U.N. Leader Softens His Predecessor’s Criticism of Iran Missile Tests

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/world/middleeast/united-nations-antonio-guterres-iran-missile-tests.html?_r=0>

The [United Nations](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/u/united_nations/index.html?inline=nyt-org) secretary general appears to have softened his predecessor’s criticism of [Iran](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iran/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) last year over its missile tests, a volatile issue in Iran’s relationships with other powers, including Israel and the United States.

The milder language is contained in a report by the secretary general, António Guterres, to the United Nations Security Council that has not yet been released. A softening of the criticism would be significant partly because the United States has called Iran’s missile tests unacceptable.

The Trump administration imposed sanctions on Iran in [February](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/03/us/politics/iran-sanctions-trump.html) and [May](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/25/world/middleeast/iran-sanctions-senate-foreign-relations.html) in response to what it described as “bad behavior” with respect to the tests.

Mr. Guterres’s relatively mild language in a passage of the report concerning those tests could complicate any American-led effort to further penalize Iran for them at the United Nations. A copy of the report, dated June 14, was seen by The New York Times on Wednesday.

The tests are not prohibited under the landmark [2015 nuclear agreement](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-deal-is-reached-after-long-negotiations.html) between Iran and six major powers, which eased economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for its verifiable promises of peaceful nuclear work.

But Security Council Resolution 2231, which put the agreement into effect, called on Iran not to test ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

When Iran [conducted missile tests](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/09/world/middleeast/irans-revolutionary-guards-test-nationwide-ballistic-missiles.html) in March 2016, critics led by the United States and Israel [were infuriated](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/15/world/middleeast/iran-israel-un-missile-tests.html), calling the country’s behavior a violation of the Security Council resolution and a sign that it would not honor provisions of the nuclear accord. Iran rejected the accusation.

In a report to the Security Council last July on compliance with Resolution 2231, [Ban Ki-moon](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/b/ban_ki_moon/index.html?inline=nyt-per), then the secretary general, said he was concerned that the missile tests might not be consistent with the “constructive spirit” demonstrated by the nuclear accord. He called on Iran to “refrain from conducting such launches, given that they have the potential to increase tensions in the region.”

Mr. Guterres’s report, his first on Iran’s compliance with the resolution, also called on the country to refrain from missile tests. But it did not echo Mr. Ban’s broader concerns about them.

A spokesman for Mr. Guterres, Stéphane Dujarric, did not immediately respond to a query about the difference.

Iran has long contended that the missiles are its defensive bulwark in an increasingly hostile region. Since it has already promised not to make [nuclear weapons](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/science/topics/atomic_weapons/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier), its leaders have said, the missiles by definition cannot carry them. Iran has also argued that Resolution 2231’s language does not ban missile tests.

Some disarmament experts suggested that Mr. Guterres’s report decreased the possibility of United Nations penalties against Iran over its missile development.

Daryl G. Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, a Washington-based group, said the difference between Mr. Ban’s and Mr. Guterres’s reports was subtle.

Mr. Guterres “may have adjusted the language in the report out of recognition that further sanctions of Iranian entities tied to missile development or production will not likely succeed in reducing, or even slowing, Iran’s ballistic missile program,” Mr. Kimball said.

Sanctions intended as punishment for missile tests, he said, could even strengthen hard-liners in Iran “who want to accelerate the program in response to U.S. pressure.”