North Korea's Arming of the Revisionist Middle East: How Effective?

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Abstract

Since the United States and Israel went to war with Iran in February 2026, press coverage has largely ignored North Korea's decades-long role in building the capabilities Iran and its proxies have used against the United States, Israel, and Arab states. This article traces that proliferation. It shows how North Korean Scud, No Dong, and Musudan technology evolved into Iran's Qiam, Shahab-3, Emad, Ghadr, and Khorramshahr missiles, and how cooperation on an 80-ton rocket booster tied to the Hwasong-12/14/15 likely gave Tehran advanced IRBM and ICBM technology. It also examines North Korean contributions to Iran's fast attack craft, Ghadir-class mini-submarines, and hardened underground missile and nuclear facilities. The article then follows Pyongyang's support for Iran's "encirclement" strategy against Israel: chemical weapons and Scud missiles for Assad's Syria, tunnel networks for Hezbollah and Hamas, rockets and anti-tank missiles used in the October 7, 2023 attacks, and missiles and conventional arms for the Houthis. It concludes that although the encirclement strategy has proven a military failure, Iran and its surviving proxies will likely turn again to North Korea to rearm, making disruption of Pyongyang's supply networks essential to stability in the Middle East.

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Keywords: North Korea, Iran, ballistic missile proliferation, arms transfers, encirclement strategy, Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, Syria, underground facilities

Introduction

Since the United States and Israel war with Iran began on February 28, 2026, there has been a great deal of spin by various analysts and pundits in the press about the threat Iran presents to the region and to the United States. But when it comes to what we have seen since this conflict started, after a review of the reporting in news outlets in the United States, Europe, and even East Asia, I have been unable to find any mention—zero—of

North Korea's proliferation to Iran over a period of many years and how that has contributed to the capabilities we see Iran using in combat against US forces, Israel, and Iran's Arab neighbors. Thus, I believe it will be important to describe the capabilities that North Korea has proliferated to Iran, and how these capabilities have been used—particularly to present a threat to the US and its allies.

Also important in the conflict with Israel that began on October 7th, 2023 (through Tehran's Hamas proxies) was Iran's "encirclement" strategy. This strategy used Iranian proxy forces to attack Israel. These forces—all of them—were also supplied by North Korea, often by using Iran as a conduit and sometimes receiving arms and training by dealing directly with Pyongyang and/or collaborating with the Iranians to do so. Thus, in this paper I will address not only the role Iran played in combat in the October 7th and post-October 7th violence, but the key role North Korea played with key proxies prosecuting kinetic operations against Israel. These key Iranian proxies included Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. The information I discovered and will now articulate is both telling and compelling.

Iran: What Kind of Missiles did Tehran Launch at Israel?

Perhaps the most important threat from Iran as the war with the United States and Israel has evolved has been the ballistic missiles, launched not only at US facilities and Israeli cities, but also at neighboring Islamic countries. Thus, it is important to consider this capability and where Iran got it. The short-range ballistic missiles that Iran has launched at key US facilities and at neighboring Arab states include a key system—the "Qiam." The Qiam was developed and improved with North Korean assistance. The story goes like this: North Korea first supplied Scud Bs and later Scud Cs to Iran in the late 1980s. The North Koreans had shipped about 200 Scud Cs to Iran by 1994.[1] The Iranians further contracted with Pyongyang to build a Scud C facility. But the facility still needed North Korean missile components and technical assistance. From this facility also came the "upgrade" to the Scud C, called the Qiam—now a widely used Iranian missile against targets within its range (up to 800 kilometers). In addition, according to the *Wisconsin Project*, "North Koreans reportedly helped build a large missile test facility at Emamshahr and a tracking facility at Tabas."[2]

For targets farther away from Iran and out of the range of its SRBMs the Iranians also turned to North Korea. Enter the No Dong. The North

Koreans proliferated around 150 No Dong systems to Iran in the late 1990s.[3] The Iranians were apparently very happy with the missiles the North Koreans provided them, and following the earlier precedent of the Scud C factory, contracted with Pyongyang to build a No Dong facility in Iran.[4] Of course, much like the assemblage of the Scud C (which evolved into the Qiam), North Korean components and North Korean assistance was needed in the process to manufacture the missiles "indigenously" in Iran. The Iranians called this "new" missile the Shahab-3.[5] The Shahab-3 is almost an exact copy of the No Dong. Once the Shahab-3 was up and running, the North Koreans moved forward with the Iranians in improving its range and lethality. With assistance from the North Koreans, the Iranians were then able to produce (at the No Dong facility) the Emad and the Ghadr.[6] The Emad has a range of 1,750 Kilometers and the Ghadr has a range of 1,950 kilometers.[7] The Iranians have used these two systems to target not only Israel, but their Arab neighbors (including US bases located in these countries) throughout the ongoing first stages of this conflict.[8] But wait, there is more…

Thus far I have addressed North Korea's proliferation of its Scud systems to Iran (evolving into the often used Qiam) and the longer range (able to hit Israel) No Dong system (evolving into the Ghadr and Emad)—also often used systems in the recent conflicts with Israel and the United States. But there is another system capable of hitting Israel that has been even more lethal (when it is able to somehow get through BMD) than any of the systems described thus far. This system is called the "Khorramshahr," and the fourth version of this system, appropriately called the "Khorramshahr-4," has been proven to carry a warhead larger than any other in Iran's missile inventory, armed with what appears to be "cluster munitions."[9] But where would such a missile—with a warhead weighing up to two tons—originate? Well, North Korea of course.[10] According to numerous press reports, and perhaps just as importantly, the US State Department on leaked cables published in WikiLeaks, the Iranians purchased 19 Musudan IRBM missiles from the North Koreans that were delivered in 2005.[11] The Musudan has a range of 3,500 to 4,000 kilometers.[12] The Iranian version has a much shorter range. But it also carries a much larger warhead than the original payload on the Musudan. Thus, the reported 2,000-kilometer range. If one is to simply do the physics, a larger warhead (much larger) with the same amount of thrust (the same engine as the Musudan), this equals a missile with a shorter range yet more lethality upon contact.[13] One could legitimately call this missile "son of

Musudan." It was—according to numerous reports—built with North Korean assistance.[14]

To add to the ongoing debate about the Khorramshahr and its use by Iranian forces, on March 20, 2026, the Iranians launched two missiles with IRBM range at Diego Garcia. One of the missiles apparently malfunctioned in flight, while the other missile was shot down by an American SM-3 system from a US warship. While there is debate among analysts and intelligence people about what type of missile was actually launched at Diego Garcia, the Khorramshahr is the only fielded and tested missile that the Iranians have in their inventory that possesses anything close to the range needed to target Diego Garcia.[15] It is important to remember, with a 500-kilogram warhead, most estimates place the maximum range of the Musudan at 4,000 kilometers—which would put Diego Garcia within its range.[16] Thus, using the same physics I used in the previous paragraph, the Iranians already had the missile (the "son of Musudan" if you will) with the range to target something as far away as Diego Garcia. They simply put a lighter warhead on the missile using an engine with the same thrust.

Thus far my text describes three important missile programs currently being used against the United States, Israel, and our Arab allies. These systems have derivatives of the Scud, No Dong, and Musudan systems. One can say that, quite literally, as North Korea has increased its capabilities, it has proliferated its capabilities to Iran. We are seeing these capabilities today as we observe these attacks.

But what of North Korea's ICBM capability? Has this also been passed on to Iran? To answer that question, I will provide an excerpt of my most recent book, *Rogue Allies: The Strategic Partnership between Iran and North Korea.*[17] In 2017, North Korea tested what they called the "Hwasong-12." This missile is an IRBM with a range of forty-five hundred kilometers (or more). It turns out, the Hwasong-12 is powered by a rocket engine reportedly based on an engine procured from the Ukrainians (according to the Ukrainians, illegally, under the table, and unknown to officials, or not at all), known as the RD-250.[18] This engine is reportedly powered by eighty tons of thrust at sea level, thus likely making it the system that was known (for several years) as the "eighty-ton rocket booster" that North Korea collaborated on and proliferated to Iran. Later in 2017, North Korea tested two ICBMs. The first, the "Hwasong-14" is assessed to be capable of hitting Anchorage in Alaska, while the second, the "Hwasong-15," is assessed by many analysts to be capable of hitting

the east coast of the United States. The Hwasong-12 is powered by a large single rocket motor, which, though it appears to be based on the RD-250, is not exactly like it as the RD-250 is powered by two thrusters. The Hwasong-12 appears to be the first stage of the Hwasong-14 two-stage ballistic missile. The Hwasong-15 appears to use a much more powerful engine as its first stage—one that looks very much like the actual RD-250. The first stage of the Hwasong-15 uses what looks like a complete RD-250 rocket motor with two thrusters (instead of the one-thruster unit used by the Hwasong-12/14). This engine has 80 tons of thrust at sea-level.[19] This is probably the system with the 80-ton rocket booster that the North Koreans are collaborating on with the Iranians.

North Korea began to assist Iran with the development of an 80-ton rocket booster (presumably for an ICBM) as early as 2013.[20] In 2015, further developments were revealed in the press, when it was disclosed that several shipments of the aforementioned rocket from North Korea to Iran had occurred even as JCPOA talks were ongoing.[21] In 2016, following the conclusion of the JCPOA talks, the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Iranian companies and individuals for violations of sanctions imposed on North Korea. To put a finer point on it, North Korean and Iranian officials had exchanged visits. This was done so that Iran could procure an eighty-ton rocket booster for a missile that North Korea was developing at the time. The names and companies (including front companies) involved are in the actual Treasury Department document.[22]

While not gaining much attention in the American press, other important information has come to light in recent years regarding the North Korea—Iran strategic relationship. In August of 2018, Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif welcomed a group of North Korean officials led by Ri Yong-ho. The officials reportedly talked about "bilateral relations and regional issues in the Middle East."[23] According to press reports in 2019 citing the UN Panel of experts, "The presidents of top North Korean regime arms firms, KOMID, which exports equipment for ballistic missiles and other weapons, and Green Pine, which sells conventional arms, recently traveled to Iran, according to air passenger documents cited by the report by the U.N. panel. A U.N. member state informed the panel that the two North Korean arms firms—which are both blacklisted by the United Nations—are 'extremely active in Iran now,' Hugh Griffiths, coordinator of the U.N. panel assessing sanctions on North Korea, told NBC News in an exclusive television interview."[24]

On September 21, 2020, the US Treasury Department sanctioned several entities and individuals active in Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Among them was Seid Mir Ahmad Nooshin, who was "key to negotiations with the North Koreans on long-range missile development projects."[25] In related analysis to the aforementioned sanctions by the US Treasury Department, in 2021 it was disclosed that according to the UN Panel of Experts, North Korea had resumed actual shipping of technology and parts to Iran for long-range missile projects. The information in 2021 stated, "Citing information from a member state, the U.N. report noted that the cooperation included "the transfer of critical parts," with the most recent shipment taking place in 2020."[26] It appears that if there was a "lull" in North Korean military cooperation and assistance to Iran, it didn't last for very long. But there is more to this picture. North Korea appears to currently be cooperating with Iran when it comes to both China and Russia.

What does this mean? It almost undoubtedly means North Korea collaborated on and then proliferated a system to Iran that was then tested in 2017—first as an IRBM and then (using the rocket from the first test as the first stage of one of the ICBMs) as two separate ICBM systems. If this is the case—and it most certainly appears that it is—this means that North Korea has proliferated an IRBM (based on the RD-250 engine) to Iran, and if they have also proliferated the associated technology from the Hwasong-14/15, they have now given Iran both an advanced IRBM capability and an ICBM capability.[27] It also means that when it comes to ballistic missile technology, North Korea has now proliferated Scud, No Dong, Musudan, Unha, and Hwasong 12/14/15 technology to Iran—updating Iran's missile capabilities as they update their own.[28]

North Korean Contributions to Naval Capabilities Targeting America's Forces

The almost dizzying amount of proliferation that North Korea has conducted of ballistic missiles with Iran over a period that has lasted more than 40 years is quite compelling. But there are other important aspects of proliferation that Pyongyang has engaged in with Iran. One of them is naval craft. Fast Attack Craft (FAC) have been a major irritant in the waters off the coast of Iran for more than 20 years. According to a publication of the Office of Naval Intelligence published in 2017, "Between 1996 and 2006, the IRGCN received approximately 46 FAC of various classes from China and North Korea. Depending upon the platform, they are equipped with torpedoes, short-range anti-ship cruise missiles

(ASCM), or both, and can reach speeds of 40-50 knots. The North Korean procurement effort included four distinct classes of torpedo boats, two of which are submersible/semisubmersible. Both Chinese classes include short-range ASCMs. Iran has copied the North Korean Peykaap-class boat and is domestically producing it as a missile boat with Nasr (C704) ASCMs."[29]

As most Korea watchers know, a North Korean Yono-class mini-sub sank the South Korean Corvette, *Cheonan*, in 2010. What some may not realize is that North Korea proliferated this same class of submarine to Iran (several of them). The North Koreans then built a fabrication facility ("factory") for the Iranians where they could "indigenously" produce it themselves. By the time the war broke out in March of this year, the Iranians had at least 14 Yono-class submarines—called Ghadir-class craft in Iran.[30] It is unclear how many of the FAC or submarine craft have been sunk since the war with Iran. It is likely that many of them are at the bottom of the sea already. But what is clear is that North Korea proliferated these naval craft to Iran.

North Korea's Contributions to Iran's Underground Facilities

The other military capability related to the current conflict is North Korea's underground complex building capabilities. Pyongyang has—for many years—assisted Iran in building underground complexes. There are two key ways they have done this: 1) underground missile facilities,[31] and 2) underground nuclear facilities—specifically at Natanz and Isfahan. It was because of the skill and expertise with which North Korea built the facilities at Natanz and Isfahan, that it took United States B-2 bombers to take them out.[32] As of the writing of this piece, there are still underground missile facilities that remain active. There is no doubt that the reason these facilities remain such a difficult challenge for both United States and Israeli aircraft is because of the assistance North Korea provided Iran in building them.

Compelling Conclusions on Pyongyang's Military Contributions to Iran

It should be very clear from this piece that North Korea has been knee-deep in providing military capabilities to Iran since the early 1980s. This has been an ongoing effort and in fact it was going on right up until the start of the latest conflict. To quote a scholar from the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, "Ever since June

2025, Iran has been vigorously working to recover the capabilities it lost in those 12 days. The missile industry received new equipment from China, North Korea and perhaps also Russia with which to renew production."[33] Indeed, former UN Panel of Experts member Neil Watts was quoted on an *Iran Watch* podcast in 2021: "Neil describes the 'close working relationship' between Iran and North Korea on ballistic missile development, notably 'leapfrog technologies' from North Korea that have allowed Iran to qualitatively increase its ballistic missile capabilities. From complete missile systems in the 1980s and 1990s, to more recent transfers of subcomponents, software, test data, and technical expertise, these transfers have helped Iran further its goal of self-sufficiency in missile production."[34]

North Korea has been a key strategic ally to Iran in a relationship that has revolved around proliferation. Once Iran's critical systems have been destroyed or rendered non-combat effective, North Korea will lose a key customer. One thing is for sure: An American forces departure from combat operations in Iran without the Theocratic regime going down will mean that North Korea will simply move in re-supply/re-build systems and facilities for Iran. There is precedent for this. It's what happened after the "12-Day War."[35]

What Does Assad's Fall Mean for North Korea?

Since the fall of the Assad regime the Israeli Air Force has launched attacks on numerous strategic military facilities. Included in these facilities are chemical weapons facilities and ballistic missile sites.[36] It is established in open sources that these facilities are for either development and/or weaponization of chemical weapons, or for the matching up of these weapons with their launching platforms—typically Scud missiles or 122mm multiple rocket launchers. What we are not seeing in the press for the most part is the North Korea connection. In fact, Syria would not have the weapons or the missiles or even most of the multiple rocket launchers (in other words both the weapons and the platforms) without one of their key suppliers: the North Koreans.

North Korea began proliferating chemical weapons capabilities to the Syrians at least as early as the early 1990s. In fact, North Korean scientists and technicians assisted the Syrians in developing several of their chemical weapons facilities. In 2005 the Syrians reportedly used North Korean provided Scud missiles to test North Korean provided air-burst chemical weapons.[37] The North Koreans did not stop there. Throughout

the Syrian civil war the North Koreans remained to assist Syria with its chemical weapons procurement, manufacture, and deployment of chemical weapons, and the UN Panel of Experts Report from March of 2018 stated that there were at least 39 illicit shipments from North Korea to Syria between 2012 and 2017—shipments that contained items such as "acid-resistant tiles, valves and pipes."[38] In other words, despite Syria's claims that it ended its chemical weapons program in 2013, it did not. And its chief supplier was North Korea.

Of danger to Israel, many of these weapons remained in Syria after the war subsided (until the recent overwhelming violence that just threw the Assad family out of power) and the Syrians (along with Iranians and North Koreans) were even assisting Hezbollah in the development and storage of these weapons during 2022.[39] Thus, the need for Israel to destroy Syria's chemical weapons facilities now that they had fallen into the hands of a radical and unpredictable government was quite compelling. Immediately following the fall of the Assad government, the Israeli Air Force conducted at least 400 airstrikes against what was described as strategic military targets. In a statement released to the press, the IDF said, "Within the last 48 hours, the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) struck most of the strategic weapons stockpiles in Syria, preventing them from falling into the hands of terrorist elements."[40] The facilities destroyed likely included the ballistic missile and chemical weapons facilities that the North Koreans proliferated to the Assad government.

North Korea began proliferating Scud C missiles to Syria after the first Gulf War in 1991. The North Koreans and the Syrians entered a deal where Pyongyang would deliver at least 150 Scud C missiles for the bargain price of $150 million. The first missiles reportedly arrived in March of 1991 and included launchers. There were other shipments later in the year and the following year and Syria eventually received close to the number of missiles they had paid for from the North Koreans.[41] The North Koreans also built fabrication facilities for the Syrians for Scud C missiles.[42] Of course these facilities could not operate without North Korean parts and North Korean technical assistance.

North Korea also sold Scud D ballistic missiles to Syria. Early tests were detected during 2000, 2005, and 2007. The North Koreans appear to have been at all of the tests, and the testing also included the use of live chemical munitions. The first known use of the Scud D missiles in the Syrian civil war was in 2012 when the Syrian army used it against insurgents.[43] Of note, during the many years of the Syrian civil war, as Iran,

Russia and Hezbollah were assisting the Syrian army, another key way of launching chemical weapons was by using 122mm multiple rocket launchers (improvised for chemical weapons use with the assistance of the North Koreans). This proved successful and thus deadly for opponents of the Syrian army.[44]

It is clear that North Korea supplied, then re-supplied the Syrian military with chemical weapons, the platforms to carry them (Scud C, D, and 122mm multiple rocket launchers), and the necessary materials to maintain an "industry" that could continue to upgrade and produce these weapons. This was happening before the early stages of the civil war and was ongoing until at least 2022. Thus, the necessity of destroying these facilities and weapons systems cannot be doubted. At least the Syrians did not directly attack the Israelis with these systems. With the new government in power in Damascus, there is no such guarantee for Israel's security.

And what does this mean for the North Koreans? Perhaps most importantly, it means the loss of an important consumer of both conventional and unconventional weapons. Syria has been a consumer of North Korean systems since roughly the late 1960s. That is over now. The same might be said for both Hezbollah and Hamas. Both used North Korean weapons against Israel. Both used North Korean assistance to build important underground facilities and tunnels (now largely destroyed). This leads to the question: will these two entities now try to reconstitute themselves with the support of the North Koreans (and others including Iran)? One hopes that can be prevented, but it will take definitive action. With a key consumer of its proliferated military systems gone now that Assad is out, North Korea will once again be looking to "sell its wares" elsewhere in the Middle East.[45]

Perhaps as importantly as anything else, Syria served as a major conduit for arms flowing into Hezbollah from Iran or elsewhere.[46] The Assad government was actively involved in seeing that these arms reached Hezbollah, exacerbating the threat to Israel. While the new government in Damascus is certainly anything but "pro-Israel," it is highly unlikely that it will continue the cozy relationship with Iran and North Korea that not only supplied arms and training, but also used the government in Damascus to funnel systems to Hezbollah that could be used in deadly attacks against Israel. This will be a key factor in future events that impact the region. If Iran's proxies find it difficult to receive the systems that can attack Israel, new methods will have to be used. Thus, the fall of the Assad

government could cause huge ramifications for Iran's "encirclement strategy" and the results of this will rate very important observation and analysis.

North Korea's Hezbollah Connection

As we watched Israel go into Lebanon with ground forces during October of 2024, it is important to understand that this would not be necessary unless Hezbollah had a vast network of tunnels (their second one) that prevented destruction from purely air power. To destroy or degrade Hezbollah's military ability to continue attacking Israel's citizens the IDF had to send in land forces to attack them underground. This military paradigm shift, which started in the 2006 war and was on steroids for the conflict that occurred in 2024, would not exist were it not for the expertise, engineering (to include special equipment), advisors, and technicians of North Korea. Hezbollah paid Pyongyang's Korea Mining Development Corporation (KOMID) $13 million to build this 45-mile-long tunnel network. Now we see it in combat thanks to North Korean military proliferation and Hezbollah's unending appetite for launching rockets into towns in northern Israel.

Numerous reports following the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war provides evidence that Hezbollah's underground facilities were constructed under North Korean supervision and advice in 2003-2004. The tunnels constructed contained among other things, dispensaries, arms dumps, and food stocks.[47] This significant tunnel network was far more robust than Israeli forces anticipated as they prosecuted combat operations against Hezbollah in 2006. To quote an article in the Israeli press, "Hizbullah's military bases, armories, bunkers and communications networks were much more extensive than Israel's intelligence services estimated on the eve of the 2006 war."[48] Other reporting based on testimony from a former IRGC officer states, "With the assistance of several Iranian engineers and technicians, as well as North Korean experts, who traveled to Lebanon disguised as servants for the Iranian embassy and its officers, Hezbollah has successfully built a 25km long underground belt, with 12-meter openings along it, the officer added. Every four openings are connected to one another through an easily accessible passageway."[49] But this system Hezbollah used in 2006 was only the beginning.

In 2021 a very important report from the Alma Research Center in Israel revealed Hezbollah had built another larger tunnel system—with the assistance of the North Koreans of course (and the Iranians). Hezbollah

agreed to a $13 million deal with KOMID (North Korea's primary proliferation front company) to build a 45-kilometer tunnel system, reportedly much longer and more sophisticated than the first tunnel system, connecting several key nodes in Lebanon. The North Koreans had already been paid $6 million by 2013, and the tunnel system appears to have been completed by 2021. As the Alma publication articulates in the report, "In our estimation, the cumulative length of all the tunnels in the "Land of the Tunnels" can reach up to hundreds of kilometers. Hezbollah tunnels, like Hamas tunnels, contain underground command and control rooms, weapons and supply depots, field clinics and specified designated shafts used to fire missiles of all types (rockets, surface-to-surface missiles, anti-tank missiles and anti-aircraft missiles). These shafts are hidden and camouflaged and cannot be detected above ground.[50]

What the evidence presented above shows us is that Hezbollah has been building up in anticipation of its next conflict with Israel. Clearly, they were enabled in this process by support from North Korea and Iran. It is also important to note that these tunnels were a key factor, perhaps the key factor in Israel's decision to bring ground forces into the conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanese territory. The tunnels not only gave Hezbollah longer sustainment, but the ability to move forces and equipment from combat zone to combat zone without being seen by IDF aircraft or other intelligence collection methods. Thus, North Korea has been a key aspect of Hezbollah's military capabilities and logistical flexibility. There was quite simply no other way of going after attacking Hezbollah forces except to take out this extensive and sophisticated tunnel system—and that took ground troops.

This is yet another example of the fact that North Korea's fingerprints are all over the violence in the Middle East that has occurred since October 7, 2023. There is now definitive evidence that North Korea supplied Hamas with F-7 RPGs, 122mm rockets and launchers, and the "Bulsae" anti-tank guided missile system, as well as other small arms.[51] Pyongyang has supplied the Houthis with both conventional weapons and ballistic missiles, and Iran (its biggest customer) with the same—including the genesis of missile systems and engines that attacked Israel throughout 2024.[52]

Despite a plethora of evidence, the United States government has yet to acknowledge the involvement of North Korea in the violence that is ongoing in the Middle East. The reasons for that are almost unexplainable. There has been no hesitation to address North Korea's proliferation to

Russia. But why no discussion of Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah? Unless or until the United States engages in more robust enforcement of existing sanctions and publicly announces North Korea's role in the current violence in the Middle East, Pyongyang will continue to engage in these financially lucrative, sanctions busting activities.[53]

North Korean Proliferation to Hamas

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.[54] 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 had changed. The threat from Hamas had proven to be so horrifying that most agreed it needed to be completely destroyed. The terrorist attacks against civilians and targeting civilian communities in Israel were 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 showed 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.[55] 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 the deal 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,[56] 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.[57]

And what of the actual capabilities that North Korea has contributed to Hamas? According to sources within the South Korean JCS, "some of the multiple rocket launchers found near the Israel border that Hamas militants reportedly used had "Bang-122" written in Korean." The 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," said a JCS official. "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. [58] 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."[59] The "Bulsae" is a laser-guided ATGM that had the potential to be effective against Israeli armor as it moved through a ground campaign in Gaza. It was also reportedly used by Hamas forces in the attacks on October 7th, 2023.

Also used during the October 7th attack were the Type-58 rifle (the North Korean version of the AK-47) and the Type-73 machine gun (the North Korean version of the SKS). The North Koreans proliferated their own copycat versions of Russian MANPADS to Hamas, and the system was detected attacking Israel a few months after the attack on October 7th. A shipment of MANPADS reportedly bound for Hamas and Hezbollah was interdicted in Thailand in 2009 and further shipments likely put the weapon into the hands of the two terrorist groups soon thereafter. But

North Korean MANPADS were not reported in the initial large-scale attack on October 7th.[60]

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."[61] These tunnels continue to be a major challenge to the IDF and will continue to be a challenge to a ground campaign in Gaza.

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 US 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.[62]

North Korean Proliferation to Yemen: Then, Now, and in Relation to October 7th

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 essay) 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, yet now is a confirmed supplier of weapons and training to the Houthis—who overthrew the previous government and now are 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 2000's North Korea provided military support (for a price) to the government of President Ali Abdullah Saleh.[63]

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 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.[64] 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).[65] 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.[66] The North Koreans also reportedly have been supplying the Houthis with 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."[67]

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.[68] 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.[69] 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.

Conclusion

The results of the "encirclement" strategy that Iran carried out beginning on October 7th, 2023, and largely ending when the 12-Day War came to a conclusion during the summer of 2025 are quite compelling. Iran has—in every way—proven that its military is largely a paper tiger compared to the IDF. The Assad government has fallen in Syria, largely because Iranian and Hezbollah forces could not come to its aid this time as they did during the Syrian civil war. The military power of Hamas and Hezbollah is broken. The Houthis remain defiant but largely subdued (at least for now). Thus, the Iranian strategy, which it has built and implemented since the end of the war with Iraq, has proven to be an abject failure. But the new paradigm that now exists in the Middle East leaves challenges and questions for future military planning and foreign policy.

Despite the fact that Hezbollah's military capabilities have been greatly downgraded, the terrorist group likely remains focused on reconstituting its ability to attack and terrorize Israel. Where would they get these arms and technological support from? Of course, the answer is Iran. Since Iran gets many of its conventional weapons from North Korea, then passes them along to its proxies, this means there is likely going to be an increase in demand for North Korean-made weapons. The challenge for Israel will be to shut down shipment routes and money laundering entities. The challenge for Hezbollah will be the fact that their key conduit in enabling Iranian shipments to their arsenal is now gone (the Assad regime). [70] Thus, monitoring and shutting down illicit proliferation activities relating to Hezbollah will be a real challenge in coming years as the group makes attempts to bring back its military capabilities.

Hamas appears to be largely broken militarily. That could change. But if it does, or if the remnants of Hamas morph into another terrorist organization, they will still need to be supplied with conventional military weaponry and training. Thus, this also bears watching and vigilance. The Houthis are another matter as they continue to exist (thought degraded largely from American and Israeli air attacks) as a relevant and trouble making entity in the region. Shipments and illegal financial transactions are likely to continue as the Houthis don't look like they are going anywhere—at least for now.

And what of the kingpin in all of this planned violence and terrorism—Iran? The culmination of the violence promulgated, planned and financed by Iran that began on October 7, 2023, was the "12-Day War." The results of that war were quite compelling. Fourteen of Iran's key nuclear scientists

were killed; important nuclear facilities were largely destroyed. Natanz, Isfahan, and Fordow look to be so badly damaged that it will take several years to rebuild them and reconstitute nuclear weaponization capabilities. Other centrifuge facilities were also heavily degraded. The IDF has reported that 65 percent of Iran's missile launchers and around 1,000 ballistic missiles have been destroyed.[71] The Israeli air force clearly targeted weapons that could be used against the Jewish state. The ongoing results from the war with America in 2026 have appeared to be even more compelling. Thus, the question to be asked is, is this the end of Iran's nuclear weaponization and terrorism supporting activities? The likely answer is no.

Iran is undoubtedly going to attempt to re-arm both itself and its proxies. Iran is much closer to both Russia and China now more than ever in the history of the "post-shah government." But Russia is very busy with its own munitions industry attempting to subdue Ukraine. In fact, in this effort the Russians have been forced to turn to North Korea for much of their arms effort. This is especially true for artillery, rockets, and ballistic missiles. The same likely holds true for Iran. While China will probably provide them with some (purchased) weaponry, there can be almost no doubt that Iran will once again turn to their proliferator of over 40 years to reconstitute their military capabilities—North Korea. Thus, we must understand that the North Korean proliferation threat in the Middle East over the next few years is likely to be as robust and compelling as it ever has been. Policy makers and strategists would be wise to remember this.

Finally, it must be noted; as the war with America and Israel ends and US forces make a large-scale withdrawal from the Middle East, one thing is for sure. If the theocratic government in Iran remains in power they will need to once again turn to North Korea to rebuild, resupply, and reconstitute their military forces. If America and its allies do not stop North Korea's supply chain to Iran and its proxies, the violence and instability in the Middle East will continue to be enabled by a steady flow of arms generated from the Kim regime.

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