

## Iranian claims of jet range dismissed

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Yaakov Lappin , THE JERUSALEM POST

Iran's claim of having increased the range of its fighter jets, allowing them to fly as far as Israel and back without refueling, did not signify any new operational abilities, an arms expert said on Sunday.

Iranian state TV quoted the Islamic Republic's air force chief Gen. Ahmad Mighani as saying Iranian warplanes could now fly 3,000 kilometers without refueling. He didn't specify the aircraft type or explain how the range was extended. Israel is about 1,000 kilometers from Iran.

But Yiftah Shapir, head of the Middle East Military Balance project at Tel Aviv University's Institute for National Security Studies, said there was a major difference between being able to fly 3,000 kilometers and actually carrying out a successful airstrike on a distant target.

"You may be able to technically fly the distance at high altitude without arms on the jet," Shapir said.

"But there's a big difference between that and flying low as you would on a mission to avoid radar, laden with arms, which takes up more fuel. You would need a plan to reach the target, hover it for five to ten minutes as you strike it, and then escape the area without being shot down and escape fighter jets.

"You would need the intelligence on targets, and a rescue plan. This is a very complex business, and I'm certain the Iranians are far from having that capability," he added.

Iran has 203 combat jets in service, according to Shapir's data. It possesses four types of ground-attack jets - the SU-24 (23 in service), the SU-25 (13 in service), the Saegheh (3 in service), and the indigenously developed Azarkhsh plane (6 in service). The SU jets are named after the Russian Sukhoi company which produced the warplanes.

Iran also possesses three types of multi-role fighter jets; 49 F4 jets, 22 phantoms, and 10 Mirage F1-E type aircraft.

In March 2007, *Jane's Defense Weekly* reported that "Iranian pilots are stepping up training and exercises for long-range missions."

Quoting "Western defense sources," the report said "Iran is pursuing a longer-range strike capability for its air assets to support the delivery of more powerful strategic weapon systems," adding that Teheran was "investing considerable resources" in aerial refueling capabilities. The training involved the Iranian air force's Sukhoi Su-24MK strike aircraft,

*Jane's Weekly* said.

*AP* contributed to this report.

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