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Iran unveils new long-range cruise missile

Soumar appears similar to Russian missile, able to carry nuclear payload, reach Europe

Anshel Pfeffer

Iran's Defense Ministry, in an unusual public display, on Sunday introduced a new cruise missile, the Soumar.

The missile is very similar to the Russian Kh-55, which can carry nuclear or conventional warheads and has a range of 2,500 km (1,550 miles).

This would enable the Iranians to hit targets not only throughout the Middle East but in eastern and southern Europe as well.

Reports have said the Iranians were attempting to develop cruise missiles, but this is the first time they have unveiled such weapons publicly.

Iranian websites that reported the introduction presented photographs of a display of a number of static Soumars and a short video of

why the Iranians are interested in revealing that they have such a weapon, which threatens wide swaths of Europe, including ... Moscow and NATO members Greece and Turkey.

"Iran has for years been developing the Shihab series of ballistic missiles, but it makes sense for it to simultaneously develop cruise missiles."

Inbar says that "it's much easier to hide a cruise missile. They are smaller and more mobile [and] you can launch them from a variety of platforms on land, from submarines, bombers and even disguised merchant ships."

Cruise missiles fly at subsonic speeds, which make them easier to shoot down, but their relatively small size and ability to fly at low altitude make them difficult to detect.

The timing of the Iranian exhibition raises questions, coming as it does on the eve of what could be a crucial round of negotiations toward an agreement limiting Iran's nuclear program.

The Obama administration has said it would insist on including Iran's long-range-missile program in the agreement as well.

But from the details of the impending agreement that have leaked so far, the Americans and other world powers taking part in the talks seem to have capitulated to Iran's demand that the missile program is non-negotiable.

The Iranian media reports make no mention of any participation in the missile event by representatives of President Hassan Rouhani, who is eagerly pushing the nuclear deal.

Development of advanced weapons systems is carried out under the auspices of the Islamic Republican Guards Corps, whose commanders oppose a nuclear deal with the West.

Defense Minister Hossein Dehqan, a former general in the IRGC, attended the event, which probably was not coordinated with Rouhani.

Another observation regarding the timing: Had the Iranians introduced the missile five days earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would certainly have made much of the event in his speech last week to Congress in Washington.



Iranian President Rouhani AP

a launch of one of them from a military vehicle.

In 2005 senior officials in Kiev confirmed that Ukraine in 2001 had sold a dozen Kh-55 missiles to Iran. Ukraine held the missiles after the Soviet Union disintegrated.

Since the missiles were delivered, the Iranians have been trying to reverse-engineer the Kh-55 to produce a local version.

The missile presented in Tehran resembles the Kh-55 externally and has a booster enabling it to be launched from the sea or ground. The Russian original doesn't need a booster in addition to its jet engine, as it is launched in the air from a bomber.

"The unveiling of the cruise missile is very surprising," says Tal Inbar, head of the space and unmanned-aerial-vehicle center at the Fisher Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies in Herzliya.

"We have to ask ourselves