In my Foreign Policy column, I explain why a missile war between Israel and Iran will be a workout for modern missile defenses, with implications for the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

An Aug. 15 Bloomberg article describes a grim and anxious Israeli public preparing itself for war with Iran. Citizens are filing by distribution sites at shopping malls to pick up gas masks while wondering when the Israeli air force will attack Iran's nuclear complex. Although it is possible that Iran would restrain itself -- leveraging potential outrage at the attack to reverse some of the political and economic isolation it has suffered in the past few years -- virtually everyone assumes Iranian military retaliation would soon follow an Israeli strike. Matan Vilnai, the outgoing civil defense minister and a former general, predicts that a war with Iran would last a month and said that Israel should brace itself for hundreds of missile hits each day, which could kill 500 people by the end of the war.

Although Hezbollah pounded northern Israel with short-range rockets for several weeks in 2006 and Hamas still occasionally strikes towns near Gaza, a war with Iran could subject Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and other major urban areas and military bases to large-scale and long-range missile attack, the first such missile war anywhere since the 1991 Gulf War. Such a bombardment would test the hopes placed in modern missile defenses, affecting not only Israel but also American plans for the Asia-Pacific, where the United States has made missile and anti-missile systems a core part of its strategy for the region.

Vilnai's prediction of several hundred rocket hits per day implies that Hezbollah would join Iran, again striking northern Israel with Katyusha and other mostly short-range rockets. But even if it didn't -- fearing another bashing from the Israeli army and the prospect of having to recover without much help from a fracturing Syria -- Israel would have to face Iran's growing ballistic missile arsenal. Of particular concern is the Shahab-3 missile, which, according to an analysis prepared by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), can fly up to 1,300 kilometers and carry a high-explosive or chemical warhead weighing 760 to 1,100 kilograms. The U.S. Congressional Research Service estimates that Iran possesses 25 to 100 Shahab-3 missiles, deployed both in underground silos and on truck-mounted launchers. (According to the CSIS report, however, Iranian policymakers will have to live with uncertainties regarding the Shahab-3's dependability, accuracy, and warhead reliability.)

Opposing Iran will be Israel's Arrow missile defense system, designed specifically for the Shahab-3 threat. The Arrow system is tested and deployed, but has yet to face combat. The United States has positioned a high-powered, long-range X-band radar facility in Israel to boost the Arrow's sensor capability and supply target data to the Pentagon's own missile defense network. The performance of both Arrow and the U.S. missile defense system will depend on how well all the various radars and sensors in the region collect, transmit, and integrate their results -- something that has yet to occur under the stress of actual combat.
particular, Arrow's operators should brace for a large attack, perhaps involving a dozen or more Shahab-
3s. It is very unlikely that the system has ever gone through a live-fire rehearsal against a dozen or more
simulated Shahab-3s. Iran will have a strong interest in launching such a large-scale raid, both to stress
Arrow before it can work out any unknown bugs and to use its missiles before Israel destroys them on the
ground during follow-up airstrikes.

The U.S. Navy has the highly capable Aegis air and missile defense system deployed on most of its
guided-missile cruisers and destroyers. The Aegis system, originally designed to protect naval task forces
from missile attack, has been upgraded to be a major player in national missile defense. Some of these
ships could be positioned for missile defense duty over Israel. U.S. policymakers will have to decide
whether to have such ships, if present, along with other U.S. missile defense capabilities, participate in the
initial defense of Israel. Opting out would allow Israel to demonstrate its own missile defense capabilities
and would remove an excuse for Iran to escalate the war against the United States around the Persian
Gulf. Policymakers in Washington, however, will likely opt to engage, both to exercise U.S. missile
defense systems in combat (revealing any glitches) and to demonstrate to allies in Europe, Asia, and the
Middle East that missile defense partnerships with the United States will be effective when needed.

The outcome of an Israel-Iran missile war will have profound implications for military strategies and
investments in Asia. The expansion and modernization of China's ballistic and cruise missile forces is a
recurring topic in the Pentagon's annual reports on China's military power. In a recent study CSIS
performed for the Pentagon, it noted the vulnerability of U.S. military bases in the Pacific to missile attack
and recommended increased missile defenses and dispersal of airfields and aircraft around the region.
Should a lopsided outcome occur in an Israel-Iran missile war, military planners on all sides would likely
scramble to reassess their assumptions. Should Arrow and the U.S. Navy's missile defense systems sweep
a large Shahab-3 raid from the skies, American planners would undoubtedly gain confidence in their
ability to sustain a forward presence in the Western Pacific in the face of China's growing missile forces.
By contrast, should Iran succeed in pummeling Tel Aviv and other targets in Israel, U.S. policymakers
would likely develop doubts about the long-term future of their forward-basing plans in the Pacific. The
outcome of a missile war would also affect the long-running debate over funding the Pentagon's troubled
effort to build limited defenses against intercontinental missiles.

An Israeli strike on Iran will come with no warning. Israel would like to give its citizens some time to
prepare for an Iranian retaliatory barrage, but because it may get only one shot at Iran's nuclear program,
Israel will want its initial airstrike to benefit from tactical surprise. Ideally, Israel's policymakers would
also prefer to ready their missile defenses in coordination with the Pentagon and the U.S. Navy. But Prime
Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will have to weigh the risk of a leak from Washington, which would prefer
that Israel hold its fire. An Israeli attack would thus be "a bolt from the blue," designed to surprise Iran's
air defenses, wreck the program's physical plant, kill Iran's nuclear engineers and technicians, and
demoralize survivors.

Vilnai may be right that a war may taper off after a month, if only due to the exhaustion of missile
inventories. But that would hardly mean the end of the war, which would be bound to take many
unpredicted turns in the years ahead. If Netanyahu and his colleagues decide to strike, they will be
walking into a dark room, with everyone else scurrying to adjust to the shock as best they can.

About the Author
Robert Haddick is a contractor at U.S. Special Operations Command. From January 2009 to September 2012 he was Managing Editor of Small Wars Journal. During this time, he wrote the “This Week at War” column for Foreign Policy. Haddick was a U.S. Marine Corps officer, served in the 3rd and 23rd Marine Regiments, and deployed to Asia and Africa. He has advised the State Department, the National Intelligence Council, and U.S. Central Command.

In the private sector, Haddick was Director of Research at the Fremont Group, a large private investment firm and an affiliate of the Bechtel Corporation. He established the firm's global proprietary trading operation and was president of one of Fremont's overseas investment subsidiaries.

In addition to Foreign Policy and Small Wars Journal, Haddick's writing has been published in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, Air & Space Power Journal, and other publications. He has appeared in many radio and television interviews.

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