

North Korea and Syria: Partners in Destruction and Violence

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North Korea and Syria have a long history of military cooperation. Most of this cooperation has been in the form of North Korean proliferation of weapons, training, assistance, and advisors. North Korea has assisted Syria in at least two forms of WMD—a chemical weapons program, and a plutonium nuclear weaponization program. While both of these programs have been largely destroyed, Syria will likely rebuild its chemical weapons program with North Korean assistance if not deterred by the international community. Conventional weapons are also an international security issue, as North Korea has proliferated a large number of weapons systems that have been used in the Syrian civil war by the Syrian army and Hezbollah fighters. North Korea has been a vital supporter of the Assad regime's military throughout the Syrian civil war. Korean analysts should take note of how chemical weapons were used in the Syrian civil war because this is likely going to be a test-bed for future North Korean actions in a conflict with the South.

Keywords: North Korea, proliferation, chemical weapons, Scud, ballistic missiles, North Korea–Syria

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The Middle East has been a hotbed of violence and instability since the Arab Spring burst upon the scene. Some countries (such as Libya and Yemen) have now essentially become failed states, while others (such as Egypt) continue to be unstable. There are other nations mired in civil war. The nation-state that often comes to mind first is Syria. While Syria continues to be bogged down in a civil war as of the writing of this article, the international community has often posed the question of who is supplying the Assad regime with the weapons and support that is needed in order to fight the various groups who would seek to change the government in Damascus. While many have pointed to Russia and Iran (among others), there has been little reporting about the support and proliferation to the Assad regime in Syria that is generated by North Korea.¹ In fact, North Korea has been a constant source of both training and weapons for the Syrian military for many years, and it has increased in focus and tempo since the Syrian civil war began.

It will be the purpose of this article to address the longstanding relationship

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between the Assad regime (beginning with the older Assad) and the Kim family regime. This will be important because this relationship has been dependent on Syria's needs combined with the need for the regime in North Korea to generate cash and resources. Throughout this relationship there have been outside nations who have helped to enable it and provide support for an authoritarian government in Damascus that has long been noted for human rights abuses. It began during the Cold War with the USSR, and has continued, following the demise of the Soviet Union, with enabling actions from Iran (including cash). Thus, this paper will examine the history of the North Korea-Syria military proliferation relationship, and the impact it has had on current events.

Certainly one of the key concerns for policymakers and anyone interested in international geopolitics has been Syria's weapons of mass destruction (WMD). There has been a longstanding relationship (North Korea being mostly the seller, and Syria being mostly the buyer) between Pyongyang and Syria for a variety of WMD programs. Whether it is the aid in construction of a nuclear reactor that North Korea provided to Syria, the chemical weapons programs North Koreans have proliferated to Syria, or the Scud missiles that the Syrians now have in their large arsenal thanks to Pyongyang, these issues should be of key concern to policy makers. An analysis of the WMD programs that Syria has in place thanks to North Korean assistance will be a key section of this essay.

While WMD is of key concern to anyone with an interest in the Middle East or Northeast Asia, conventional weapons are also of key concern, particularly when Syria is mired down in a civil war. This will be an issue that this paper will cover. What weapons are going in and how are they being used? Few have asked this question, yet it will be answered in this essay.

North Korea (as we shall see) is not the only state or non-state actor that is providing weapons and/or support to the Syrian armed forces. A key aspect of this has been Hezbollah. Hezbollah fighters have played a key role in supporting Assad's military.² North Korea has been proliferating to Hezbollah for years, but in this essay, it will address how this has been stepped up due to the Syrian civil war, and what types of weapons and training North Korea has provided to this well-known terrorist group. Tied into this is the exact role that North Korea is playing in supporting the Syrian government and military in its quest to hold onto power and to quash the various rebel groups that are attempting to overthrow it (including ISIS). This will be the another key factor that the paper will address, and it will bring us up to the present regarding the ongoing concerns for stability and security, both in the Middle East and in Northeast Asia.

A Historical Look Back at the North Korea-Syria Military Relationship

The military relationship between Pyongyang and Damascus goes back many years. Originally subsidized by the Soviet Union, it was a relationship that involved military personnel filling vital combat roles, training key units for war and operations other than direct war (such as reconnaissance), and the proliferation of both conventional weapons systems and WMD. Now that the Cold War is over, the USSR no longer subsidizes this relationship. But Syria now has a need for military assistance and support perhaps more than it ever has in its history. Thus, the proliferation and military

assistance by North Korea to Syria continues, with external assistance from others.

Pyongyang officially established diplomatic relations with Syria in 1966.³ North Korea's military assistance to Syria goes back at least as far as 1967, when North Korean pilots assisted the Syrian air force during the Arab-Israeli war.⁴ It continued for many years after that (and continues today). According to Korean specialist Alexandre Mansourov, "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 to Damascus 75 Air Force instructors and 40 MIG pilots, 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 of whom were killed by the Israeli military. In 1984–1986 and 1990, fifty and 30 North Korean military instructors were sent to Syria, respectively."⁵ In addition, starting in the early 1970s and continuing into the Syrian civil war, North Korea supplied Syria with conventional weapons such as tanks, rifles, artillery, multiple rocket launchers (MRL), anti-tank weapons, etc. During the 1982 "Lebanon War," the Syrian army successfully and efficiently used 122mm BM-11 systems sold to them by the North Koreans to target civilians. Reportedly, around 25 North Korean soldiers were killed during this conflict when the Israelis destroyed one of the MRL systems.⁶ In later years, these 122mm MRLs had become very important for Syria and North Korea as will be described later.

There are other key historical factors that have (for many years) been important in the North Korea-Syria arms trade. In 2004, several Syrian technicians were killed on a train (in an apparent attempt to kill Kim Jong Il—who was not on the train). The explosion was created by a cell phone enabled explosion device and killed dozens of people on the train. The Syrians were employed by the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC)—the agency in charge of many of Syria's covert WMD-related programs. The Syrians killed were accompanying updated missile components and other materials (perhaps chemical weapons related), and were bound to accompany these materials to the North Korean port of Nampo for transshipment to Syria.⁷ North Korea is well known for having a large supply they have manufactured of such chemical materials as Sarin gas, chlorine, VX, and several others.⁸ This was during an era when North Korea was developing (programs that are now fully developed) both chemical and ballistic missile programs for Syria—programs that would largely be assembled in Syria, but with parts and assistance from North Korea. North Korea has long had an association with the SSRC—probably going back to the early 1970s.⁹

Personal relationships have also been very important throughout the North Korea-Syria military relationship. Perhaps the most important personal relationship between a high ranking North Korean military officer and counterparts in Syria is that of Kim Kyok Sik, who was a close personal confidant of Kim Jong Il and a family friend. In addition, he was also widely believed to be one of the most trusted advisors of the son, Kim Jong Un. The key here is that Kim Kyok Sik was a key player in the North Korea-Syria military arms/training relationship since 1971. It was then that he began serving as the deputy military attaché in the North Korean embassy in Damascus. An artillery officer, and an Arabic speaker, Kim was very

useful for setting up programs in Syria. He reportedly managed several key aspects of North Korea's military relationship with Syria. The projects he managed included helping to rehabilitate the Syrian armed forces in the 1970's, coordinating shipments of MRL systems—including the now infamous 122mm MRL systems (122 MRLs were used to attack Syrian citizens with chemical munitions during the Syrian civil war), and (in an important development that will be addressed in detail later), providing training and military support to non-state actors (Hezbollah among them). Kim Kyok Sik last visited Syria in 2013, and remained a key player in North Korea's dealings with Damascus until his death in May of 2015.¹⁰

Of note, while the USSR financed much of Syria's budget (and subsidized North Korea) during the Cold War, it appears that now (since the end of the Cold War), much (if not most) of Syria's cash to purchase weapons and advising comes from Iran.¹¹ Iran was not the only nation to fill the void left by the disintegration of the USSR. Saudi Arabia rewarded Syria for its participation in the Gulf War against Iraq with several billion dollars—a mighty stipend that the Syrians used largely to purchase Scud-Cs and production equipment from the North Koreans.¹²

Syria and North Korea have also had a very important diplomatic relationship. Kim Il Sung and Hafaz al-Assad had an important relationship that was mutually beneficial to both leaders during the height of the Cold War.¹³ The relationship continued as their respective successors, Kim Jong Il and Basher al-Assad, maintained good relations—and a robust proliferation and arms trade relationship.¹⁴ The strong relationship has continued in the Kim Jong Un era. As mentioned earlier, Kim Kyok Sik continued to play a role in maintaining good relations between North Korea and Syria, particularly when it comes to military affairs. During 2013, a Syrian diplomatic delegation officially visited North Korea (Syrians frequently visit North Korea because of arms deals, but these are events that get little to no publicity).¹⁵ The delegation once again affirmed the strong relationship between the two countries, officially.¹⁶ Meanwhile, in 2014, the Foreign Minister for North Korea, Ri Su Yong (also known as Ri Chol), met with Syrian President Assad. They also reaffirmed that the relationship would remain strong and that the two countries would continue to stand against the West, and make strong efforts to rebuild the Syrian landmass—war-torn by the ravages of civil war.¹⁷ Of one thing we can be sure, the long, mutually beneficial relationship between North Korea and Syria shows no signs of ending—or slowing down—anytime soon.

Nukes, Chemical Weapons, and Missiles: The DPRK's Proliferation of WMD to Syria

There has been much made of Syria's chemical weapons capabilities that have been used during the ongoing civil war. The capabilities that Syria possesses are important, but they are not capabilities that have come without a great deal of external support. In fact, all of Syrian capabilities for conducting warfare using WMD have come with a great deal of external support. Whether it is the nuclear weaponization capability that Israeli forces destroyed in 2007, the chemical weapons capabilities that may or may not have been largely destroyed by UN forces,¹⁸ or the variety of ballistic missiles that Syria continues to use against rebel forces (many of these missiles can and have been equipped with chemical warheads according to numerous reports), Syria has

shown the world that its government will not hesitate to add whatever form it can of WMD to its military inventory. High on the list of those nation-states who are supplying Syria with these capabilities is North Korea.

North Korea had been, as the definitive evidence now shows, cooperating on nuclear weaponization with Syria since the 1990s. In fact, the former Director of the CIA, Michael Hayden, made some very important references to the nuclear cooperation between North Korea and Syria to the World Affairs Council of Los Angeles in 2008. In referring to a plutonium reactor built by the North Koreans for the Syrians and destroyed by the Israeli Air Force in 2007, he said, "The depth of that relationship was revealed in the spring of last year. . . ." He went on to describe the evidence in more detail when he described the Syrian nuclear reactor as, "similar to Yongbyon in North Korea, but with its outer structure heavily disguised." Finally, he confirmed that the evidence regarding Syria's nuclear weaponization program and North Korean involvement was both diverse and clear cut when he said, "Virtually every form of intelligence—imagery, signals, human source, you name it—informed their assessments, so that they were never completely dependent on any single channel."¹⁹

But there is far more compelling evidence that tells us the story of North Korean proliferation of (quite literally) its plutonium nuclear weaponization program to Syria. According to a briefing given to the press by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, sources began to reveal a nuclear weaponization relationship between North Korea and Syria going all the way back to 1997. But during 2006, a facility in Syria that was under construction was identified. The next year, 2007, intelligence was collected showing key aspects of the interior and exterior of the facility, revealing it was a plutonium nuclear reactor. Of note, the facility actually closely resembled the facility at Yongbyon in North Korea! Photographs inside the facility showed a gas-cooled, graphite moderated reactor with a configuration very similar to the Yongbyon reactor.²⁰

Some of the evidence revealed to the press during 2008 was almost comical. For example, a tin roof and thin curtain walls were added to the facility after construction was complete in an attempt to change the building's outline which closely resembled the outline of the DPRK plutonium nuclear facility at Yongbyon (prior to the tin roof and curtain walls being added to alter the outside appearance of the facility in Syria). North Korean high-ranking officials made numerous visits to the facility once work began on it starting in 2001. Among these high-ranking officials was Chon Chi-bu, one of the key scientists in North Korea's nuclear weaponization program. In summary, as one of the intelligence officials stated at the press briefing, ". . . our information shows that Syria was building a gas-cooled, graphite-moderated reactor that was nearing operational capability in August 2007. The reactor would have been capable of producing plutonium for nuclear weapons. It was not configured to produce electricity and was ill-suited for research." The official finalized this statement by saying, "Only North Korea has built this type of reactor in the past 35 years."²¹

What likely spawned the attack on the Syrian (North Korean built) plutonium facility was the port call of a North Korean ship at Tartus. This port city has reportedly been the port of entry for missile components and other WMD associated materials that are then transferred overland to Iran. Later reports revealed that the cargo of the ship was 45 tons of yellow cake. The ship had originally departed Nampo, North Korea, and stopped at two different ports in China on its way to Syria. The ship arrived in Syria during September of 2007. The yellow cake may have eventually

ended up in Iran (instead of the facility in Syria).²²

As discussed earlier in this article, Iran has been the “financer” of many of the weapons programs used by the Syrian military, and certainly a huge part of the WMD under development or fielded in Syria. Apparently that was also the case with the plutonium nuclear reactor destroyed by the Israeli Air Force in 2007. According to an Iranian defector named Ali Reza Asghari, the Iranians financed much (if not all) of the building of the nuclear reactor for the Syrians. Ali Reza Asghari is a former general in the Iranian Republican Guard Corps. He is also the former Iranian deputy defense minister. Iran reportedly spent one to two billion dollars to finance the Syrian nuclear project, perhaps hoping to keep a plutonium program for Tehran “offshore.”²³

While the plutonium nuclear reactor in Syria destroyed by the Israeli air force was quite a disturbing development, a much more disturbing development that has been ongoing for many years is the support that the DPRK provides to Syria’s chemical weapons program. The North Koreans have proliferated chemical weapons programs to Syria, and have also brought Syrians to North Korea for training and weapons transfers.²⁴ On July 27, 2007, several Iranian advisors, Syrian technicians, and North Korean advisors were reportedly killed when they were loading a chemical warhead containing VX and Sarin onto a Scud missile for a test-launch. The missile and the warhead were either manufactured in North Korea or manufactured in Syria with North Korean assistance.²⁵ In 2009, a Syrian Scud D veered off course during a test-launch. The missile landed in the middle of a village, and ended up killing at least 20 people and wounding 60 more. The missile may or may not have had a chemical warhead. Reportedly participating in the test-launch gone wrong were both North Korean engineers and members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.²⁶

The North Koreans have reportedly been providing support and training for the Syrian chemical weapons program since at least the 1990s. Pyongyang is currently helping Syria to produce the precursors and is also providing chemical weapons parts to Syria. In addition, as mentioned earlier, North Korea has sold 122mm MRL systems to Syria, and is well known for assisting Damascus with its ballistic missile programs (as will be described later). The chemical weapons used by the Syrians have been launched either using ballistic missiles or 122mm MRL systems. Thus, North Korea has been—and continues to be—assisting Syria with both the chemical weapons, and the platforms that are used to launch them.²⁷

If one were to examine just how close the North Korea-Syria chemical weapons relationship is, there are many disturbing details that can be discussed. During 2013, an Israeli attack on a Syrian convoy of anti-aircraft weapons also damaged Syria’s key development center for WMD—the SSRC. This is a center that the North Koreans have been present at and served an active role in for many years, including during the Syrian civil war.²⁸ In fact, in an important report issued by a United Nations panel, an assessment was made that North Korea had in fact stepped up chemical weapons shipments and assistance to Syria—in no small part through the SSRC referenced earlier.²⁹ North Korea is now, and has been throughout its chemical weapons assistance program to Syria, even routinely providing “after sales services.” In other words, chemical weapons assistance from “cradle to grave.”³⁰ Indeed, as noted North Korean military capabilities analyst Joseph Bermudez has stated, “With regards to DPRK-Syria chemical weapons-related activity, reports originating in the Middle East indicate that there was an acceleration of such efforts beginning in early 2007. These reports identify the city of Aleppo as the center of this activity.”³¹ At the previously

mentioned SSRC, North Koreans have lived a life of luxury, in an exclusive compound that has manicured lawns, and a swimming pool. Compensation for North Korea's assistance to Syria's chemical weapons program is reportedly from both Syria and Iran—and Syria also barter agricultural goods and computers (barter is common in North Korea's compensation for proliferation to a variety of countries). According to press sources, North Korea, Syria, and Iran, have collaborated in the “planning, establishment, and management” of at least five Syrian chemical weapons facilities that are manufacturing precursors for chemical weapons.³²

The chemical weapons program has been a subject of debate and horror worldwide as the world watched Assad gas his own people. But very important to not only the chemical weapons program, but Syria's battlefield readiness and capabilities overall, is the robust ballistic missile program in this troubled nation's arsenal. One of the key supporters when it comes to missiles and missile components, training of personnel, refurbishment and re-supply of missiles, and matching missiles with chemical warheads, is North Korea. The North Koreans working on ballistic missiles at the aforementioned SSRC are working under the cover of the Tangun General Corporation (and other front companies), and are also often working with those who are chemical weapons specialists. North Koreans have provided support and supply beginning with Scud B missiles in the late 1980s.³³ But there is more to the WMD picture—the platforms that carry it (ballistic missiles being one of the key platforms).

As the Cold War was winding down, the tight relationship Damascus had with Moscow began to wane. Thus, Syria began looking to other nations as options for acquiring its ballistic missiles. North Korean official Yi Chong Ok traveled to Syria during 1990 in an effort to set up a new missile deal between Pyongyang and Damascus. By late 1990 thanks to money that Saudi Arabia donated to Syria for its efforts in the alliance against Iraq in the Gulf War (\$2 billion) Syria had the money to make a big deal with North Korea. The first big deal the two countries made for missiles was the sale of 150 Scud C missiles to Syria for \$500 million. North Korea also agreed to build two missile assembly facilities in Syria (thus reducing the amount of maritime shipping and/or aircraft deliveries that would have to be made). The North Koreans built facilities were completed by at least 1994, and continue to produce Scuds as of the writing of this article. During 1992, Syria conducted its initial Scud C test-launch. Many more test launches have followed over the years.³⁴

The Scud C was apparently not enough to satisfy the Syrian appetite for ballistic missiles. Thus during May of 2000, North Korea shipped its first set of Scud D systems to Syria. This was immediately followed up by a test launch of the Scud D during September of 2000.³⁵ In 2005, a test-launched Scud D missile went off course and landed inside the Turkish border. Upon examination by American intelligence specialists and missile experts, an assessment was reached that the missile contained components not contained in earlier models. In other words, it was an “improved” Scud D. This improved model was assessed by the experts who examined it, to have a range of 700 kilometers and a separating warhead. The warhead on the missile was proven to have a chemical warfare capability.³⁶

If one is to “fast-forward” to the present time, in 2013 North Korea began a large-scale project to refurbish and resupply Syria with ballistic missiles. The obvious reason being the many ballistic missiles used during the civil war meant Syria needed more missiles. North Korea is also working with Syria to (once again) improve the capabilities of the Scud D missile.³⁷ Syria has reportedly stepped up missile production

for two important reasons: 1) The ballistic missiles are an important aspect in combating rebel forces, and 2) Hezbollah has requested a need to acquire missiles and rockets.³⁸ Indeed, continued North Korean support to Syria's ballistic missile program is quite compelling. According to *Jane's Defence Weekly*, Syria is most dependent upon Iran and North Korea for the success of its ballistic missile program (and Iran gets much of its acquisition of missiles from North Korea). According to the respected British publication, the SSRC (discussed often thus far in this essay) is engaging in a "cooperative missile development program with North Korea to upgrade Syrian Scud D variant SSMs with a maneuvering re-entry vehicle (MaRV) capability (essentially bringing them closer in capability to the original Russian Scud D standard), in disregard of UN sanctions—Resolutions 1718 (2006) and 1874 (2009). . . ." The *Jane's* report goes on to state in part, "This variant is designated 'Scud MD' (Maneuvering D). The upgrade, which incorporates a bespoke canard system, will enable the MaRV of the 'Scud' to alter its original planned trajectory when it re-enters the atmosphere, significantly improving its accuracy and increasing warhead survivability by making its flight path problematical to assess for missile-defense interceptors."³⁹

Conventional Weapons Proliferation to Syria: A Vital Aspect of Assad's Survival

North Korea's assistance to Syria when it comes to chemical weapons and ballistic missiles is quite troubling to say the least. But the Syrian army is also fighting its civil war using a variety of conventional weapons. In addition, the conventional weapons tie in with the WMD when it comes to combat situations. For example, the 122mm system is a system supplied by North Korea to the Syrians for many years. But it is also the system that the UN inspectors have now proven to be one of the key platforms the Syrian army uses for launching chemical weapons attacks on the rebels.⁴⁰ The North Koreans have been there all the way—before the civil war, and no doubt after it is over (if Assad survives). Thus, it will be important to consider the various weapons systems that North Korea has provided to Syria over the years, and leading up to (and during) the ongoing civil war.

When it comes to conventional weapons that North Korea has supplied to Syria, the list is actually quite staggering. Since the beginning of their relationship in the late 1960s, and leading up to today, North Korea has supplied the Syrian military with rifles, artillery, mortars, machine guns, ammunition, bombs, armored vehicles, anti-tank weapons, and multiple rocket launchers, just to name a few.⁴¹ But these are not the only weapons systems that the North Koreans have provided to Syria. North Korea upgraded several hundred T54/55 tanks for the Syrians during the 1980s. While these tanks are not considered top of the line armor, they are relatively simple to operate and effective in combat. As Syria began to lose much of its armor in the war with the rebels, these older tanks have been recalled to duty. Confirmation that the North Korean variant of the T54/55 has been used on a large scale in combat occurred during 2014. The North Koreans are likely also assisting the Syrians in the maintenance and operations of these older tanks.⁴² In addition, photos during 2014 revealed Syrian rebels had captured—and were using—a North Korean variant of the Iгла-1E man portable air-defense system (MANPADS). The features of the system show that it can be nothing except a North Korean weapon, which means it was

proliferated to the Syrians and then captured by rebels.⁴³ Even as the civil war in Syria was raging into massive casualties for both sides, North Korea continued to supply “Vehicle parts, munitions component parts, and ordnance” to Syria, in shipments rushed into the troubled nation.⁴⁴ North Korea continues to ship as many conventional weapons to Syria as fast as it can get them there.⁴⁵

North Korea’s Role in the Syrian Civil War

While, as described earlier, it is a well-documented fact that the North Koreans and the Syrians have a mutually beneficial relationship going all the way back to Hafaz al-Assad and Kim Il Sung, North Korea’s role in providing arms, training, support, and even WMD to Syria has been played down by most governments in international geopolitics. The reasons for this remain unclear. In fact, North Korea’s support for the current Assad regime gets almost no notice, even in Congressional testimony. While this remains an unfortunate aspect of American priorities, it is also something that needs to be fixed. North Korea has become a key aspect of the support that the current Assad regime needs to survive and fight on against the rebels. The DPRK is also benefitting a great deal from the civil war in Syria. If a nation is fighting a war, it must use artillery, tanks, ballistic missiles, small arms of all kinds, ammunition, and yes (in the case of the Assad regime), WMD. As the war continues (if it does so), these expensive and vital items must be replaced and/or refurbished. Thus, Syria has gone from being one of North Korea’s most important customers for many years, to being almost on par with Iran as an important customer for Pyongyang.⁴⁶ In this section, this paper will address how all of the North Korean support and proliferation to Syria over the years has now reached an apex as the Syrian civil war rages on.

On July 24, 2013, Kim Jong Un met with a Syrian government delegation. At the meeting, he reportedly addressed how North Korea could increase support (of course for a price) to Syria in its ongoing civil war. In fact, during 2013, the North Koreans did in fact step up the number of advisers assisting Syria’s national defense. At facilities near Aleppo, North Koreans have played an important role in aiding the Syrians with engineering and construction, providing badly needed aid in repairing destroyed military infrastructure. North Korea has also assisted with operational planning, and played a role (even on the front lines) in advising Syrian combat artillery warfare.⁴⁷ The non-government dissident group *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* asserts that in 2013, there were 11 to 15 North Korean advisers serving in several places—largely in and around Aleppo. At least some of these advisers were reported to actually be serving with combat units on or near the frontlines.⁴⁸ Lebanese press sources claim there are, “. . . confirmed reports that officers from North Korea are present with regular forces, and aiding them with logistics and operational plans in Aleppo.”⁴⁹ The interesting facts regarding the wide variety of support functions North Koreans are providing in Syria continue with the reporting that North Korean military personnel are working with Iranian personnel (probably members of the IRGC), running an operations room for the Syrian military. The North Koreans and Iranians were reportedly collaborating on plans to increase the effectiveness of Syria’s air defense systems and to upgrade Syria’s missile effectiveness.⁵⁰ At the time—and now—Syria was using a large number of ballistic missiles in its

attacks on rebels, particularly Scuds.

In another move reminiscent of the Cold War, North Korean pilots are, according to several reports, flying combat sorties for the Syrian air force. According to several reports, there are up to 15 North Korean pilots flying in combat with the Syrians. It is unclear what type of rotary aircraft the North Korean pilots have been flying, but it appears that the helicopters are either Mi-2s or Mi-8s. This highlights the wide variety of missions and tasks that the North Koreans have taken on in support of the Syrian military, since there is already evidence that North Koreans are playing key roles in supporting both artillery and Scud missile units during the ongoing Syrian civil war.⁵¹ It appears that the reasons behind the augmentation of helicopter units by North Korean pilots is a shortage of trustworthy pilots (or pilots who are loyal to the Assad regime) in the Syrian air force.⁵² Whether it is that, or simply a shortage of trained pilots, North Korea's augmentation of air units with its own pilots is yet another disturbing aspect of its support to Syria in the ongoing civil war.

The North Koreans continue to benefit from both their missile and chemical weapons assistance to Syria during the civil war there. The North Koreans are reportedly assisting the Syrian military and its scientists and engineers, with integrating chemical weapons and precursors into actual missile warheads for Scud missiles. They have also played a major role in helping to repair damaged missiles, a key capability in any war. The same familiar players appear to be coordinating the whole effort—SSRC on the Syrian side, and the Tangun Trading Corporation on the North Korean side. These sanctions busting activities are important for North Korea, as is their continued assistance to the Syrians with upgrading their Scud D missiles.⁵³

North Korean Proliferation to Terrorists through Syria

North Korea has been providing assistance for many years to Hezbollah, and this has occurred in a variety of ways. Pyongyang has been known to use Iran as a conduit (Iran pays for much of Hezbollah's weapons and training), through Syria (it appears nearly as often as through Iran, but it also appears that Iran is footing much of the bill there too), and sometimes directly. The purpose of this section will be to touch on some of the key weapons systems and forms of assistance that North Korea provides to Hezbollah that go through Syrian operatives.

North Korean assistance to Hezbollah reportedly began during the 1980s when several key Hezbollah operatives had an extended visit for training in North Korea. The operatives, now well known to those follow Hezbollah and security issues in the Middle East, were Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general; security and intelligence chief Ibrahim Akil; and Mustapha Badreddine, head of counter-espionage operations. As one can imagine, this relationship likely began because of North Korea's longstanding ties to Iran.⁵⁴ While Hezbollah is now known for a variety of weapons system it has used both in the Syrian civil war, and against Israel, rockets have always been a major weapon of choice. The North Koreans (often through Syria) have been a long-time provider of components and/or actual complete systems of Katyusha, and Grad rockets.⁵⁵ To give a key example of the North Korea-Iran-Syria nexus when it comes to supplying arms to Hezbollah, one can turn to a piece written by Yonsei University professor Moon Chung-in, who makes the assertion that North Korea provided short-range missile components to Hezbollah. North Korea first

shipped the components to Iran. After arrival in Iran, the missile components were assembled at a facility there. Following assembly of the missiles, they were then transferred to Syria, and shipped from there into Lebanon for Hezbollah.⁵⁶

In another example of the North Korea-Iran-Syria nexus, and how it applies to Hezbollah, the M600 series rockets, a weapons system jointly produced by North Korea and Iran, come equipped with a 300-kilometer range. The rockets are supplied to both Hezbollah and Syria—and have likely been used in the civil war.⁵⁷ In a joint deal between North Korea and Syria, Damascus provides Hezbollah with the Kornet anti-tank missile. North Korea mass-produces the weapons, which are now used by both the Syrian army and Hezbollah.⁵⁸ Ballistic missiles may be the most disturbing example of North Korea's weapons ending up in the hands of Hezbollah thanks to the Syrian government. As with many of the deals taking place in the region, this deal appears to be financed by Iran.⁵⁹ As discussed earlier, North Korea built a missile-assembly facility for the Syrians where the Scuds are fabricated with the help of DPRK advisors. The North Koreans reportedly continue to advise the Syrians and help with the building of these missiles, including Scud Ds.⁶⁰ Hezbollah has now taken delivery of two Scud D platforms with a range of 700 kilometers. According to press sources, the deliveries occurred during 2010.⁶¹ There may have been more deliveries since then.

North Korea, largely through Syria (and Iran), has also supplied Hezbollah with small arms that are now likely being used by Hezbollah fighters in the Syrian civil war.⁶² Finally, a portion of the chemical weapons configured in Syria and assembled in the form of ordnance for 122mm MRLs and warheads for Scud missiles (with North Korean assistance), have now been removed from storage and transferred to Hezbollah units in the southern Beqaa valley according to a Syrian army defector.⁶³

Conclusion

North Korea's military capabilities, conventional, unconventional, and WMD, present a real threat to security and stability in Northeast Asia. But as this study has shown, the DPRK has also contributed, through proliferation, to the instability of another very important global region, the Middle East. North Korea's proliferation may have an ideological element, but we are kidding ourselves if we think this is the main reason Pyongyang proliferates to rogue states like Syria, and terrorist groups like Hezbollah.

This article has addressed North Korean proliferation to only one state actor, Syria. The fact that there is so much military proliferation to Syria that it rates an entire study is rather compelling if one is to think about it, because Syria is only one of several customers that North Korea has in the Middle East. The fact that this military proliferation rarely is in the headlines—even though it has an important impact on conflicts and potential conflict in the Middle East—is troubling. Thus, unless and until actions are taken that effectively stop or even slow North Korea's proliferation to the Middle East (and other global regions), we are likely to continue to see this rogue state behavior continue, or, as we have seen in Syria during its civil war, increase. North Korea has used Syria as its testing ground for platforms that launch chemical weapons, using 122mm MRLs and Scud missiles. Military planners should pay close attention because what we are seeing is an effective training and testing ground for future North Korean planning in a conflict with the South.

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