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BALLISTIC MISSILES IN IRAN

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In the last week of May, Iran confirmed that it had, in fact, conducted another flight-test of its Shehab-3 Medium Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM). On May 26, the Iranian Minister of Defense, Ali Shamkhani, declared that Iran had tested the missile earlier that month but provided no further details. Shamkhani apparently confirmed reports of the test that had begun to circulate a week earlier, based on American sources. However, the news about the test had been largely ignored or played down by world media, including some of the leading journals in the defense industry. This was in sharp contrast to coverage of previous Shehab-3 flight tests in July 1998 and in September 2000. This oddity raises the suspicion that the last test was either insignificant or even that it never happened at all.

Iran's ballistic missile development program has been a major concern in the Middle East for the past eighteen years. The latest test, whether or not it actually took place, should not divert attention from the fact that Iran is making continuous progress in its effort to build a strong missile force. Iran began operating ballistic missiles during its war with Iraq, when it attacked Baghdad with Scud-Bs acquired from Libya. During the decade following the war, it developed its capabilities with considerable

assistance from North Korea, China and Russia. This assistance included technology transfer, which enabled Iran to produce Scud-B and Scud-C missiles and most of their components.

Once Iran acquired the capability to produce the Scud-C, it launched the Shehab-3 project, again with substantial aid from North Korea. The Shehab-3 resembles the North Korean "No-Dong." It is a liquid-fuelled single-stage missile, based on the technology of the Scud B. Its range is some 1,300 km - just enough to reach Israel. The Iranian ballistic missile program also includes the Shehab-4 and Shehab-5 (liquid-fuelled missiles, allegedly based on Russian technology) and a solid-fuelled missile dubbed "Fateh-110" (which is probably similar to the Chinese M-11).

The Shehab-3 is probably in its final stages of development. Last year, it was announced that the missile had limited operational capability. Thus, we may assume that the Iranian armed forces have a limited capability to launch a small number of missiles in case of emergency. In this respect, the last test makes little, if any, difference to Iran's usable strength.

Iran's ballistic missiles form its main strategic arm. Its air force is not able to project power far

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from Iran, and its navy has no real blue water capability. The primary mission of the strategic arm is deterrence. Iran does not yet have a nuclear capability, but the deterrence role of its missile force points to the possibility that the missiles will be equipped with nuclear warheads if and when Iran is able to produce them.

Ballistic missiles are a source of pride for the regime and this is another strong motive for pursuing the development program, in addition to any strategic role they might have. One of the declared aims of the program is to develop a satellite launch vehicle (SLV); the Shehab-4 and Shehab-5 are designed for this role. This capability is also a matter of prestige. Iran probably lacks the know-how to develop an advanced reconnaissance satellite, but at this stage any satellite will serve the purpose.

A lot of stress has been placed on the Shehab-3's range. It seems that the reason for pushing to the maximum range possible with the missile's 1950s-era technology is developmental: Iran will need a missile with much longer range for its future SLV. Nevertheless, Iranian leaders do not hesitate to mention their missile force in the context of threats against Israel. Such threats should not be taken lightly. On the other hand, their significance should not be overstated. Israel is certainly viewed through the lens of ideological hostility. But it is also perceived as a security threat, because it has long-range strike systems (like the F-15I aircraft and ballistic missiles) and because its leaders did not hesitate to warn Iran in the past. Thus, Iranian leaders can easily rationalize the need to deter Israel. Still, there is a wide gap between deterrence threats and actual use.

The latest test proves once again that missile tests are often used as a political message. In this case, it seems that if there was a message, it

had three different addresses. The first was Israel. Israel launched its Ofeq-5 satellite two days after the Iranian announcement (on May 28), but the forthcoming launch was no secret. Israeli officials announced their intention several times last year. Neither was the approximate date of the launch a complete secret. Since Iran considers the Shavit SLV a ballistic missile that directly threatens it, it needed a launch of its own to signal its own countervailing capability.

The second addressee was Pakistan, which had tested its own Ghauri missile only one week earlier. Although Pakistan and Iran are sometimes seen as allies due to the Islamist character of their governments, the relations between them are sometimes strained. In the past, Pakistan supported the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, with which Iran came close to war. Although Pakistan is now allied with the United States in its struggle against the Taliban and the Ghauri test was undoubtedly intended to impress India, it is possible that Iran felt the need to remind Pakistan that it, too, has similar capabilities.

The third intended target of the message was, of course, the United States. American forces are now deployed very close to Iran -- in Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Tadjikistan -- and the United States continues to denounce Iran as a charter member of "the axis of evil."

One final word is in order concerning the information about the test. As already mentioned, very little specific information was released, and what there was came from American intelligence sources. This may well have been done in accordance with American political needs, that is, to ensure that the world's attention would not be diverted for long from what remains, for the US, an ongoing source of strategic concern.