



Air-Launched Ballistic Missiles and the Theater Nuclear Gap

By

Dylan Gottesman

On September 9, 2025, Israel launched a daring attack on Hamas leadership in Doha, Qatar, that took American forces by surprise. The attack was conducted by an [air-launched ballistic missile](#) (ALBM) that ascends to space before diving back to earth with lethal accuracy. An American ally conducting a precision strike on another American ally was a [shock to many](#). This daring operation showcased ALBMs as a technology that present new threats to the joint force.

Air-launched ballistic missiles are an integral part of Israel's long-range strike capability. Without long-range bombers and contested airspace on its borders, Israel must rely on innovation to conduct long-range strikes. Air-launched ballistic missiles enable Israel to turn a fighter aircraft into a mobile missile launcher with the range to hit Israel's most powerful enemies while avoiding contested airspace.

The capability that ALBMs give the Israelis is best demonstrated by their first publicly announced strikes on Iranian territory on October 26, 2024. Israel struck approximately twenty targets, including missile production facilities and air defense sites. Satellite imagery and reporting from Reuters, *Forbes*, and the *Economist* indicate that [air-launched ballistic missiles were Israel's primary standoff weapon](#).

Debris found in Iraq matched components consistent with an Israeli ALBM, possibly tied to the [still-unconfirmed Golden Horizon](#) program referenced in Israeli and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) reporting. This strike proved that Israel could bypass the dense Syrian air defense belt by launching ALBMs from within its own airspace, or over the Mediterranean, and allowing the missile to climb, coast, and descend into Iran.

ALBM's offer four exquisite capabilities: extended range, short flight time, unexpected launch angles, and precision accuracy. These weapons can hit an air-defense battery in a few minutes, from virtually any point in the air. For mobile air defenses and high-value targets, ALBMs provide a significant advantage over gravity bombs and cruise missiles. The air-launched nature of ALBMs also gives it survivability and accuracy advantages over ground-launched intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) used by Iran, Russia, and China.

ALBMs are not just employed by the Israelis; Russia and [China](#) both possess them. As an example, hypersonic missiles like [Khinzal are in reality maneuverable ALBMs](#). Khinzal is proving challenging for Ukrainian air defenses to intercept and enables Russia to conduct accurate strikes from deep within Russian territory. Early warning and midcourse tracking are key challenges for Ukraine because ALBMs have low plume density and travel on the edge of space, compressing decision time and making tracking difficult.

Russian and Chinese ALBMs are dual-use systems with the capability to have a nuclear or conventional warhead. The short time between detection and impact poses a difficult challenge for intelligence analysts in the scenario of a launch against American or North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces. The mobility of these systems also makes attribution difficult.

These weapons pose new challenges for air defenses and NATO's current theater nuclear posture, particularly in Europe. The United States currently lacks an air-launched ballistic missile



or comparable prompt-strike capability analogous to Russia's Kinzhal. American B61 nuclear gravity bombs, while credible, cannot match the speed of a potential Khinzal launch. One of the few credible prompt options within 10 minutes is a [W76-2 from a Trident D5 submarine-launched ballistic missile \(SLBM\)](#), a weapon likely used in a large-scale attack. Relying on a submarine-based capability for theater-level deterrence complicates escalation dynamics and highlights a gap in the NATO nuclear mission's posture.

As ALBMs become more useful in extending conventional strike capability and obfuscating integrated air and missile defenses, the US must field a similar capability. Without the ability to respond to a Russian theater strike in a short timeline, or to threaten a comparable attack, the US and NATO are at a disadvantage.

A ground-launched hypersonic, like [Dark Eagle](#) or the Precision Strike Missile (PrSM), is a promising capability to fill this gap; however, it misses the nuclear and airborne elements. An air-launched version of either of these systems would provide an adequate analog. A dual-capable air-launched Dark Eagle would enhance the effectiveness of the NATO nuclear deterrent by providing NATO with a flexible prompt-strike theater-level capability.

As long-range strike technologies proliferate, ALBMs have emerged as one of the most disruptive systems in modern warfare. Adversaries can now deliver precise, rapid strikes from unexpected launch angles, while NATO lacks a comparable prompt-strike option. This imbalance increases escalation risk and undermines American credibility in a crisis. To close this gap, the United States should pursue an air-launched, dual-capable system that matches the speed and flexibility of its competitors.

Dylan Gottesman is a sophomore in nuclear engineering at Purdue University. As Director of the Purdue National Defense Society's OSINT team, he leads the development of white papers and analytical research on nuclear deterrence, geostrategy, and missile defense. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.