of the Iraqi government.

The expectation of the Obama administration and European countries—led by Britain, Germany, and France—that Iran would scale down its malign activity in the region, following the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), failed the test of reality. Rather, it led to the opposite outcome. Iran exploited the deal and UNSCR 2231, which removed effective sanctions in the fields of energy and finance and made them difficult to reinstate. Thus, covered by the deal’s impunity before the United States

withdrew from it, Iran went on to expand its hostile actions in the region—particularly, in arms transfers—without paying a price for its harmful policy.

Opponents to the Trump administration’s initiative to extend the arms embargo—[including](#) former senior officials in the Obama administration—contend, among other arguments, that the extension would weaken the impact of past and future UN Security Council resolutions, harm the credibility of the US, and set a problematic precedent. From an Israeli perspective, the opposite is true. UNSCR 2231 cannot oblige one side, only. The international community cannot be expected to implement the Security Council resolutions while Iran has been violating the same resolutions for years. Ignoring Iran’s flagrant transgressions—or, effectively, rewarding them—would begin a slippery slope that would steadily undermine the authority of the Security Council and its ability to enforce the operative clauses of its resolutions.

Israel has first-hand experience with the dangerous results that come from the troubling gap between UN Security Council resolutions and their implementation on the ground. One notable example is UNSCR 1701, which ended the Second Lebanon War in 2006. Originally, the resolution aimed to restore the control of the Lebanese government and its armed forces over South Lebanon and to remove Hezbollah from the border with Israel. On the ground, however, Hezbollah gradually returned to the border, rebuilt, and expanded its military infrastructures with the assistance of the Lebanese military. Meanwhile, the UN peacekeeping force, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL)—tasked with supervising the resolution’s implementation—and the UN institutions in New York ignored the robust military build-up of Hezbollah.

Given that the UN chose to ignore gross violations of its own resolutions, it should not be a surprise that the self-confidence of Hezbollah and Iran have continued to grow over the years. For example, Hezbollah have started blatantly threatening UNIFIL to prevent it from implementing its mandate on the ground and have upgraded the quantity and quality of its military aid to Hezbollah, with a special effort to provide it with

precision-guided munitions to expand and increase the threat it poses to Israel's civilian home front.

From an Israeli perspective, removing the arms embargo on Iran has problematic implications. Firstly, this measure would boost the Iranian regime and its organs, led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force, and would exacerbate the proliferation of Iranian conventional arms across the Middle East and along Israel's borders.

Secondly, repealing the arms embargo would set a problematic precedent for a similar decision in 2023 that involves removing the limitations on Iran's missile program. Iran pursued missile research, development, and testing, initiated a special [project](#) to increase the destructive power of its warheads, and [launched](#) a military satellite into space in April. This launch supports its efforts in developing inter-continental ballistic capabilities. This is yet another aspect of Iran's violations—at least of the spirit of UNSCR 2231.

Thirdly, the removal of the embargo will likely encourage Russia, which seeks to return and play a major role in the Middle East and in the Gulf at the expense of American dominance, to sell Iran advanced air-defense systems, such as the S-400, despite its previous hesitations. Beyond the irresponsible Iranian use of such capabilities—demonstrated by the [downing](#) of a Ukrainian passenger airliner in January—advanced air-defense systems could offer Iran a sense of immunity and encourage it to accelerate its nuclear program, which it resumed expanding in May 2019.

Israel is not interfering in the international [disagreement](#) regarding the reinstatement of all UN sanctions against Iran by triggering the 'snapback' mechanism enshrined in the JCPOA. At the same time, Israel is, probably, not impressed by Iranian [threats](#) to withdraw from the nuclear deal. From Israel's [perspective](#), the JCPOA suffers from dangerous deficiencies—top among them, the sunset clauses and the shortcomings

regarding the ability to monitor Iran's nuclear weapons-related activities. Moreover, Iran's violations of the research and development restrictions are mostly irreversible. Should a Russian veto block the US effort to extend the embargo, Israel will actively support any American-led initiative to form a like-minded coalition of willing states that will apply a rigid arms embargo on Iran, including on allegedly defensive platforms, such as surface-to-air missile systems or advanced anti-ship cruise missiles. Such an embargo would aim to increase the pressure on Russia to avoid selling problematic and balance-shifting weapon systems to Iran.

From Israel's vantage point, the campaign to extend the conventional arms embargo on Iran must not divert attention from Iran's expanding nuclear program and from applying pressure to stop it. Iran's nuclear file is the most acute and urgent issue.

The confrontation regarding the arms embargo, its linkages to the nuclear file, and the broad [consensus](#) in Congress on this issue, offer opportunities to Israel—first and foremost, to engage in an urgent and deep dialogue with the Trump administration and presumptive Democratic *nominee* Joe Biden's team in parallel with European countries. The objective of such a dialogue would be to advance a comprehensive international strategy vis-à-vis Iran and to increase pressure to block its harmful activities.

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/removing-the-un-arms-embargo-on-iran-will-reward-tehrans-malign-actions/>



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (C) and U.S. special representative on Iran Brian Hook (R) take in a meeting with Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates September 19, 2019. Mandel Ngan/Pool via REUTERS

The Gulf is watching Washington's moves on the UN embargo on Iran

IranSource by **Kirsten Fontenrose**

In salons across the Gulf, decision makers sip coffee and brainstorm answers to tough foreign policy questions. Among them, the lifting of the UN arms embargo on Iran this October. With six months to go, these conversations haven't yet focused on what the Gulf itself will do once the embargo dissolves, but on what American options are for keeping it in place.

As Gulf analysts see it, the US has three options. The first is convincing the members of the UN Security Council to extend the current arms embargo or risk the US demanding snapback of all sanctions waived by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and collapsing what's left of the Iran nuclear deal. The US does not have to remain in the JCPOA to be a participant in the deal under UNSCR 2231.

But this seems unlikely to Gulf leaders, based on comments they have heard from Paris, London and other European capitals about the fragility of that argument. The second is unilateral action. This could take the shape of an Executive Order sanctioning companies that produce components of weapons made by Iran for export or made elsewhere for sale to Tehran. This option could be nearly as crippling as the arms embargo. With the producers of every screw in a 50-caliber sniper rifle facing sanctions, it would notably disrupt Iran's defense supply chain, and could slow production in Russia and China of items produced with a global vendor base.

The third option is pressing for a new UN resolution that falls short of the current embargo but still limits the items Iran can purchase and sell. This option requires statesmanship and takes time. The tricky part is convincing Moscow and Beijing, who stand to gain from sales made to Iran once the embargo is lifted. These two of the five permanent UN Security Council members might only agree not to veto such a resolution if the items it restricts are those they do not intend to or believe they have a chance to sell. For instance, Iran has begun producing its own medium-range air defense systems in recent years and will be less interested in these than might have been the case in pre-embargo 2007.

Gulf countries carefully cultivate relationships with both China and Russia, and are expecting a request from the US to engage both diplomatically on the arms embargo. However, as one Emirati senior diplomat clarified to this author, the Gulf does not have enough leverage with either when it comes to core political and foreign policy issues to move this issue.

What will Iran's acquisition choices mean for the Gulf?

Conventional thinking among some US analysts shrugs off the end of the embargo in October, noting that Iran does not have the funds or the inclination to acquire large weapons systems and will therefore not pose a greater threat to US interests. This analysis ignores three things. First, that Iran has [flirted](#) with the purchase of S-400s or S-500s, national level combat systems. Second, that Iran's primary foreign policy tool is the deployment of armed proxies. Arming and equipping small, unconventional militias requires troop-level combat systems, and lifting the embargo will make it easier for Iran to acquire and transfer weapons it currently must smuggle. Third, that Iran's modus operandi is to upgrade the components of existing weapons systems instead of acquiring new ones, so the intended strategy may not be to procure large systems but to amend what they already have with leapfrogged technologies.

One question that deserves attention is whether Iran would leverage the end of the embargo to upgrade the Artesh or the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Artesh are the red-headed stepchild neglected in the shadow of the golden-haired IRGC favorite. Throughout the maximum pressure campaign by the US, Tehran has demonstrated a preference for supporting the IRGC above other priorities. If this continues once Iran is uncuffed but still short on funds, it will underscore the regime's commitment to extra-territorial destabilization of the region, versus to augmenting defensive capabilities to protect its homeland.

At that point, the Artesh should question even more seriously than they already do whether their leaders have their interests at heart. If Iran picks a fight with the US through any of the recent or new methods of provocation, the Artesh will be called to the front lines, but they will not be well-equipped.

Iran's acquisition preferences post-arms embargo can be expected to reflect this favoritism. Considering this, what items prohibited by the series of UN resolutions that comprise the embargo present the greatest threat to Gulf states if acquired?

Hydraulic presses are a base component of the explosively formed projectiles (EFPs) that were a favorite of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani prior to their removal from the battlefield, and are responsible for blowing limbs off soldiers and civilians in multiple countries across the region. Delivery of hydraulic presses to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, for instance, will make them instantly more lethal. “The concern with EFPs in Iran’s hands, and thus the hands of their proxies, is that they will again have an easily transportable, hard to detect weapon that is highly effective against US or Coalition ally armored vehicles. You can’t see them, you can’t find them, you can’t stop them. You’ll see a drastic increase in casualties any place they are deployed,” says Sean Robertson, a military munitions consultant with CACI-The Wexford Group.

Electronic warfare capabilities like anti-radar missiles targeting surface-to-air defense systems would give Iran the ability to take down Patriot batteries and THAAD systems on a first strike, then fly right over them with the same missiles used to attack the Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq in September 2019, or aircraft like the SU-30 in which they’ve reportedly been interested. Delivery of anti-radar missiles (or HARMs) would change the nature of the game in Syria. The Turks should be even more concerned than the Gulf about this.

Additional surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) like the SA-7s will be another tempting acquisition for Iran. They’ve managed to supply these to proxies despite the embargo. Lifting of the arms embargo could result in a steady flow to proxies. These present an immediate and direct threat to US and allies’ planes and helicopters. With no restriction on their acquisition, the US Department of Defense will have to rethink their military footprint in the region writ large because a proliferation of SAMs among Iran-backed militias will place even the cargo planes that supply our troops in clear and present danger.

Staying on the topic of missiles, should Iran acquire hypersonic cruise missiles, the Gulf would face several nail-biting years before they are able to take delivery of new systems to defend themselves against this upgraded threat.

Likewise, the rapid advancement of unmanned aerial systems (UAS) means Iran will have a variety of options in high quality aircraft engines, optical lenses to improve their ability to produce imagery, and industrial machinery used to manufacture aircraft components. Andy Dreby of Red Six Solutions, a consultancy that helps the US and NATO test counter-UAS systems, points out to this author that expanding the marketplace from which Iran can purchase “makes it easier for them to hide their sources. If the intelligence community only has to look at China for sources, it makes it easier to identify supply chains. If they have to look at the whole world, it’s easier for Iran to obfuscate.”

The IRGC [harassment](#) of US Navy ships in the Northern Persian Gulf in mid-April points to the potential risk that post-embargo access to new anti-ship and naval mines poses to security in the Strait of Hormuz. Even without the embargo, the expected timeframe to clear the Gulf of naval mines placed by Iran is eight to twelve months. The US had a tough time courting European partners to join an alliance to counter Iran in the Strait after a [meeting](#) in Warsaw in the summer of 2019. Europe feared such an alliance would provoke Iran. A similar task would be Herculean if attempted after a proliferation of Iranian naval mines drove the stakes higher.

On land, acquisition of anti-tank mines will offer Iran an anti-armor capability that is simple enough for untrained militia members to employ against not just tanks but vehicles of any type. These mines in the arsenals of proxy forces will reduce the training time and numbers of personnel Iran needs to inflict damage on the militaries and civilians of regional adversaries on the ground.

In the air, Iran may have reached the end of the upgrades it can make to the airframes in its inventory and their ability to “clone” advanced American airframes may be

overstated, according to US analysts closely tracking their capabilities. In this case, Tehran could seek to finalize the procurement discussion with Russia for the [SU-30](#), which is said to outperform Saudi and Israeli fighter jets and host anti-shipping cruise missiles.

Low funds may not impede purchases

The fact that Iran is anathema to international financial markets is reassuring to the Gulf on one level. It is difficult for Tehran to get its hands on cutting-edge military technology without dollars and lots of them. But Iran has protected its proxy and ballistic missiles programs from the slow starvation suffered by other sectors during the US sanctions-induced economic crisis. The international community could be surprised by the level of funding that materializes for arms purchases when Iran is free to make them.

The lack of dollars available to Iran may not be altogether a sales disincentive to Russia and China. Article 146 of Iran's constitution [prohibits](#) foreign countries from establishing bases within Iran's borders. And Iran's public [balked](#) in 2016 when Russia was permitted use of Iran's territory for launching air strikes in Syria. But could Moscow be invited as a training contingent to co-locate with Iranian forces under the guise or for the secondary purpose of providing capacity building, in exchange for discounted rates on Russian arms? In November 2019, Iran [invited](#) China to take part in its Chabahar seaport project, and as one astute Kuwaiti analyst commented recently to this author, "nobody in the region admits anything it does with China is for military purposes."

How the Gulf is reacting

Even before October, the debate about whether to allow the arms embargo to expire will put sweat on the brow of Gulf countries. Oman, Qatar, and Kuwait, who painstakingly navigate the ridgeline between the US and Iran, may be placed in a position where they are asked to make statements either in support of or opposition to lifting the embargo. Qatar has strengthened ties with the US in recent years, launching a Strategic Dialogue in 2018 and installing more permanent infrastructure for US forces at Al Udeid air base.

Nevertheless, as a senior Qatari diplomat accurately joked to this author when asked if the embargo debate would put them between a rock and a hard place, “it wouldn’t be the first time we’d be asked to pick a side between Iran and the US.”

The Government of Yemen, on the receiving end of Iranian proxy armaments, is definitive in its position on the embargo, and in [agreement](#) with almost 400 members of the US Congress. Ambassador Ahmed bin Mubarak, Yemen’s representative in Washington, stated to this author that “lifting the UN arms embargo on Iran will have catastrophic effects on the stability of the Middle East region and will exacerbate the conditions there. Many international reports mention that Iran is a major arms supplier to radical groups in Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq, including those listed as terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah. In Yemen such lifting will definitely send a very wrong and untimely message.”

The UAE has come under pressure to reduce tensions with Iran in light of COVID-19, and although Emirati leaders are actively exploring ways to do just that, they point out that the [humanitarian](#) assistance offered to Iran does not imply acceptance or approval of Iran’s escalatory activities. They stress that despite their emphatic opposition to the UN allowing Iran to up-arm, the UAE will not take any unilateral actions even if the embargo is lifted and will act in conjunction with the US and other partners.

Despite the spectrum of positions on Iran exhibited by Gulf governments, one thing they agree on is the need for the US and Europe to arrive at one voice on the embargo, and on Iran’s proxy activities across the board. They stress that as long as Iran is able to exploit the daylight between American and European interlocutors, they will continue to push the limits of international law.

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-gulf-is-watching-washingtons-moves-on-the-un-embargo-on-iran-2/>



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (2nd L) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (R) attend a meeting at the Xijiao State Guesthouse in Shanghai, May 22, 2014. REUTERS/Kenzaburo Fukuhara/Pool

Will China become a major arms supplier to Iran?

IranSource by **Jonathan Fulton**

With the UN arms embargo on Iran set to end in October, US attempts to extend it have been met with widespread international criticism. This is taking place during the lowest point in US-China relations in decades, giving Beijing's views on the situation with Iran an added weight. So far, Beijing has been clear about its intentions, with a spokesperson for the Chinese UN mission [tweeting](#): "US failed to meet its obligations under Resolution 2231 by withdrawing from #JCPOA. It has no right to extend an arms

embargo on Iran, let alone to trigger snapback. Maintaining JCPOA is the only right way moving forward.”

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is clearly concerned that China will take advantage of the embargo ending. In a briefing on April 29, he [said](#), “It’s now just several months out where China, Russia, [and] other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapons systems to the Iranians in October of this year. This isn’t far off. This isn’t some fantasy by conservatives. This is a reality.” Pompeo has also turned to Twitter, [musing](#) that Beijing could send “a couple of divisions if VT-4 tanks” to Iran.

How likely is it that China will become a major arms supplier to Iran? In isolation, it makes perfect sense. The two share a comprehensive strategic [partnership](#) that highlights defense cooperation. They have long standing-diplomatic ties and historic relations going back across centuries. Iran is a huge potential market for Chinese merchants; not just for arms, but for consumer and industrial sales, as well. Resuming an arms supply relationship with Iran would provide China—a \$13 trillion economy—with a few million dollars, assuming Iran’s weak economy could come up with the hard currency to purchase in significant quantities. At the same time, it would unnecessarily antagonize the United States and alienate several Iranian rivals across the Middle East, many of which are also strategic partners for China.

The US factor is an important consideration. As Jon Alterman, senior vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, has [pointed out](#), Iran provides a useful foil for Beijing; its revisionist bent keeps the US Navy tied up in the Gulf rather than rebalancing or pivoting to Asia or the Indo-Pacific, which are closer to China’s core interests. Minimal support for Iran, therefore, provides a low-cost means of keeping the US preoccupied with the Middle East, rather than devoting more resources to the South China Sea or East Sea. Selling weapons to Tehran could conceivably ramp up that leverage.

Given the deterioration of the US-China relationship, however, Beijing would likely be reluctant to antagonize Washington for such a minimal return. Despite exaggerated rhetoric about the bilateral comprehensive strategic partnership, the China-Iran relationship is tremendously one-sided. As this author has [argued](#) before, Iran needs China much more than China needs Iran. And China definitely needs a functional relationship with the United States much more than it needs a partnership with Iran. The high-water mark for bilateral [trade](#) between Beijing and Tehran this century was in 2014, at \$38 billion. In 2019, with China-US relations at a low point due to the trade war, China-US trade was [valued](#) at just over \$540 billion. That's not to say that economic considerations are everything, but they are a lot, especially, in China, which has a performance legitimacy model that offers economic growth with no political reform. Selling weapons to Iran, knowing that it is a red line for the Trump administration, would come with a substantial cost to China-US relations. And, with the general election immediately following the end of the embargo, it is unlikely that China would take such an enormous risk.

Another important point is that the China-Iran relationship is much less substantial than is often portrayed. There is a huge gap between rhetorical and material support. The comprehensive strategic partnership does not have anything close to alliance obligations. Chinese leaders have a preference for a multilateral world order and are not comfortable with US normative leadership, but that doesn't extend to unconditional support for a revisionist Iran in order to achieve it; China can achieve what it wants without Iran. As Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, a frequent commentator on Iranian economic issues, recently [wrote](#), China has steadily been downgrading its economic relations with Iran—in the face of US sanctions, the Iranian relationship is considered more trouble than it's worth. A [report](#) from Chatham House reinforces this, with Chinese respondents describing Iran as “not that relevant to China's national interest... China is both preoccupied with its trade dispute with the US and at the same time frustrated with Iran... many Chinese businesses do not believe it is worth doing business with Iran, given the difficulties involved.”

Beijing also has to consider its interests in the rest of the Middle East. Yes, Iran represents a potential market, but several other states in the region have mature, established ones. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are especially important. Both have comprehensive strategic partnerships with China, buy substantial quantities of Chinese arms, and sell China a lot of energy. Jumping into an arms relationship with Tehran would jeopardize the gains Beijing's vendors have made in other Middle Eastern markets in recent years.

Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute ([SIPRI](#)) in January shows that four Chinese state-owned arms companies are in the global top twenty, with three in the top ten. That they are state-owned is an important point—these companies are expected to meet both commercial *and* political goals for China. They are not going to threaten diplomatic relationships relations to make more money. The Middle East is China's second largest [market](#), and much of this is on the back of UAV [sales](#) to Iranian enemies, such as the transferal of armed drones to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.

In 2017, China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC) signed a [deal](#) with Saudi Arabia to build CH-4 drones, the Chinese equivalent to the US Predator, in the kingdom. This was only the third such facility outside China—the others are in Pakistan and Myanmar—and acts as a sales and service facility for other Middle East buyers. This is a significant market for China—not having signed the Missile Technology Control Regime or the Wassenaar Arrangement on Export Controls for Conventional Arms and Dual-Use Goods and Technologies, Beijing does not face the same kind of restrictions in UAV sales that signatory states do. As a result, [across](#) the Middle East “China has been selling the hell out of its drones.”

This matters, because, in addition to not wanting to alienate the countries it is already selling to, Beijing knows that Tehran has a sophisticated domestic UAV [industry](#) of its own. In China's most established Middle East arms industry, Iran doesn't represent a

market. It is unlikely that China would want to alienate existing customers for potential ones, especially, knowing that Iran's UAV needs are being met by domestic production. So what would China possibly sell Iran if it were willing? Iran needs to upgrade its air force and there have long been [rumors](#) of China [selling](#) J-10s to Iran, but nothing has been substantiated. Iran would likely want to lean on China's expertise in satellite navigation for military purposes. But, again, China has been [working](#) closely with Iran's rivals to implement BeiDou 2 systems. It is not likely that Beijing would trade their established relationships for the potential one.

In the end, China is going to be looking out for China and, for now, closer relations with Iran do not offer the same range of interests that the United States and Gulf monarchies do. In the long-term that may change, so, we can expect China to keep that door open while currently making minimal outreach to Iran.

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/will-china-become-a-major-arms-supplier-to-iran/>



Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan meet in the Black sea resort of Sochi, Russia, 14 February 2019. Sergei Chirikov/Pool via REUTERS

Lifting the UN arms embargo on Iran: Insights into Turkey's options

IranSource by [Şaban Kardaş](#)

Turkey has yet to formulate a policy on the expiration of the UN arms embargo on Iran in October. If a crisis ensues as a result of US attempts to extend the embargo, Ankara will most probably fall back to its default of avoiding taking a clear stance on US-Iran disputes. As it manages the tensions exerted by such a crisis, its reaction is likely to be based on a number of considerations, rather than the substantive issue of arms procurement dynamics *per se*, such as: the reverberation of a potential crisis for international and regional geopolitics; the evolution of US policy on Iran, particularly in

view of the November US presidential elections; and the trajectory of US-Turkey relations, which is itself beset with several lingering crises.

Geopolitics surrounding the lifting of the arms embargo

From a Turkish perspective, the most likely scenario is one where the United States will find itself unable to prevent the lifting of the arms embargo at the United Nations. Keeping the embargo in place through the snapback of UN sanctions is far from certain at this point. Therefore, in all likelihood the United States may seek to address arms sales directly through bilateral engagements with potential stakeholders like Russia and China. Seen from Ankara, the Trump administration's Iran policy remains predominantly bent on limiting Tehran's regional influence, unlike the Barack Obama policy of a narrow focus on the nuclear file.

Short of a major reversal from the maximum pressure policy, the United States will do everything at its disposal to prevent Iran's access to arms markets. In this situation, Turkey realizes that this issue is likely to emerge as an area of contention between the United States and Europe and Russia and China. Turkey is likely to closely watch the unfolding tensions, but will stop short of direct involvement.

A particular issue of concern to Ankara is whether Moscow might choose to supply advanced weapons systems to Iran, which the latter has long sought. Turkish observers believe Iran's deficiencies lie in air capabilities and advanced electronics, but Russia and China may have their own reasons against rushing into future arms trade with Iran or providing it with advanced technology. If Russia does decide to sell some of the advanced systems—such as the Russian S-400 air defense missile system—to Iran, Turkey will hardly welcome this development.

Nonetheless, Ankara is unlikely to escalate this issue into a direct crisis with Moscow. For one, as a rising arms exporter, itself, Ankara will not challenge Russia's sovereign right of choosing its own customers. Second, Iran's procurement of such weapons does

not constitute an immediate threat to Turkey, which is also covered by NATO security guarantees. If Iran ends up acquiring such systems, it is more likely to deploy them against US military capabilities in the Gulf, where major US airbases are also located. Turkey and Iran are not entangled in a direct inter-state dispute, their deployment of military installments in shared border areas remain limited, and Turkey's main air assets are stationed in western parts of the country. Instead, their confrontation is through proxies in regional theaters, such as Iraq and Syria, and it will be difficult for Iran to deploy such systems into third countries where they would constitute a more direct challenge to Turkish military capabilities.

US-Iran-Turkey triangle in a regional context

With that in mind, Turkey's foreign policy agenda has been dominated by developments in Iraq and Syria. Ankara's convergence or divergence with the United States and Iran on Iraq- and Syria-related issues will be a major factor in its reaction to the lifting of the embargo. On the one hand, after its recent Spring Shield Operation in Syria's Idlib province and in view of ongoing military incursions in northern Iraq, Turkey is increasingly converging with the United States, while its common understanding with Iran is eroding.

In recent months, Turkey has been rather quiet on US policy on Iran, refraining from direct criticism of the "maximum pressure" policy. The widening wedge with Iran over Iraq and Syria may further incentivize Turkey to align with the US position, especially, if Tehran seeks to use the window presented by the lifting of sanctions to increase arms supplies to its proxies.

On the other hand, some irritants also remain that prevent a full convergence of Turkish and US perspectives on regional issues. For instance, if the US centers its strategy to counter the return of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) on YPG-dominated Syrian Defense Forces (SDF), once again, it will likely poison US-Turkish relations, which will fall back into the pattern seen before the Peace Spring Operation in Syria in

Fall 2019. In such a scenario, the United States might end up opening new channels of financial and military supplies to the SDF—this will irritate Ankara and undermine the current understanding with Washington.

Therefore, the most critical determinant of Ankara's reaction will be how Turkey-US relations unfold by October. One line of argument suggests, that if Ankara achieves progress in resolving some of its outstanding issues with Washington, it may have more room to maneuver, whereas the continuation of the current confrontational path might limit Turkey's options and force it to go along with the United States.

Meanwhile, it is also possible to hear arguments that the escalation of the US-Iran crisis might be viewed as a welcome development, since it may present a bargaining chip for a new understanding with the United States in Iraq and Syria. More specifically, some security analysts assert that, in return for acquiescence to—if not collaboration with—US policy on Iran, Turkey may seek to extract some concessions in the defense industry, primarily, regarding some of the outstanding demands pertaining to the procurement of certain systems or technology transfers.

Granted, the US presidential elections in November remain a real gamechanger. Those willing to revive the Obama-era nuclear deal are working hard and, if the Democrats win the election, the new administration may revert away from the maximum pressure policy. Hence, Turkey will more than likely pursue a wait and see approach on the lifting issue to see how the broader US policy on Iran will take shape.

Prospects for Iran-Turkey cooperation in arms procurement?

A last question to ponder is whether Turkey may take advantage of this opening to venture into arms procurement deals with Iran. It remains premature to expect a vibrant arms trade between the two countries and the issue is nowhere on the agenda of the Turkish defense industry. First, Ankara will be concerned with the fallout from such a partnership on its troubled relationship with the United States, which is already

overburdened with the outstanding issues. Second, defense industry firms are well aware of the toxic nature of any arms deal with Tehran. Many rely on partnership with the West and they will not want to be implicated in any US secondary sanctions as a result of deals with Iran. Likewise, in the case of some domestically produced systems, export licenses may require clearance from Western countries, which will practically prohibit any potential deal with Iranian companies. Third, regional competition will also, potentially, limit potential collaboration between the two countries.

Through the proxies they support, Turkey and Iran are on opposite sides of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, therefore, they are unlikely to procure for or supply the other party. Last, but not least, in addition to divergence in regional issues, both countries will not want to share their arsenal utilizing homegrown technology with the other, given lack of trust or concerns about reverse engineering, among other things.

In short, regardless of Turkey's divergence with the United States on a crisis sparked by the lifting of the arms embargo, technical and political considerations suggest that direct defense industry cooperation between Ankara and Iran is unlikely in the short run. Moreover, if this issue escalates into a major point of contention internationally, Turkey—with no reason to put itself at the center of tensions—is more likely to pursue a hedging strategy to maximize its options than to involve itself in the crisis directly.

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/uncategorized/lifting-the-un-arms-embargo-on-iran-insights-into-turkeys-options/>



Russian President Vladimir Putin meets with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the Bocharov Ruchei residence in Sochi, Russia May 14, 2019. Alexander Nemenov/Pool via REUTERS

Moscow is not buying Pompeo's Iran snapback sanctions logic

IranSource by **Mark N. Katz**

Moscow made clear months ago that, once the United Nations arms embargo on Tehran expires in October, Russia intends to resume selling weapons to Iran. Not surprisingly, then, Moscow has reacted negatively to US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's call for the UN Security Council to extend the arms embargo or, if it doesn't, for the United States to exercise its right as a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) participant to unilaterally force the "snapback" of multilateral sanctions against Iran, despite the Trump administration's 2018 withdrawal from the nuclear agreement.

According to Iranian state media, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif denounced Pompeo's plan as both "[delusional](#)" and "impractical."

Russia's Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov, was especially critical of the US claim to still being a participant in the JCPOA: "The US attempts to present itself as 'JCPOA participant' have no future," he [tweeted](#). Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov accused the United States of applying a selective approach to UNSC Resolution 2231 and [asserted](#) that, "For us, the case of the existing ban on arms deliveries to and from Iran was closed with the adoption of Resolution 2231. The embargo regime expires in October this year."

As a result, Moscow can be expected to veto any US effort to get the Security Council to extend the JCPOA's arms embargo on Iran, and to resist, undermine, and even defy any unilateral US effort to trigger "snapback" sanctions on Iran under the provisions of UNSC Resolution 2231. If Washington's Western allies also object strongly to the Trump administration efforts to re-impose sanctions on Iran, Moscow will see this as an opportunity to form a "united front" with them against Washington—much as it did with France, Germany, and other Western governments opposed to the Bush administration's [insistence](#) on military intervention in Iraq in 2003.

Yet, even if Britain, France, and Germany—the European signatories to the JCPOA—urge Moscow and Beijing to go along with Pompeo's plan to extend the JCPOA arms embargo in order to avoid far more draconian snapback sanctions (and a brawl with the Trump administration over them), Moscow may decide to go ahead with arms sales to Iran just to show that Russia will not submit to Washington on this.

The US Defense Intelligence Agency [stated](#) that weapons systems Russia might sell to Iran include Su-30 fighter jets, Yak-130 trainer aircraft, and T-90 main battle tanks. Tehran was also said to be interested in buying S-400 air defense missiles and Bastion coastal defense systems. Moscow, reportedly, [rejected](#) an Iranian request to purchase

S-400 air defense missiles in May 2019, but this decision could be revisited (Russia has already sold S-400s to Turkey and has talked about selling them to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, but has only sold the earlier S-300 model to Iran in 2016, after years of delay). Still, even if Moscow is not concerned about the effect of the resumption of arms sales on US-Russian relations, there may be other factors influencing Moscow to hold back on them. The most basic is that, as a result of existing US-backed sanctions against Iran, coupled with the steep decline in oil prices that occurred in early 2020, Tehran may simply not be able to buy much Russian weaponry—especially, the high-end expensive sort. Moscow, of course, could extend credit to Tehran, but it may be neither willing nor able to do so because of the economic straits it also faces from sanctions, low oil prices, and the impact of the coronavirus.

Another factor that might serve to restrain Moscow's enthusiasm for selling arms to Iran could be the negative impact this would have on Russia's relations with Saudi Arabia. As the outbreak of the Saudi-Russian oil price war in March showed, Riyadh can punish Moscow for behavior it disapproves of by keeping oil prices low. On the other hand, the Kremlin may view selling arms to Iran as a means of punishing Riyadh. Moscow may wish to show Saudi Arabia, that if Russia will not forego arms sales to Iran at Washington's behest, it certainly will not do so at Saudi Arabia's, either.

What Moscow might be willing to do, though, is hold off on the sale of certain weapons that Riyadh most fears Tehran obtaining in return for compensation purchases of Russian arms by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Similarly, Moscow may be willing to "compensate" Qatar for Russian arms sales to its Gulf rivals by allowing Doha to purchase more Russian weapons, as well.

An additional consideration that could serve to restrain Russian arms sales to Iran is the close [relationship](#) between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Israel has long lobbied Moscow not to sell sophisticated weapons to Iran. At the time of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, Israel reportedly [agreed](#) to stop supplying Georgia with Israeli military technology in return for

Russia not selling S-300 air defense missiles to Iran. Moscow also values Israel as a [source](#) of Western military technology.

Nevertheless, Moscow may see Israel as being unable to afford making too much of a fuss over renewed Russian arms sales to Iran. This is due to Putin's subsequent sale of S-300s to Iran in 2015 and Israeli dependence on Russian forbearance for its attacks on Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria.

Ultimately, Putin's response to the Pompeo plan is likely to be both principled and transactional. Putin will not abandon what he considers to be the principle of the JCPOA that allows Russia—and others—to sell arms to Iran beginning in October, and that the United States cannot withdraw from the agreement while still claiming to be a party to it in order to prevent this. On the other hand, what, when, and how much Russia sells to Iran may be impacted by whether or not others are willing to make concessions to Putin. For example, an announcement by mid-November by either President Donald Trump or the Democratic president-elect that he is willing to renew—as Putin has sought since the beginning of the Trump presidency—the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), which is due to expire in February 2021, might lead to drawn out Russian-Iranian negotiations even while Russia asserts its right to sell arms to Iran. The same is the case for Saudi purchase orders involving advance payment for S-400s or other major Russian weapons systems and Western sanctions relief, as well as greater “understanding” for Moscow's position vis-à-vis its annexation of Crimea and support for Russian nationalists in eastern Ukraine. Without such concessions, Russian arms sales to Iran are likely to occur soon after the JCPOA arms embargo expires in October.

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/moscow-is-not-buying-pompeos-iran-snapback-sanctions-logic/>



A military vehicle carrying the Shahab 2 surface-to-surface missile drives past pictures of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (R) and Late Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini during a parade to commemorate the anniversary of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), in Tehran September 22, 2011. REUTERS/Stringer

Post-embargo, Iran arms purchases would be limited and selective

IranSource by **Barbara Slavin**

Since Iran accepted the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), it has been looking forward to the scheduled lifting in October 2020 of a UN embargo on arms transfers. This would help modernize elements of Iran's conventional military equipment, some of which dates to before the 1979 revolution.

Iran has shown a significant ability to develop systems on its own, reducing the need for expensive imports. Its purchases will likely be limited, therefore, by both economic and geopolitical constraints, including the impact of US sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic and caution on the part of potential suppliers.

Iranian officials pride themselves on developing a military strategy that has defended their country's territorial integrity and expanded regional influence at a fraction of the cost of the defense budgets of their Arab neighbors across the Persian Gulf. According to the latest [figures](#), Iran had the eighteenth largest military budget in the world last year—\$12.6 billion—compared to Israel's \$20.5 billion (fifteenth largest); Saudi Arabia's \$61.9 billion (fifth largest) and the largest spender, the United States, at \$732 billion. In a scathing op-ed [piece](#) published in *The New York Times* in 2017, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif asserted that the sale of billions of dollars' worth of what US President Donald Trump has [called](#) "beautiful military equipment" by his administration and its predecessors to the Arab states of the Persian Gulf had not resulted in greater security for that country or the region. Iran has relied, instead, on asymmetric means, especially, militias in Lebanon, Iraq, and other countries to project influence and, raise the cost of potential attacks on itself through proxy attacks. Strategic blunders by adversaries and the dislocations caused by the 2011 Arab Spring created numerous opportunities for Iranian intervention, while discrimination against Shia in the Arab world and South Asia—and the lack of alternative employment for youth—produced a steady supply of militia recruits. Iran has managed to transfer arms to these militias despite UN and other arms embargos.

Iran has also developed significant cyber capabilities—in part, in reaction to the Stuxnet attacks on its nuclear infrastructure a decade ago—and has made advances in ballistic and cruise missiles and unarmed aerial vehicles, building on Russian, Chinese, and North Korean platforms. Many observers were stunned by the accuracy of the cruise missile and drone [attacks](#) on Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq stabilization plant in September 2019, which temporarily put half the country's daily production out of commission, and by the missile [strikes](#) against bases housing US forces in Iraq in January in retaliation

for the US assassination of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani. More recently, Iran has also [lifted](#) a military satellite into orbit after several failed launches that may have been sabotaged by the United States and Israel.

Where Iran has fallen short is in the area of missile defenses—which are not covered by the UN embargo. The poor state of its ground-based air defenses was tragically demonstrated by the [shoot-down](#) of a Ukrainian passenger airliner in January, when a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) mistook it for a hostile US missile. Iran might like to purchase the Russian S-400 system but may have trouble coming up with the funds. Russia may also be reluctant to antagonize Israel by selling such advanced equipment to the Islamic Republic. Sirous Amerian, a guest lecturer at the Center for Defense and Security Studies at New Zealand’s Massey University, told this author that Iran might only seek to acquire some components of the S-400, as it did with Russian Kasta and Nebo SV radars.

Michael Eisenstadt, director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and a long-time student of Iran’s capabilities, reminded this author that Tehran and Moscow haggled for a decade over the S-300 system. He predicted that Iran would go after “niche systems to provide niche capabilities and will not seek or be able to achieve the recapitalization of the Iranian military inventory or a total makeover of the Iranian military.” Iran will look for components—navigation, guidance and propulsion technologies—to improve its indigenous drone, cruise, and ballistic missile programs, Eisenstadt added. Iran has provided some of this technology to regional partners, defying the UN embargo and other sanctions.

Amerian said Iran wants fighter jets, logistics aircraft, and helicopters. Russian Su-30SM fighters or the Chinese JF-17, which China co-produces with Pakistan, have been [mentioned](#) as possible purchases. Amerian says the latter is more likely because the JF-17 is \$10 million cheaper than the Sukhoi, easier to maintain, and uses the

Klimov RD-33 turbofan, which Iran already has experience working with from its fleet of Mig-29As.

Eisenstadt said Iran would also like to purchase intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance technology so it no longer has to depend on Russia to support ground forces, as has been the case in their mutual intervention in Syria to prop up the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Furthermore, Iran is looking for new radar-guided air-to-air missiles, such as the Russian R-77-1 or the Chinese PL-15 and has expressed interest in the Russian T-90 main battle tank.

Desire is one thing—reality another. Eisenstadt has estimated that it would cost Iran \$100 billion to refurbish its air force, which still includes stripped-down American F-14 Tomcats manufactured in the 1970s before the shah was overthrown. That sum is equivalent to Iran's entire hard currency reserves.

A key priority for Iran is to be able to build and revamp equipment domestically. [According](#) to Farzin Nadimi, an associate fellow with The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Iran made upgrades to Iraqi Su-22 Fitters—which Iraqi pilots flew into Iran during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and Iran never returned—with the help of Syrian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian experts. Nadimi wrote, recently, that the IRGC has claimed that these planes will soon be equipped with 1,500-km range cruise missiles that can hit targets in the middle of the Arabian Sea and in the sensitive Bab al-Mandab Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden.

Iran has tried and failed, before, to revamp its conventional arsenal. In the 1990s, it sought East bloc equipment after the end of the Cold War but was stymied by US political pressure and a lack of funds. One question, now, is how influential the US will be in dissuading arms transfers given international anger at the Trump administration for unilaterally withdrawing from the JCPOA while Iran remained in full compliance. The Trump administration has threatened to snap back pre-JCPOA sanctions—a dubious strategy since the US quit the deal—and to [use](#) other means to block arms sales if the

UN Security Council balks. Iran has threatened to leave both the JCPOA and Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty if those sanctions are extended.

Iran could incentivize Russia to supply new arms by granting it more access to Iranian military bases. That would risk provoking domestic opposition, however, since such access violates the Iranian constitution. Moscow's revelation that Russian planes [refueled](#) at Iran's Hamadan airfield en route to Syria in 2016 led to so much criticism in Iran that permission was abruptly revoked.

Retired Vice Admiral John Miller has [noted](#) that Russian "advisors" would need to be present in Iran should Tehran buy the S-400 system or Yakhont anti-ship missiles. The Yakhont system, Miller says, "would be especially troublesome to coalition maritime commanders as the system would provide anti-ship coverage over the entire [Persian] Gulf."

It remains doubtful, however, that new conventional arms will change the balance of power in the Persian Gulf. The United States and its allies remain dominant in terms of hardware, while Iran's asymmetric capabilities will stay its most potent weapon for the foreseeable future.

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<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/post-embargo-iran-arms-purchases-would-be-limited-and-selective/>



Secretary Michael R. Pompeo attends the UN Security Council meeting on Iran at the United Nations, in New York City on December 12, 2018. [State Department photo by Ron Przysucha/ Public Domain]

The United States needs to preserve the UN Security Council snapback for the future

IranSource by **Thomas S. Warrick**

It helps to have a quantum physicist at your elbow to explain the lesson of Schrödinger's [cat](#) in order to understand the logical flaw in the State Department's [position](#) that the United States ceased to be a “participant” in the Iran nuclear deal in 2018 but is still a “participant” today. What “participant” means, and who gets to decide, will drive high-stakes diplomacy at the United Nations Security Council

(UNSC) in the next few months. The United States, for its part, will need to be careful not to undermine one of its most powerful diplomatic tools developed since World War II: the ability to use the unique authority of the UN Security Council to get Russia and China—sometimes—to agree on what needs to be done.

The reason the Security Council's authority is at risk is because the Trump administration wants to extend the five-year arms embargo and travel ban that was part of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231 that implemented the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), better known as the Iran nuclear deal. (The key language is in Annex B, paragraphs 5 and 6.) A straightforward extension would require another Security Council resolution, which any of the five permanent members of the Security Council—China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—could veto.

As negotiating leverage, Secretary of State Mike [Pompeo](#) and [other](#) administration officials said that the United States would invoke the “snapback” provisions of UNSCR 2231 to re-impose all international sanctions that existed against Iran in June 2015, prior to the JCPOA. These sanctions were the result of the Obama administration's successful efforts to build an international consensus, backed by strong multilateral sanctions, to keep Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons. Those multilateral sanctions forced Iran to the negotiating table in 2014-2015.

While many have criticized the JCPOA for not ending Iran's malign campaign to destabilize key countries in the region and for imposing only a ten-year limit on key aspects of Iran's nuclear program, it is beyond dispute that UNSCR 2231 was one of the most carefully negotiated Security Council resolutions in history. The “snapback” provision was one of 2231's crown jewels and is something the United States should want to preserve for the future.

The snapback provision was designed to invert the veto power of countries like Russia or China. In an ordinary situation, once UN sanctions against a country like Iran are

lifted, the UN Charter would require a new resolution to take action to re-impose those sanctions—which the United States might want, but that Russia or China could veto. The snapback provision reverses the process, setting a precedent that is very valuable for US interests, by nullifying Russia's and China's right to veto the Security Council's taking action.

Instead, the snapback was the Security Council's agreement in 2015 that the United States would have a veto power to compel the Security Council to take action—in this case, to re-impose sanctions on Iran. The wording of the snapback provision in 2231 has three parts: (1) any “JCPOA participant State” could require the Security Council to affirmatively adopt a resolution that would keep the sanctions relief in place, so that (2) the United States, or any other permanent member, could veto such a resolution, and (3) if the resolution was not adopted, then all the early 2015 international sanctions would come back into force.

This was a powerful procedure for the United States. In theory, even if the rest of the world objected, the United States alone could re-impose binding UN sanctions. Under Chapter VII of the United Nations charter, particularly article forty-one, those sanctions should have the force of binding international law. Under article twenty-five of the charter, all United Nations member states agreed to carry out the “decisions” of the Security Council.

UNSCR 2231 was negotiated to give the United States or any other “JCPOA participant State” the ability to unilaterally re-impose sanctions on Iran's *nuclear* obligations under the JCPOA. The arms embargo, however, was negotiated to be an *ordinary* sanctions situation; once the arms embargo expires, it will take a new resolution to re-establish it. The Obama administration team that negotiated UNSCR 2231 anticipated many contingencies, including a breakdown of the international consensus on the need to limit Iran's dangerous nuclear ambitions. But they did not anticipate that the United States would seek the quantum physics state of superposition—that the United States would

claim to not be a “participant” in the JCPOA while simultaneously [claiming](#) the benefit of being a “JCPOA participant State” under article eleven of UNSCR 2311.

Most Americans would agree that extending the arms embargo on Iran is an important goal. Nearly 90 percent—382 of 429 current members—of the US House of Representatives [signed](#) a letter urging Secretary Pompeo to work with US allies and partners to extend the arms embargo and the travel ban on Iranian arms proliferators. The problem with invoking the snapback provision in UNSCR 2231 is who gets to decide whether the United States is still a “JCPOA participant State.” The United States gets its say, but it would have to get the other Security Council members to agree. Given the way the United States has withdrawn so publicly and confrontationally from the JCPOA, based on statements by President Donald Trump, Secretary Pompeo, and other top officials, it’s unlikely that the Trump administration could persuade most UNSC members to consider the United States as a participant for purposes of the snapback provision, unless the United States agreed to be bound by the JCPOA’s provisions. If all the permanent members of the Security Council don’t agree that the United States is a “participant” eligible to invoke the snapback provision, then they will not feel pressure to be bound to enforce pre-2015 UN sanctions.

One of the most powerful tools that American diplomats have at the United Nations is the ability to get Russia and China, long our rivals for international influence, to abide by the binding resolutions of the United Nations Security Council. On issues as diverse as the Balkans, Libya, the Middle East, and Iran, once the Russians and Chinese agree to a binding resolution, they will usually abide by it, even if their short-term interests later pull in a different direction. Binding Security Council resolutions have more persuasive power than US diplomats do, alone. The United States has a strong national interest in keeping the international consensus that a binding UNSC resolution really is binding on all UN member states.

The idea of a “snapback,” in which the members of the Security Council agree that sanctions can be re-imposed even if only one permanent member wants them, is an

option the United States needs to preserve for the future. The Trump administration knew that the snapback option was available only to a “JCPOA participant State” when it embarked on re-imposing sanctions in 2018—sanctions that the JCPOA said would be lifted in 2020, so long as Iran satisfies the other four permanent Security Council members that Iran is complying with the JCPOA’s terms. The fact that the United States has not, so far, been able to convince even the United Kingdom or France to invoke the snapback provision is a sign of how dangerously isolated the United States is in its view of the JCPOA and Iran’s compliance.

It would be dangerous for the United States—and would diminish US power—to allow Russia and China to define the terms of a binding Security Council resolution for themselves. The Trump administration should think twice about claiming this right because, in this case, it will take an international consensus to re-impose the pre-2015 UN sanctions on Iran.

The United States should explore other ways to extend the arms embargo and travel ban on Iranian arms proliferators. Quantum physicists know that Schrödinger’s [cat](#) is *not* simultaneously both dead and alive, just as the Security Council members will not accept the idea that the United States is both no longer a “JCPOA participant State” while being able to call for a vote as a “JCPOA participant State.” The world will not re-impose sanctions on Iran pursuant to a US “snapback” decision unless there is a vote in the Security Council whose legitimacy most governments respect.

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