



Iran's Struggling Space Program Could Be A Real Threat If It Ever Gets Off The Ground

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On August 29th, Iran attempted to put its newest commercial satellite, the Nahid-1, into orbit from a test range in the country's north. The endeavor ended inauspiciously, with the rocket blowing up on the launchpad – marking the third such Iranian failure this year alone.

But the unsuccessful test nonetheless elicited a strong reaction from Washington. President Trump took to Twitter the next day to publicly troll the Iranians for the botched launch attempt – and to hint that it might have been America's doing. A more serious response followed shortly thereafter; just days later, the Trump administration formally added Iran's official space agency and two affiliated research institutes to its sanctions blacklist.

So, why is Washington worried about what seems on the surface to be a struggling Iranian space effort? The answer has everything to do with Iran's strategic programs – and the potential for them to combine in a way that dramatically expands the threat the regime poses to the West.

Here, space represents a crucial part of the conversation. While most people don't know it, Iran has actually been a spacefaring nation for the better part of two decades. Back in 2005, it formally ventured into the "final frontier" when it successfully launched a surveillance satellite, the Sina-1, from Russia's missile base at Plesetsk. Since then, the Iranian regime has carried out a number of additional launches, showcasing an ongoing space program that has proven largely successful, despite Tehran's current trouble getting the Nahid-1 off the ground.

But if its space advances have taken place quietly, the Islamic Republic's parallel work on ballistic missiles has been a great deal more prominent – and controversial. Years of sustained investment have made Iran's clerical regime one of the most advanced missile powers in the Middle East, with the ability to hold the entire region at risk via a stockpile of medium-range missiles. Moreover, thanks to the particulars of its 2015 nuclear deal with America and the other P5+1 powers, the Islamic Republic has greater latitude than ever before to improve its missile force.

As a result, experts worry that Iran's already-formidable strategic arsenal could soon undergo a major evolution. That's because the technology necessary to launch a payload into orbit is essentially identical to that which can transform a medium-range missile into one of intercontinental range.

"Space launch vehicle (SLV) technologies, such as those developed by Iran's space program, are virtually identical and interchangeable with those used in ballistic missiles," the State Department has officially noted. "Iran's civilian space launch vehicle program allows it to gain experience with various technologies necessary for development of an ICBM – including staging, ignition of upper-stage engines, and control of a multiple-stage missile throughout flight." All of which means that any gains Iran makes in its space launch capability can translate into improvements to its ballistic missile arsenal, and do so in a relatively short amount of time.

That, in turn, underscores the urgency behind the Administration's latest blacklisting. If left unimpeded, Iran's work on its space program will inevitably give the Islamic Republic far greater strategic reach – and improve its ability to hold at risk adversary targets beyond the Middle East (among them the continental United States). Averting such an outcome, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has told reporters, is precisely the point of the new sanctions.

"The United States will not allow Iran to use its space launch program as cover to advance its ballistic missile programs," Pompeo said in announcing the new sanctions. In other words, curbing Iran's space program has become a critical part of the Trump administration's efforts to roll back Iran's malign activities, both in the Middle East and beyond.

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