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Iran Pulse

The wrong way to address Iran's missile program

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[Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#) November 21, 2017

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Article Summary

To address Iran's ballistic missile program, the United States and Europe need to work toward a region-wide solution.

📷 Nazanin Tabatabaee Yazdi/TIMA

A display featuring missiles and a portrait of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is seen at Baharestan Square in Tehran, Sept. 27, 2017.

In remarks on Oct. 13 when decertifying Iranian compliance with the July 2015 nuclear deal, US President Donald Trump called on Congress to address the “near total silence on [Iran's missile program](#)” and prevent it from “developing an intercontinental ballistic missile.” Congress has since [floated bills](#) that would not only [impose further sanctions](#) on Iran for its missiles, but would also condition America's commitment to the nuclear deal on Iran's missile policies.

While the European Union and the United States differ on the nuclear deal, they have taken a common position on Iran's missile capability, with French President Emmanuel Macron saying on Nov. 9 that Iran's missile program [should be restricted](#), either via negotiations or sanctions.

US and European assumptions about Iran's missiles often fail, however, to consider the political, legal, defensive and regional security contexts of the program. To hedge the nuclear deal's fate on such a misguided understanding of Iran's missile ambitions only serves to doom the deal and reinforce the rationale behind Iran's missile program in the minds of decision-makers in Tehran.

In the political arena, Trump regularly lambasts the nuclear deal for not doing more to address Iran's missile program and its regional activities. Indeed, the nuclear deal, by design, focused only on the crisis surrounding [Iran's nuclear program](#).

Ironically, during the tenure of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran had put [regional issues](#) on the negotiating table in its nuclear talks with the United States and the other world powers, but the Americans and Europeans at the time balked at the prospect of bringing regional issues into the discussion. Senior US and European nuclear negotiators have since told me that they believed going beyond the nuclear issue would have bogged down the negotiations process.

Legally speaking, the Trump administration has no basis for pursuing punitive measures against Iran for its missile program. There is no international treaty curtailing the development of ballistic missiles, and [31 countries](#), including Iran, currently possess ballistic missiles. Furthermore, contrary to the Trump administration's claims, the nuclear deal does not obligate Iran to cease development of its ballistic missile program.

UN Security Council Resolution 2231, endorsing the nuclear deal, only “calls upon” Iran not to undertake missile tests that are “designed to be nuclear capable.” This is far less than the stringent language of a previous resolution it voided. The International Crisis Group notes that the language [“calls upon” is nonbinding](#), and Greg Thielmann, an expert with the Arms Control Association, has stated that the language of Resolution 2231 “implies nuclear weapons [intent must now be established](#) in assessing the design of any missile launched by Iran, ... [a] higher bar in light of Iran's acceptance of stringent limits on its nuclear program.”

In the context of Iranian security, the aim and design of Iran's missile program is to provide the country with a conventional deterrent, not to attain a nuclear-weapons delivery system. This need for deterrence stems from Iran's threat perceptions — chiefly a US or Israeli attack — and its history of having been subjected to missile and chemical weapons attacks by Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War. Iran had been unable to retaliate against the latter, much less deter the attacks. Iran's precarious borders with weak states ridden with conflict — Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq — and the terrorist threat it faces from groups such as the Islamic State (IS) further inform the logic behind Iran's missile program. Indeed, this summer, Iran responded to IS attacks in Tehran by launching [missiles at IS targets](#) in Syria.

It is also a technical reality that Iran does not have and is not developing an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) program, as Trump has claimed. Iran has [limited the range](#) of its ballistic missiles to 2,000 kilometers as a matter of policy, well below the minimum 5,500-kilometer [threshold for an ICBM](#). Instead of focusing on range, Iran's ballistic missile program has been concerned with improving accuracy, a quality not necessary in missiles designed for nuclear weapons. As nonproliferation expert Tytti Erasto has noted, “Iran's pattern of missile testing — which has sought to address the long-standing problem of poor accuracy — is consistent with the program's stated purpose as a [regional deterrent](#).”

Another vital lens through which Iran's missile program must be viewed is the regional security environment. By every military measure, Iran is outmatched by its regional rivals. For instance, [Saudi Arabia](#) not only has sophisticated US-made ballistic missiles, but also possesses advanced Chinese Dongfeng intermediate-range missiles with a range upwards of 4,000 kilometers. Israel maintains a hefty arsenal of nuclear-tipped missiles on top of its powerful [conventional military capabilities](#). To Iran's east, Pakistan has a nuclear arsenal potentially vulnerable to terrorist groups.

Also of importance, Iran's [military spending](#) is dwarfed by that of its regional rivals. Simply stated, at a time when Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia is telegraphing [overt hostility toward Iran](#), and Israel is [threatening military strikes](#), for Iran to have the minimum form of deterrence that its indigenous missile program provides is logical and far from destabilizing.

If Europe and the United States are sincerely concerned about Iran's missile program, they should cooperate with other global and regional powers on a region-wide arms control initiative, for both conventional and unconventional weapons, that would foster a regional balance of power and promote regional peace and security. Endeavors to realize UN resolutions on weapons of mass destruction and nuclear weapons free zones in the Middle East, coupled with a regional conventional arms control arrangement, would be the most effective path to preventing further militarization and conflict in the area.

Otherwise, to discriminate against Iran for its military capabilities while US officials insist on policies of [“regime change”](#) and “all options on the table” signals to Iranian decision-makers that the United States seeks to weaken Iran's means of deterrence to more

easily attack it. This, in turn, compels Tehran to invest more in developing effective deterrents. This steers the United States and Iran into an escalatory cycle that could lead to disastrous conflict.

Found in: [Defense/Security cooperation](#)



[Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#) is a Middle East security and nuclear policy specialist at Princeton University and a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiators. He is the author of "The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir" (2012) and "Iran and the United States: Insider's View on the Failed Past and the Road to Peace" (2014).

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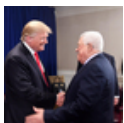
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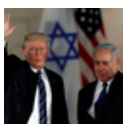
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Kaminoyona • 6 days ago

Yes the Iranians found the loopholes of the laws and twist the truth so they can say they abide by the laws.

Iran is a direct threat to every person on this planet who does not wish for global Shia Islam.

I suggest this moron who calls himself a journalist listened to the "supreme leaders" speeches where he clearly states Iran's goals of world domination and his willingness to sacrifice his nation to do so.

The Iranians smile as they lie and the fools in the west believe them though they should not ever be trusted.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Cyrus ➔ Kaminoyona • 6 days ago

You don't know what you are talking about.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Fargo ➔ Kaminoyona • 6 days ago

What law are you talking about? 10 commandments?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

farouk → Fargo • 3 days ago

I think he's talking about the laws of physics

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Kaminoyona → Fargo • 6 days ago

Those are not laws.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Fargo → Kaminoyona • 6 days ago

They are for you? Unless you are an atheist ethno-racial Zionist.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Not a fan of Israel → Kaminoyona • 2 hours ago

Zionist nonsense. Next.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Justnfree → Kaminoyona • 5 days ago

Can you give us several examples of how Iran twisted the truth and several of their lies and several examples of threatening all those who don't with for global Shia Islam. IAEA, Russians, Christians Lebanese, Sunni Hamas would be interested!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Justnfree • 6 days ago

Those who criticize Iran's missile program should dismantle their own first!! Specially those who have nuclear warheads on them and particularly those who have nuclear warheads beyond NPT!!

How come no one complain about American missiles when they fire 59 toward another country without any legal pretext?!

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Kaminoyona → Justnfree • 6 days ago

The NPT? thats the one that Iran broke many times,why would they be trusted again?

BTW America is not run by a fanatical madman that believes a man will appear in the sky to usher forth global Shia Islam through war.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

IranMan → Kaminoyona • 6 days ago

Arguing with a semi-literate troll like you about serious topics is like having a root canal for recreational purposes. The NPT, which Iran signed in 1968, allows the signatory country(ies) to engage in nuclear development for peaceful purposes. Therefore Iran was within its rights to enrich Uranium to fuel its nuclear power plant. There has been NO credible report that Iran violated its treaty commitments. The countries that are run by rational leaders are all sticking to CJPOA. Except the US at this time, when the so-called president is a sexual predator, congenital liar, and a completely un-hinged as a person. That will change soon and the US will be back on the right track.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Not a fan of Israel → Kaminoyona • 2 hours ago

Reading your posts, I believe the Zionists' education system has failed once again.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Justnfree → Kaminoyona • 6 days ago

IAEA supposed to define who has broke NPT. So far they never found remote evidence that Iran is in

violation of NPT and never said so. Unless you can provide a reference to prove otherwise.

Trump seem like fanatical madman to many people around the world including US allies and even considerable of part of American people. According to Trump, Obama and Clinton have invented and founded Daesh. Bush was a fanatical madman who started wars and murdered millions based on lies, also threatened whole world by saying either you're with or against us. Netanyahu is fanatical madman who is ready to destroy the world with his nuclear weapons and Samson option.

When did Iranians ever started a war?! When did Iranians invaded and occupied a country?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

10van ➔ Justnfree • 6 days ago

If you are referring to Israel, it was nuclear capable since the 60's. Though it has been through many wars some of which were unsure of the outcome, it has never threatened anyone with its use. It has been there for two reasons, as a deterrent and as a Samson option.

Iran, if we are to believe it, doesn't even have the bomb as yet, but it has already warned Israel that its only a 'one nuke' country.

Point, it seems no one trust Iran with nukes, while even Israel's current and former enemies are not running to put sanctions on it for having them.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Not a fan of Israel ➔ 10van • 2 hours ago

Keep up. Israel has NO nukes. It is all smoke and mirrors. The Russians know it. The Yanks know it.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Fargo • 6 days ago

All Iranian missiles are home produced, Iran has upward of one million if not more missiles, that is what is keeping Iran safe and the world from another major war in the middle east. All those who demand restriction on Iran's missile program should destroy their own weapons. I never understood why France needs to have any nuclear weapons, or for that matter even a military.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

10van ➔ Fargo • 6 days ago

why would Iran need nukes if not to use them?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Fargo ➔ 10van • 6 days ago

Iran doesn't have nukes neither needs them. Where do you folks get you understanding of the world?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Kaminoyona ➔ Fargo • 6 days ago

So why were they trying to make them?

Why did they brake the NPT?

Why the need to the BS deal we have with them now?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Not a fan of Israel ➔ Kaminoyona • an hour ago

Study some physics and then ask that stupid question again, ok?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Fargo ➔ Kaminoyona • 6 days ago

Iran didn't do any of them. Iran made a deal to remove bogus American sanctions, to defeat ethno-racialist Zionist who have taken over US.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

si91 → Fargo • 5 days ago

Funny isn't it, how they can take over the world's only super power, but somehow can't exert similar hypnotic control over the genocidal Arab terrorists who live next door?

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Not a fan of Israel → si91 • an hour ago

Why would they....they were running Daesh.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Not a fan of Israel → Fargo • an hour ago

They equate use of nuclear energy with nuclear weapons. I don't think Science is a high priority in israeli schools. They are still waiting for a person born in Israel to win a Nobel Prize....could be a while considering their blinkered thinking. Pmsl.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Moszep • 6 days ago

The thing about technology is you can't uninvent it, the genie can never go back in the bottle so to speak. If Iran wants to develop missile they can and there is not much that can be done about it. If countries want to boycott and penalize them they are free to do so.

Human greed is and lust for power is seen in religion and ideology. Until we move past the idea of Us and Them which religion and ideology promote, we will be perpetually stuck in this dance.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Justnfree → Moszep • 6 days ago

Human greed and lust have been seen in not so religious people more. Have you heard about Harvey Weinstein and his likes?! You think Trump is religious or world savior?!

You can be a sack of chemicals made out of coincidence, uttering some noises, without any purpose, if you like. But some people look for meaning in their life.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Moszep → Justnfree • 5 days ago

I will see your Harvey Weinstein and raise you secret trials with over 20 000 dead Kurds.

Purpose comes from yourself and those around not an imaginary sky god or his supposed messengers.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Kaminoyona → Justnfree • 6 days ago

Meaning from fairy tales?

We do not need a book wrote by bronze aged goat herders to tell us what is right and wrong.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Justnfree → Kaminoyona • 6 days ago

Yes, of course, You don't need books, religion and ideology. You need nice people like Weinstein, Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris!!

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ilami-Gilaki → Justnfree • 6 days ago

And you find meaning in the religion of Eslam? hahaha

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Bhairava → Ilami-Gilaki • 5 days ago

There is a path for everybody. Just because you don't like it or don't understand it doesn't mean everybody else feels the same way. Islam is a fine religion, and Muslims are excellent and polite people.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ilami-Gilaki ➔ Bhairava • 5 days ago

Well, Eslam doesn't fit for the Iranian people which is why Eslam is about to go extinct in that country.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Bhairava ➔ Ilami-Gilaki • 5 days ago

How doesn't it fit the Iranian people? There have been Iranian Muslims literally since the time of Muhammad. In many ways you could say Islam is both Arab and Iranian by origin, with the figure of Salman Al-Farsi in the background of the origin of Shi'ism.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Ilami-Gilaki ➔ Bhairava • 3 days ago




Adhering to a the same religion that Arabs adhere to is a disgrace and unwanted among Iranians. We wouldn't even like to be Zoroastrians if Arabs decided to convert to that religion.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

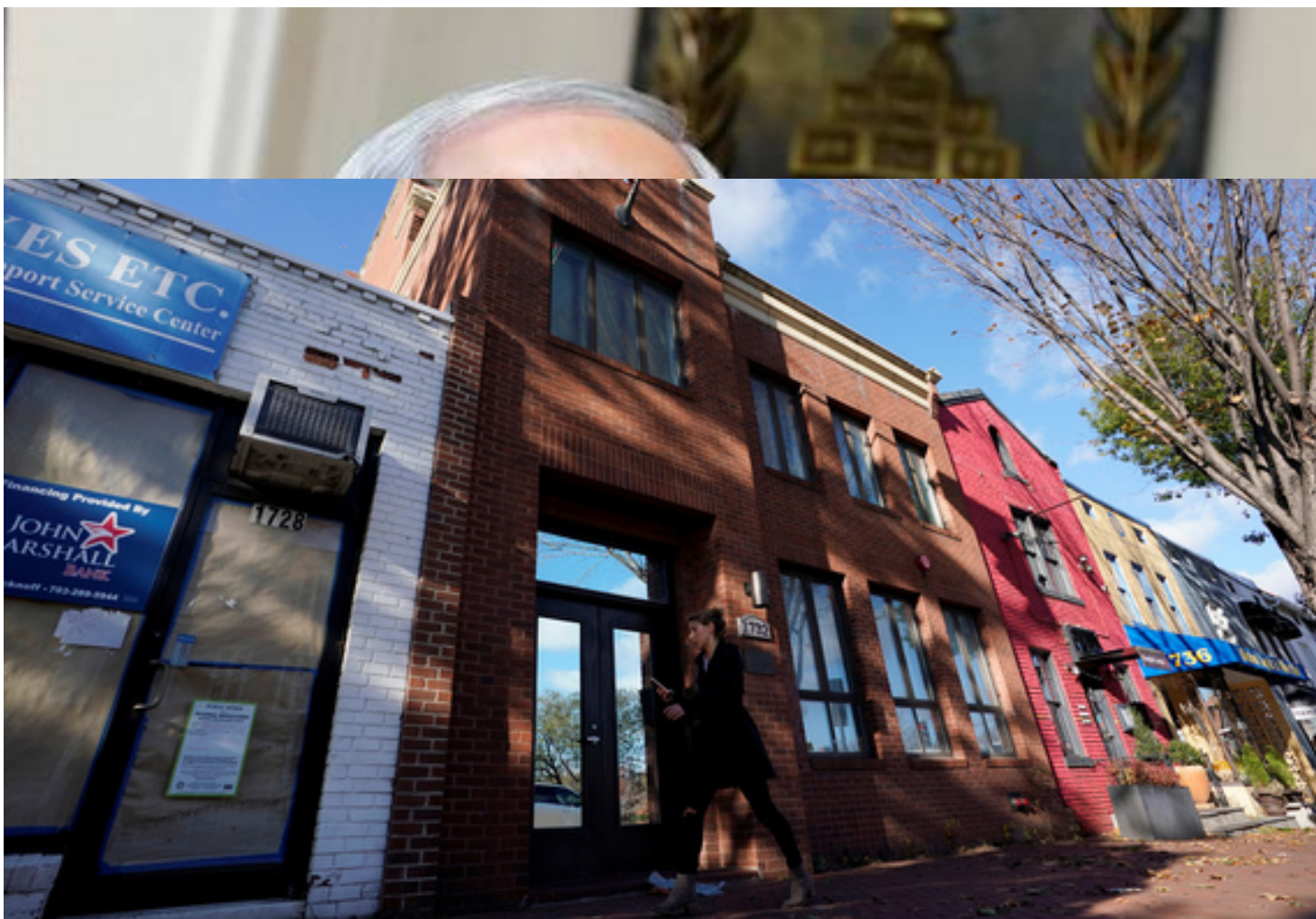
Bhairava ➔ Ilami-Gilaki • 2 days ago

That's an especially goofy thing to say, since the orthodox Zoroastrians of the Sassanid period would open each battle with a ceremonial call for the opposing side to convert to Zoroastrianism. In fact, i'm pretty sure there were Arab Zoroastrians in the pre-Islam period.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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