North Korean Support to Iran's Proxy Partners

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Abstract

This essay details the role of North Korea weapons, delivery systems, and technical expertise to Iran's regional allies (Syria, Hezbollah, the Houthis and Hamas) – starting during the Cold War and transitioning into the Post-Cold War period. Pyongyang has proliferated chemical weapons, ballistic missiles, conventional arms, and sent advisers, trainers, engineers, and technicians for a variety of projects to Syria. The 2012-2020 Syrian civil war moreover expanded the Assad regime's need for all kinds of North Korean arms. Hezbollah's military intervention on behalf of the Syrian regime has also forced the Lebanese guerilla movement and its Iranian patron to become increasingly dependent on North Korean weapons and expertise. The Israeli war with Hamas that began on October 7, 2023, has seen a terrorist force supplied with weapons by both North Korea and Iran – often in collaboration when it comes to getting the weapons and training to Hamas operatives.

Keywords: North Korea, Hezbollah, Houthis, Hamas, Syria, proliferation

Introduction

Iran's hybrid wars in the Middle East represent an unusual, but in many ways, successful form of aggression, enabled by several state and non-state actors in the region who are now supported (some would say subsidized) either partially or mostly by the Iranian regime.[1] It is also important to note that these proxy partners have long received arms, training, technology, and advisors from North Korea. In some cases (Syria is a key example) North Korea has provided these state and non-state Iranian proxy partners support even longer than Iran.[2] For several years now, North Korea has provided many of the capabilities that these entities need in order to be effective fighting forces in the ongoing violence in the Middle East – sometimes through Iran, sometimes directly, and sometimes a hybrid of each. But because North Korea provides nothing for free, this support is largely paid for by Iran.[3]

As we read the results of Iran's hybrid wars in the Middle East and the Syrian civil war, the death and destruction that has occurred— particularly since 2011—is quite compelling. But what is less well known is how long North Korea has been supporting the forces that are creating this violence. Thus, we will look at North Korean support to Syria, Hezbollah, and even Palestinian splinter groups during the Cold War. This was largely (if not completely) subsidized by the USSR, as North Korea was itself serving as a proxy for the greater "socialist cause."[4] Soviet subsidies to North Korea ended in the very early 1990s, and thus, the deals that North Korea had with state and non-state actors changed from ideological partnerships to a strictly cash and carry business.[5] It also meant that someone else was (and is) footing the bill (in other words, paying North Korea for this military support)—Iran. In the post-Cold War period since 1991, North Korea has continued large-scale military support to Syria (originally paid for by Syria, now largely subsidized by Iran),[6] to Hezbollah, to both Hamas[7] and Palestinian splinter groups, to Yemen (before the Houthis took over), and then later to the Houthis.

We will look at the kind of support that North Korea has provided to these entities and continues to provide. We will look at the amount of money this has generated for Kim Jong-un's slush funds, and we will look at how this military proliferation/support/advice has paid off in the form of violence and threats to America's allies in the region. Understanding how North Korea was able to take Cold War relationships and turn them into cash-and-carry proliferation agreements is not only interesting, but it also informs us about what is going on now in the region and what we can expect in coming years.

North Korean Proliferation During the Cold War: Syria

Syria's relationship with North Korea during Damascus' historically bloody civil war is now a matter of record. For several years now this relationship has been well documented by not only respected press sources but by equally credible sources such as the UN Panel of Experts. While this relationship is and has been extremely important to the survival of Syrian forces in combat and to North Korea's military-industrial complex (largely based on antiquated Soviet technology but extremely useful in providing fighting forces arms as they encounter equally primitively armed rebel forces in the civil war that Damascus has been fighting since 2011), something that would surprise many analysts is that this relationship is nothing new. In fact, North Korea and Syria had a

longstanding and very robust relationship throughout much of the Cold War—largely because both nations were considered surrogates of the Soviet Union at the time and often the subjects of large-scale subsidies—especially for arms and related training and advisors. Thus, in this section we will address how the relationship evolved during the Cold War, what North Korea "brought to the party" when it came to conflicts with Israel, and the specific roles and missions in which North Korea was involved.

North Korea and Syria established formal diplomatic relations in 1966.[8] This was not surprising at the time as nation-states such as Egypt and Syria were considered to be in the Soviet "sphere of influence,"[9] albeit in a far less dominant way than Warsaw Pact states or even states such as Cuba and North Korea which were totally dependent on the USSR for basic economic and political survival (or so it seemed at the time). The diplomatic relationship that North Korea and Syria established in 1966 exists today and remains important. At the time, the funding for military aid, advisors, equipment, and training was completely subsidized by the Soviet Union – a situation that would remain in existence right up until the very early 1990s.[10]

In a Stimson Center publication, North Korean scholar Alexandre Mansourov highlights many key aspects of the North Korea-Syria relationship that began in full bloom in 1967. In that same year, Pyongyang sent 24 pilots to Syria in the midst of the Six-Day War. But there is much more. According to the report, "In 1970, the DPRK dispatched 200 tank crewmen, 53 pilots, and 140 missile technicians to Syria. During the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War, the DPRK dispatched 30 pilots to Egypt and Syria, who provided training for Syrian pilots to fight against Israel. Moreover, the North Korean Air Force pilots themselves flew the Soviet-made Egyptian and Syrian airplanes during some key air battles. In 1975 and 1976, Pyongyang sent 75 Air Force instructors and 40 MIG pilots to Damascus, respectively. In 1982, during the Lebanese civil war, the DPRK government dispatched SOF (special operations forces) servicemen to Syria to provide training for guerrilla operations, some killed by the Israeli military." Mansourov also states, "Beginning in the late 1970s through the 1980s, the DPRK supplied Syria with various conventional weapons such as rifles, guns, mortars, ammunition, bombs, armored vehicles, anti-tank missiles, radars, and even military uniforms. In particular, in 1978, the DPRK sold 300 recoilless guns to Syria. In 1982, when the civil war broke out in Syria, the Syrian military killed 20,000 civilians by firing 'BM-11, 122mm MLRS

(Multiple Launch Rocket System),' the weapon system imported from the DPRK. The Israel military snatched the notorious 'BM-11' from Syria during the Lebanon war in 1982, killing 25 KPA soldiers who serviced it."[11]

Clearly, during the Cold War, during conflicts starting with the Six-Day War, North Korea was knee-deep in helping its ally Syria to prepare its armed forces to fight Israel. In fact, as indicated in the documented evidence above, North Korean military personnel actually appear to have participated in combat operations—both on land and in the air. This relationship was also dominated early by the presence of Kim Kyok-sik (now deceased), who played a large role in maintaining a robust North Korea-Syria military relationship. Kim Kyok-sik was considered a close confidant of both Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il and served over a decade in Syria—a factor that undoubtedly led to Pyongyang's large contributions of manpower, training, and equipment.[12] The Cold War relationship between Pyongyang and Damascus laid the baseline for a relationship that was to come into play following the Soviet Union's collapse in the early 1990s. But the North Koreans do nothing for free, and never have. In 1991, with Soviet subsidies gone, North Korea and Syria would have to find new ways to fund their mutually beneficial relationship. This proved to be far less difficult than one would initially imagine.

North Korean Proliferation During the Cold War: Hezbollah

Hezbollah is an organization that is well known for being both violent and well trained. Hezbollah is also well known for having no hesitation in using terrorism (repeatedly) as a tool of policy. The group has been a part of the Iranian proxy plan since during the later stages of the Cold War. In fact, though Hezbollah gets financial support from largely illicit activities overseas and expatriate remittances, the group would be unable to maintain its powerful status without patronage from both Syria and Iran, and financial support to the tune of at least $100 million a year from Tehran.[13] Iran has been providing this support to Hezbollah since the Cold War still existed (Syria has been playing its role since that time as well). What makes this situation even more dangerous is that beginning in the Cold War (which is what we will discuss in this section) North Korea has provided both arms and training to Hezbollah—typically paid for by Iran and supported by Syria.

During the Cold War (and largely now but in a much more sophisticated way), North Korea supported Hezbollah largely in two key

ways: improved versions of rocket systems such as 122 mm or 107 mm multiple rocket launchers, and specialized training for Hezbollah "commando" units and commanders of these units. Of course this was often—then and now—very difficult to analyze because as Carl Anthony Wage states, "Iran simply uses a complex of shell companies, vendors, multiple purchases, and transfer modalities to acquire arms and other prohibited materials under for itself and its proxies such as Hizballah."[14] In other words, Iran acquires systems for itself from North Korea, but also supplies them to proxy groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. For Hezbollah, this has been ongoing since the 1980s. Thus, during the Cold War, North Korea provided arms to Hezbollah through Iran, sometimes through Syria, sometimes through Iran, then Syria (since sometimes arms would go to Iran and were then transshipped to Syria and then to Hezbollah), and sometimes North Korea even cut separate deals with Hezbollah as funds from the group's illicit activities began to kick in.[15]

As any Israeli could tell you, the Hezbollah rocket attacks into the Jewish state have been quite effective at inflicting casualties and perhaps just as importantly, creating an unstable environment. The range and accuracy of these weapons has been as effective as it has been in past years—beginning in the Cold War—at least in part thanks to the proliferation from the North Koreans.[16] Of course, the Iron Dome system has greatly cut into the effectiveness of these rockets, and the next war will be interesting to observe.[17] But in the Middle East, as in Africa, and as elsewhere, the North Koreans also were quite prolific at proliferating military capabilities by conducting training, largely in unconventional warfare methods. During the 1980s, Hezbollah leaders visited North Korea to learn special warfare techniques.[18] While this is the first known instance of North Korean Special Operations Forces training Hezbollah fighters, it certainly was not the last. But it laid a baseline for more training that would occur later and be significant in Hezbollah operations against Israel.

Much like Syria, Hezbollah now has a relationship with North Korea that spans generations. Starting its baseline in the 1980s with the proliferation of what proved to be effective rockets, and important "commando" training, the relationship has now expanded to a level of sophistication not normally expected of non-state actors. A key reason for this is the financing of Iran and the support (from and for) Syria. As long as there is instability in the Middle East created largely by Iran, North

Korea will be there to supply the weapons and training. But there is more than we have addressed thus far. The post-Cold War era brought in even more violence and destruction.

North Korean Proliferation During the Cold War: Palestinian Groups

Hamas is an organization that has often used terrorism against Israeli citizens. It is also an organization that has fired numerous rockets into Israeli cities—especially Tel Aviv.[19] But Hamas came to primacy after the Cold War was over. Long before the Cold War was over – beginning in the 1960s, North Korea had a relationship with Palestinian groups who considered themselves to be "warriors" against the state of Israel. It was during this Cold War time period that North Korea (through these relationships) laid the baseline for a later relationship that Pyongyang would form with Hamas. Thus, I will address who and how North Korea supported terrorist groups comprised of Palestinians during the Cold War. This time period allowed Pyongyang's military forces to gain themselves a reputation as a group capable of providing weapons and training—both of which these Palestinian entities would use against Israel.

The Kim Il-sung-Yasser Arafat relationship began in 1966. North Korea began supplying arms and training to not just the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), but also to the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine in the very early 1970s, and this continued at least to the end of the 1980s.[20] In 1970, PFLP founder George Habash visited North Korea to seek arms and training. Subsequently, PFLP leader Wadi Hadad recruited three Japanese Red Army (North Korea also supported the Japanese Red Army) terrorists for a terrorist mission into Israel at the Lod airport in 1972.[21] According to documents from the *Congressional Research Service*, North Korea provided both arms and training to the PLO beginning in the late 1970s.[22] Reportedly, in 1972, 30 Palestinians (guerillas) were trained by 70-80 North Korean instructors. Palestinian guerillas continued to conduct military training in North Korea until at least 1975.[23]

If one is to wonder why North Korea has been able to establish what appears to be a continuing relationship with Hamas, one has only to look at the longstanding arms and training relationship that Pyongyang had in the Cold War, not only with the PLO, but with splinter groups who conducted violent terrorist acts against Israel and others as a matter of policy. It was this proven capability, along with North Korea's close

cooperation with Iran—which has often served as a benefactor to Hamas—that led to Hamas being yet another customer along with the several state and non-state actors in the Middle East that Pyongyang currently serves. Hamas has proven itself to be a formidable post-Cold War enemy of Israel, and one that will rate discussion later in this article. Suffice to say, today the big difference is where the money is coming from—Iran, not the Soviet military (which ultimately subsidized North Korea so that it could remain deeply involved in these Cold War antics).

North Korean Proliferation to Syria: Post-Cold War

During the Cold War, the Middle East, along with the rest of the world, existed in a bi-polar paradigm. That is to say, much of the conflict worldwide was simply small proxy wars fought between allies of either the United States or the Soviet Union. In the Middle East, this meant that Soviet benefactors often attacked U.S. allies and U.S. interests in the region, but they were simply acting as proxies for Moscow, which paid for these acts of violence in the form of both military aid and economic subsidies.[24] In 1991, following the end of the Gulf War, it became obvious that the well had run dry and the Soviet Union was well on its way to collapse. Certainly, countries like Syria had more of an interest than simply being a "proxy" of the Soviet Union when it came to its confrontations with Israel. But the military aid and economic subsidies that came in certainly helped their cause.[25] With the end of Soviet aid and subsidies during the very early 1990s, it became obvious that Syria would have to seek other means to finance a military it continued to need—at least in the minds of those who ruled the Alawite regime. This would allow them to purchase arms from the North Koreans and to fight their next war.

Following the end of the Gulf War in 1991, Syria was awarded several billion dollars from Saudi Arabia for the role Syrian troops played in the war. This was gratuitous, because it occurred soon after military aid and other subsidies from the Soviet Union ceased. Syria used a portion of this money to place an order with the North Koreans for Scud C missiles—reportedly hundreds of them. The North Koreans would later build a Scud C fabrication facility in Syria. This facility—like most North Korean fabrication facilities that exist in the Middle East and Africa—was likely unable to function without North Korean parts and North Korean technical assistance.[26] Later, the Syrians reached a deal with Pyongyang to purchase Scud D missile systems. During the early stages of the of the Syrian civil

war and throughout the war, North Koreans were still on the ground in Syria, assisting Syrian forces in upgrading the Scud D systems.[27]

An important component to all of this is understanding how a poor country like Syria was able to get through tough economic times and still manage to rebuild and upgrade its military. The answer is Iran. By the late 1990s, it had become obvious that Iran was at least partially financing Syria's military and also providing economic subsidies. This was extremely important at the time because North Korea—then and now—does nothing for free. Thus, it took Iranian money to go to Syrian entities to develop and upgrade Syria's military capabilities, many of them coming from and being developed by North Korea.[28] Perhaps the most striking of these military subsidies was Tehran's reported financing of Syria's nuclear reactor, built with North Korean assistance (destroyed by Israeli forces in 2007). This is described in detail in my recent book, *North Korean Military Proliferation in the Middle East and Africa*.[29]

As the Syrian civil war hit full swing in 2011, military aid and economic subsidies from Iran radically increased, as the Alawite government in Damascus was literally in a fight for its life. The Syrian civil war was an economic boon for the primitive yet effective military-industrial complex that existed (and still exists) in North Korea at the time. When a nation-state fights a war, it uses up artillery and rocket systems, it loses armor in battle, it needs to replace ballistic missiles that have been fired in combat or simply destroyed by rebel forces, and it needs to rapidly beef up its small arms of many kinds that its conventional forces use in combat (North Korea provided all of this—with Iran largely footing the bill). And if the nation-state is a country like Syria, it needs help maintaining and re-supplying its military forces with chemical weapons that will strike fear and desperation into enemy forces that might otherwise carry out completely successful military campaigns. This is where North Korea came in and became a much-needed partner in Syria.[30]

It is important to note that most (if not all) of the bill for the upgrade and maintenance of the Syrian military during the bloody civil war was paid for either through direct purchases, economic subsidies, or large loans, from Iran.[31] As this money came in, the sanctions on North Korea, Iran, and Syria seemed to have no effect on the seemingly endless shipments of both conventional and unconventional arms from North Korea into Syria.

In 2016, reports showed evidence that North Korea had supplied Syria with several types of artillery systems, light machine guns, and anti-tank guided missiles (ATGM), as well as refurbishment of older Syrian Soviet-

era tanks. They also supplied the Syrians with man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS).[32] Also in 2016, the North Koreans reportedly had two special operations forces battalions conducting combat missions in support of the Syrian army. The units were known as "Chalma 1" and "Chalma 7."[33] In the end, by 2018, it became obvious that North Korea was proliferating hundreds of millions of dollars a year worth of conventional and unconventional weapons to Syria during the infamous civil war.[34]

As the Syrian civil war continues to die down and rebel forces' ability becomes almost non-existent (or at least much less of a threat), the refurbishment and upgrade of Syrian military forces becomes very important. This is something that North Korea also helped Syria to do in the 1970s following the Six Day and Yom Kippur wars.[35] Thus, since this is something that must happen, Iran will most likely be the benefactor to rebuilding and refurbishing Syrian military forces. Can there be any doubt that North Korea will play a major role in this? In fact, the North Koreans reportedly sent 800 new workers to Syria as early as the fall of 2019. The North Koreans were also on the ground even before that occurred, assisting Syrians with missile systems.[36] It is likely that most if not all of these workers were deployed to Syria to reconstruct military facilities and assist in continuing support of Syrian combat systems.

Russia is also likely to play a role. Russia has (of course) military systems that are much more modernized than what North Korea can field. If Syria is to use Russian systems in coming years, it will cost them—unless Russia chooses to simply give Syria these capabilities for free. It is certainly possible. But what is very likely is that North Korea will be used in coming years to refurbish, rebuild, and retrain Syrian forces—and to provide systems and training for Syria's never fully dismantled chemical weapons program.[37] The reasons are simple. North Korea's proliferation comes cheaper than just about any other state, and they have the systems Syria will continue to need—artillery, rockets, ballistic missiles, chemical weapons, etc. Through all of this, Iran is likely to continue to subsidize many of the purchases. Why? They continue to need an ally who will help support their proxy wars and aid in supporting Hezbollah.

North Korean Proliferation to Hezbollah: Post-Cold War

The relationship between North Korea and Hezbollah is one that has spanned a generation. It remains intact and robust today. The reasons for this are quite simple, Hezbollah has been involved in violent conflict

nearly every day of its existence, and thus the need for arms is nearly unending. Iran has been a Hezbollah sponsor since the earliest days of the 1980s. And North Korea, one of the key suppliers of arms to Hezbollah, has maintained a constant and useful (for both parties) military proliferation relationship with Iran for over 40 years.[38] Since Iran is Hezbollah's most important benefactor (especially financially), this has meant that the arms and the training keep flowing for this non-state actor that has been so effective at creating violence and instability in the Middle East. In this section, we will examine North Korean proliferation to Hezbollah during the post-Cold War days and how its existence is a challenge to national security interests of the United States and its allies.

During the 1990s, Hezbollah continued to operate as an effective and lethal organization. During this period Syria and Iran cooperated in supporting the organization.[39] In fact, Syria often served as a conduit for Iran when North Korean weapons were coming in for Hezbollah from Iran. This continued into the 2000's as in 2006 it became obvious the North Koreans had aided Hezbollah in building a huge underground network in southern Lebanon—a network that made it quite difficult for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) to inflict casualties on Hezbollah forces. The underground networks contained arms bunkers, communications facilities, dispensaries, and command and control networks used to wage war against Israel yet more secure than anything Hezbollah had ever used.[40] To exacerbate the threat from this tunnel system, analysis from the *Alma Research Center* in Israel shows that Hezbollah has built yet another system—with the assistance of the North Koreans of course. Hezbollah cut a $13 million deal with Korea Mining Development Trading Corporation (a North Korean front company) to build a 45-kilometer tunnel system connecting several key nodes in Lebanon. By 2013, the North Koreans had been paid $6 million already and by 2021 it appears the whole tunnel system had been completed, adding capabilities and sophistication to already highly effective tunnel systems.[41]

In 2009, a shipment of over 35 tons of military equipment on a plane leased by the North Koreans (and carrying North Korean military equipment) was caught in Thailand where it had landed to refuel. The weapons onboard included small arms, rocket propelled grenades, and other weapons that one would expect to go to a force like Hezbollah. The Israeli Foreign Minister at the time stated that these weapons were bound for Hezbollah and Hamas.[42] These are compelling examples of North

Korea's supply line of weapons to Hezbollah that has remained a constant in the post-Cold War era.

Perhaps the most important role that Hezbollah fighting forces have played in the Middle East has been what we have seen in the Syrian civil war.[43] As we have described earlier, North Korea has actively supported both Iran and Syria throughout the struggle for continued power that Damascus has waged. The many arms shipments into both Syria and Iran have often contained weapons that could be used by not just Iranian and Syrian troops, but Hezbollah fighters as well. As Hezbollah's role has become more important, it has also become more sophisticated. Thus, the weaponry, command and control, and training for Hezbollah has become more and more like a traditional military organization. With this of course has come North Korean assistance and arms. In fact, according to several reports, Syrian forces have even supplied Hezbollah with Scud D missiles—supplied to them by the North Koreans.[44] According to a Syrian defector, his former army unit had also supplied Hezbollah forces with chemical weapons components—also originally supplied to the Syrians by North Korea.[45] According to reports in the Israeli and American press, by November of 2022, Hezbollah had moved hundreds of rockets with chemical munitions to a warehouse near the border with Syria. The missiles were reportedly equipped with Thionyl Chloride with the assistance of North Korean experts and in collaboration with Iranian chemical weapons specialists.[46]

As conflict and violence continues to flourish in the Middle East, Hezbollah remains a key player. They may be the most trusted proxy of the Iranian regime. The role that they play in the region is important and compelling. Thus, the continued proliferation of arms and training that North Korea continues to provide (for a price of course) is vital. Much if not most of this continues to be financed and/or transported by Iran (or Syria), as a conduit for North Korean arms that eventually get to Hezbollah. Thus, North Korea plays an important role in supporting—both directly and indirectly—one of Iran's key proxy benefactors in its ongoing war to be the hegemon in the Middle East.

North Korean Proliferation to Palestinians: Hamas in the Post-Cold War

North Korean cooperation with Palestinian groups has been ongoing for a very long time as evidenced by the information addressed earlier in this chapter. Since the end of the Cold War however, North Korea has

essentially focused on supporting Hamas more than other groups. The reasons for this are important. Hamas has had an on again-off again relationship with Iran that involved millions of dollars when it actually occurred. When this relationship was "off again," it gave North Korea an opportunity to sell arms to Hamas without "Iranian involvement," thus allowing Tehran to delay relations and aid to Hamas for reasons I will describe later. In addition, North Korea has a long history of selling rockets (largely 107 mm and 122 mm) to Hezbollah and Iran and Syria. Hezbollah has had and continues to have a relationship with Hamas that has included aid and training to the Palestinian group—thus allowing North Korea to gain a foothold in supporting military operations.[47]

According to the United States Institute of Peace, between 1990 and 2000, Iran donated $20 to $50 million annually to Hamas. Iran also provided arms and training. At a meeting during 2006, Iran reportedly pledged to donate $250 million more to Hamas. During the Hamas-Israel 2008 war, Iran donated rockets—at least some of which likely came from North Korea. The outbreak of the Syrian civil war triggered a break in the very profitable (for Hamas) relationship between the Gaza-based organization and Tehran. The Iranians backed Assad while Hamas backed the mostly Sunni opposition. Thus, in 2012, Iran cut off financial assistance to Hamas. This gap in the relationship was exacerbated in 2015 when Hamas openly expressed support for the Saudi fight against the Houthis. In 2017, after a meeting involving Iranian officials and the Hamas second-in-command, the relationship (and aid) became "on again."[48] So, there was a five-year time-table (2012-2017) during which Hamas reportedly received no aid from Iran. Enter the North Koreans…

Back in 2021, I wrote a piece for the *National Interest* in which I outlined arms deals that reportedly occurred between North Korea and Hamas, resulting in rockets, upgrades to technology, and other military capabilities.[49] At the time, Hamas was launching thousands of rockets into Israel, but most were destroyed by the Iron Dome system and the Israeli people largely considered themselves safe from attack.

Fast forward to October of 2023. Things have changed. The threat from Hamas has proven to be so horrifying that most agree it needs to be completely destroyed. The terrorist attacks against civilians and targeting of civilian communities in Israel have been carried out with a level of brutality rarely seen since medieval times. In the footage the whole world has seen, Hamas "fighters" were seen using weaponry from several

sources—but shockingly to some, an analysis of weapons used thus far shows several systems with North Korean origins.

The world first took notice of North Korean arms ending up in the hands of Hamas in 2009, when arms shipments consisting of largely rockets and rocket propelled grenades were interdicted in Thailand and the UAE. The Israeli government at the time stated that these shipments both were probably bound for Hamas and Hezbollah.[50] The go-between for North Korea to these two entities was almost certainly Iran. Since interdicted shipments are often only the tip of the iceberg this is quite disturbing.

According to reporting in *The Telegraph* during July of 2014, North Korea had entered into a deal with Hamas to sell the terrorist organization both rockets and communications gear (more on the "communications" gear later). The deal is said to have been worth several hundred thousand dollars, so it is likely that it involved the sale of thousands of North Korean rockets to Hamas. The deal was reportedly brokered through a Lebanese front company with ties to Hamas, located in Beirut. In addition, by the time the article was published, a down payment had already been made,[51] so it is likely that the shipment of rockets and communications gear occurred sometime in late 2014.

In 2018, Fadi al-Batsh, a Palestinian and reported Hamas operative, was assassinated in Malaysia. Malaysia was for many years (including during that time frame) a location that North Korea used to operate many of its front companies for arms deals all over the world, but particularly the Middle East and Africa, as well as to launder the money from those deals. According to press reporting, intelligence officials from the West and the Middle East had evidence Batsh was part of negotiations with the North Koreans for arms deals being run out of Malaysia (as many of Pyongyang's arms deals were at the time), including for communications components used in rocket guidance systems. According to Egyptian officials, a seized shipment of North Korean communications components used for guided munitions that they captured in 2018 was destined for Gaza.[52]

And what of the actual capabilities that North Korea has contributed to Hamas? According to sources within the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), "some of the multiple rocket launchers found near the Israel border that Hamas militants reportedly used had 'Bang-122' written in Korean." The JCS official further remarked, "Lately, we have repeatedly detected North Korea exporting various weapons to Middle East countries

and militant organizations, including the 122-millimeter multiple rocket launchers found along the border near Israel," adding, "We believe these weapons were used by Hamas or an organization that supports Hamas." The "F-7" North Korean-made RPG has also been photographed in the possession of Hamas fighters attacking Israel on October 7.[53] Israeli and South Korean intelligence later confirmed that fuses of an "F-7" system recovered from Hamas had Korean characters on them. And according to the *Associated Press* and confirmed by numerous photos, "Hamas propaganda videos and photos previously have shown its fighters with North Korea's Bulsae guided anti-tank missile."[54] The "Bulsae" is a laser-guided ATGM that has the potential to be effective against Israeli armor as it moves through a ground campaign in Gaza.

Finally, back in 2014 according to reporting from *The Telegraph*, "Israeli military commanders supervising operations against Gaza believe North Korean experts have given Hamas advice on building the extensive network of tunnels in Gaza that has enabled fighters to move weapons without detection by Israeli drones, which maintain a constant monitoring operation over Gaza."[55] As the IDF in Gaza during November and December of 2023 began to uncover more Hamas tunnels, it became obvious that many of these tunnels were much bigger and wider than had previously been assessed by most analysts. In fact, the new tunnels uncovered were big enough for sophisticated facilities and even a rail line. According to Daphné Richemond-Barak, a tunnel warfare expert at Reichman University in Israel, "these tunnels look a whole lot like the tunnels North Korea has dug into South Korea. I see something at a much higher level of sophistication. We are talking about tunnel warfare at a different level. I see in addition to the inference of North Korea, …I also see the hand of Iran here."[56] These tunnels have been a major challenge to the IDF in Gaza.

North Korean Proliferation in Yemen: It's About the Money not the Ideology

The situation in Yemen is a confusing one if one is to think about it as it relates to North Korea. The North Koreans have (as evidenced throughout this chapter) a long history of backing separatist movements, communist nations and terrorist groups. But it would still come as a surprise to many that North Korea sent sophisticated weapons to the government in Yemen, and yet now is a confirmed supplier of weapons

and training to the Houthis—who overthrew the previous government and are now locked in an ongoing civil war with no end in sight.

North Korea supplied conventional arms and advisors as well as missiles to the previous government in Yemen going back to the 1990s. In 2002, Yemen took shipments of Scud C missiles from North Korea. In fact, one of the shipments was intercepted by Spanish Marines, and the President of Yemen actually called the White House to ensure he got back "his missiles." Yemen was allied with the United States in the War on Terror at the time and considered an important ally. But the government in Yemen did make a promise to cease its arms relationship with North Korea (and Yemen got its North Korean missiles back). Thus, during the 1990s and into the early 2000s North Korea provided military support (for a price) to the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.[57]

As the civil war in Yemen raged on and ravaged an already very poor country, the tide shifted and the Houthis (a Shiite group backed by Iran) became the dominant force in the country. It was at this point that apparently North Korea decided it would be much more profitable to support them than to support a government that had publicly stated it no longer wanted to work with Pyongyang. In 2015, South Korean intelligence confirmed that the North Koreans had supplied missiles that were now being launched into Saudi Arabia. Saudi officials assessed the missiles had been supplied to the Houthis by Iran—which is probably at least partially true.[58] According to a UN Panel of Experts report from 2019, North Korea was in a deal to sell ballistic missiles to the Houthis (likely improved versions with longer ranges than the original Scud C).[59] There is nothing mentioned in any report about North Korean trainers or advisors on the ground assisting the Houthis—but someone would have to do this. Thus, it is likely that the Iranians (as alleged by the Saudis) were playing this role. Iranians have been heavily involved in Houthi decision making.[60] The North Koreans also reportedly have been supplying the Houthis with a variety of conventional weapons. To quote *Open Democracy*, an independent, global media association, "the weapons intended for Yemen range from light weapons such as Kalashnikovs through general-purpose machine guns, anti-tank missiles and shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles right up to tanks and ballistic missiles. The transit route has been primarily through a Syrian-registered company, the Consulting Bureau for Marketing, headed by a Syrian arms trader, Hussein al-Ali."[61]

North Korea has proven that ideology has little to do with its arms sales and military support. Yemen is an important case study in this. The previous government that Pyongyang provided missiles to was actually an ally of the United States. Pyongyang's current ally in Yemen, the Houthis, are often thought of as a surrogate of Iran.[62] Is Iran paying for the military support that North Korea is supplying to the Houthis? I think that of that there can be no doubt. If not all of it, then a very big portion. In addition, Iranian advisors and North Korean specialists are also likely working on the ground (or have in the recent past) in Yemen. It would be nearly impossible to conduct the missile mission without doing so. Thus, the Houthis are just one more aspect of Iran's hybrid warfare that has been and likely will continue to be supported by the North Koreans.

Conclusions and Implications

Watching North Korea's actions in the Middle East is a long and fascinating endeavor. The North Koreans were able to use their Cold War connections to enable relationships that would be very profitable for North Korea in the post-Cold War era—especially with countries like Syria. The benefactor has been replaced. The Soviet Union was replaced by Iran as the financial powerhouse for military and terrorist action once the Cold War ended. North Korea's most profitable and compelling relationship in the Middle East is with Iran. But Iran's "Hybrid Warfare" involves extensive use of proxy state and non-state actors. It also involves giving a great deal of financial support to these proxies. Because North Korea is providing much of the military support to these entities, this has been a significant boost to North Korea's military/industrial complex, which consists largely of copies of old Soviet era weaponry. This is perfect for fighting a hybrid war—and North Korea has been able to use this for its full financial and military advantage.[63]

What does all of this mean? First of all, it means North Korea will sell anything to anybody—including terrorist groups. Secondly, it means the governments of Israel and the U.S. must consider North Korea's military proliferation an existential national security threat and more proactive means of thwarting it must immediately commence. Third, it means that North Korea's strong ties to Iran also equate to strong ties to proxy state and non-state actors that Iran supports. Thus, the road to destroying North Korea's illicit arms networks in the Middle East runs through Iran.[64]

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[63] This essay will be published as a chapter in a book scheduled for release in the Spring of 2025, entitled, *Rogue Allies: The Strategic Partnership between Iran and North Korea* (University of Kentucky Press).

[64] Most of the information in the section on Hamas and in the concluding paragraph of this chapter was originally published as a piece in *1945*. Republished here with permission of the editor. The author would like to thank Mr. Harry Kazianis, the editor of *1945*. See: Bruce E Bechtol Jr, "Hamas Is Using North Korean Weapons Against Israel," *1945*, October 24, 2023, URL: https://www.19fortyfive.com/2023/10/hamas-is-using-north-korean-weapons-against-israel/