

Iran's Transfer of Weaponry to Russia for Use in Ukraine

November 4, 2022

Since August 2022, according to the Biden Administration, Iran has transferred armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs, or drones) to Russia, which has used them against a range of targets in Ukraine. U.S. officials express [concern](#) that Russia may seek to procure [missiles](#) from Iran. These transfers (and potential transfers of ballistic missiles) have implications for the trajectory of the conflict in Ukraine as well as for U.S. efforts to support Ukraine's defense against Russia's invasion. Other policy considerations for the Administration and for Congress include sanctions on entities involved in the arms transfers and potential action at the United Nations (U.N.).

Background

In July 2022, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan [stated](#), “our information indicates that the Iranian government is preparing to provide Russia with up to several hundred UAVs.” In late August, the *Washington Post* reported that Russia had picked up “scores” of Iranian drones. Ukrainian officials [estimated](#) in October 2022 that Russia had ordered around 2,000 UAVs from Iran, of which “[hundreds](#)” had been delivered; the U.S. Department of Defense [assesses](#) that “Iranians have been on the ground in Ukraine to assist Russia with the drone operations there.” [Russian](#) and [Iranian](#) officials deny the use of Iranian UAVs in Ukraine.

These [drones](#) (the [Shahed-131](#) and [136](#)) have a range of 900 and 1,500 kilometers, respectively. They have a slow speed, making them vulnerable to man-portable air defense and even small arms. Ukraine appears to have been [successful](#) at downing a “[significant percentage](#) of the Iranian drones,” but some continue to evade defenses. It is unclear how many of Ukraine's medium- and long-range air defense systems remain operational.

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Figure 1. Shahed-136 Drone in Kyiv

Source: Getty Images, via *New York Times*, October 17, 2022

October 2022 [media](#) reports [suggest](#) that Iran is considering transferring short-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs) to Russia. The [Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar](#) SRBMs have a warhead of approximately [500 kilograms](#), in contrast to the 40-kilogram warhead of the drones. While it is difficult to predict the impact of the use of Iranian drones and potential SRBMs on the ground conflict, the presence of these weapons [highlights](#) Ukraine's lack of adequate air defense systems. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has called for more air defense assistance. The United States and European allies have [committed](#) to delivering advanced [air defense systems](#), but production bottlenecks complicate more immediate deliveries. In addition, the systems are not designed to counter ballistic missiles, and cost imbalances raise questions about long-term viability. For more, see CRS In Focus IF12040, *U.S. Security Assistance to Ukraine*.

Russian and Iranian Motivations

Russia has responded to battlefield setbacks by conducting long-range missile strikes against Ukrainian cities and infrastructure targets. Some observers say Russia is [likely running low](#) on its stockpile of long-range precision missiles, and press articles claim that U.S. and other western officials [question Russia's ability to replace stocks](#) due to Western [sanctions and export controls](#). In contrast to cruise missiles, which [cost several million dollars each](#), Iranian drones cost far less (estimates range from \$20,000 to \$50,000). Their relatively low cost and ease of replacement provide Russia with the capability to use swarms of drones to attack targets and overwhelm air defenses. Iranian drones also cost less than [Ukraine's air defense missiles](#).

From Iran's perspective, the UAV transfers appear to represent a strengthening of its ties with Russia, a relationship **reinforced** by their economic isolation from and opposition to the United States. Additionally, the deployment of Iranian UAVs in Ukraine may be, in the words of one **observer**, "an important propaganda opportunity" for Iran to demonstrate its drone capabilities for "potential future clients." Iran reportedly has transferred UAVs to proxies in Iraq and Yemen (which have used them against U.S. forces in Syria and targets in **Saudi Arabia** and the United Arab Emirates, respectively), as well as to **states** such as Ethiopia, Venezuela, and Sudan. The U.S. government **attributes** the 2019 UAV attack on Saudi oil infrastructure to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Aerospace Force.

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Issues for Congress

U.S. Sanctions

On September 8, 2022, the Administration designated for **sanctions** four entities and one individual (pursuant to Executive Orders 13382 and 14024) for their involvement in the "research, development, production, and procurement" of Iranian UAVs and their shipment to Russia. These follow previous **designations** (announced October 29, 2021, pursuant to Executive Orders 13224 and 13382) of individuals and entities that "provided critical support" to Iran's UAV programs.

Relatedly, Congress is considering legislation that would authorize sanctions under Section 107 of the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (P.L. 115-44) on individuals who support Iran's UAV activities. That legislation, the Stop Iranian Drones Act (H.R. 6089), was passed by the House in **April 2022** and reported out by the **Senate Foreign Relations Committee** in June. Some Senators have proposed incorporating H.R. 6089 into Senate consideration of a FY2023 National Defense Authorization Act (as amendment **SA 5826 to SA 5499**), though procedural and other issues **reportedly** may complicate its inclusion.

U.N. Action

Adopted in July 2015 to endorse the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Annex B of **U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2231** restricts until October 2023 the import to or export from Iran of certain arms, including UAVs and ballistic missile systems. U.S. officials have **said** Iran's supply of UAVs to Russia violates UNSCR 2231. The United States, along with **Ukraine** and other **countries**, has **requested** the Secretary-General investigate and report on the alleged violation.

Separately, **some commentators** have called for the United States to work with partners to reimpose U.N. sanctions on Iran through the "**snapback**" mechanism of UNSCR 2231, though that mechanism is related only to "significant non-performance of commitments under the JCPOA," not UNSCR 2231 commitments. In any case, some **observers** suggest the practical impact of reimposing U.N. sanctions could be minimal, given the extensive U.S. secondary sanctions already in place. Congress may consider directing the Administration to provide reports or briefings on its views of and strategy related to UNSCR 2231.

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