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# North Korea and the Middle East

Alon Levkowitz



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**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES  
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# North Korea and the Middle East

*Alon Levkowitz*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

North Korea poses a great challenge to international peace and security. It is truly a “rogue state” – a country that conducts nuclear tests in defiance of the UN Security Council, and that is willing to sell conventional and non-conventional weapons to other rogue regimes, including Israel's enemies. The nuclear cooperation between North Korea, Syria and Iran forces Israel into new alliances to counter this threat.



# North Korea and the Middle East

*Alon Levkowitz*

## INTRODUCTION

On September 6, 2007, Israeli Air Force (IAF) fighter jets destroyed the Deir ez-Zor nuclear site in Syria, built with North Korean assistance.<sup>1</sup> Dubbed Operation Orchard, the attack demonstrated Israel's policy of preventing any attempt by Middle Eastern states to acquire nuclear capabilities. It also confirmed that Pyongyang was exporting not just conventional weapons to the Middle East, but nuclear weapons that threaten Israel's national security.

Operation Orchard took place thirteen years after President Bill Clinton made the following statement about the nuclear agreement between the US and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (October 18, 1994):

Today, after 16 months of intense and difficult negotiations with North Korea, we have completed an agreement that will make the United States, the Korean Peninsula, and the world safer. Under the agreement, North Korea has agreed to freeze its existing nuclear program and to accept international inspection of all existing facilities.<sup>2</sup>

This agreement failed to prevent Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons. Nor was it the only mechanism to fail at halting the nuclear program. The Six-Party talks, as well as various bilateral and multilateral sanctions over the years, were all unable to sway the North Korean leadership from its nuclear pursuit. Moreover, since the 1994 agreement, North Korea has also developed its middle- and long-range missile program.

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This includes submarine-launched ballistic missiles that Pyongyang can use for export as well as to upgrade its deterrence capability.<sup>3</sup>

North Korean exports to the Middle East have included troops, who were sent to fight side by side with regional forces against Israel in the 1967 and the 1973 wars. North Korea constitutes a direct threat to Israel, as well as to the US and its allies in the region.

This paper analyzes Pyongyang's security relationship with Syria, Iran and the terrorist organizations in the Middle East, and addresses the policy options available to Israel for tackling these threats. It does so first by analyzing North Korea's defense policy, briefly discussing its nuclear and missile policy, and considering the reasons behind its military cooperation with the Middle East.

The paper goes on to analyze North Korea's relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran and with the paramilitary groups that are influenced and operated by Iran, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. The new nuclear agreement between Tehran and the P5+1 raises important questions about that relationship. Will Iran limit the security relationship with North Korea over concerns that it might appear to violate the spirit of the agreement? Or will Tehran continue to cooperate with Pyongyang by allowing it to be its nuclear "back door plan?"<sup>4</sup> In other words, could Iran manage to avoid violating the agreement while continuing to develop its nuclear program via North Korea?

The paper then turns to Pyongyang's relations with Damascus, with which it has extensive military relations. North Korea has sold missiles and other military equipment to Syria, including weaponry necessary to upgrade its missile industry. It has also assisted Syria in developing its nuclear program. The study considers the extent to which the "Arab Spring" and the ongoing instability in Syria have affected those relations.

Finally, the paper analyzes the Israeli dilemma regarding the North Korean military threat. Israel has a limited military and diplomatic toolbox with which to deal with that threat. Throughout the years, Jerusalem has tried diplomatic and military mechanisms to halt, postpone, and even destroy the North Korean direct and indirect threat to its security. The concluding chapter examines the options available to Israel and the ways in which the Iranian nuclear agreement might influence those options.

## MILITARY EXPORTS AND TECHNOLOGICAL COOPERATION

North Korea has been a military exporter since the 1980s, particularly to Third World states, with ninety percent of its arms sales going to the Middle East and North Africa. For the most part, these were states that had difficulty obtaining conventional and unconventional weapons and military technologies from other sources due to UN sanctions or great-power unwillingness to sell to them.

Pyongyang offered its clients several advantages. First, it was willing to sell its military products at lower prices than those prevailing in the global market. Second, it had no political interest in influencing its buyers. (In the case of Syria, Pyongyang and Damascus tried to hide their nuclear military cooperation to avoid being detected by the US and Israel, out of concern that it might trigger a military strike against Syria – which, of course, is what ultimately happened when Israel destroyed the Deir ez-Zor site.)

North Korea began to develop its defense industry by producing tanks, light ammunition, and mortars, gradually moving with external aid into the development of conventional (missile) and unconventional (chemical, biological, and nuclear) weapons. The missile industry was established by Premier Kim Il-sung in the mid-1960s at the Hamhung military academy.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the years, Pyongyang received assistance from Chinese and Russian exports and cooperated with Iran and Pakistan on the missile industry's behalf.

In the 1970s, North Korea acquired a Soviet Scud missile from Egypt, which allowed it to reverse engineer and manufacture its own improved Scud missiles. These range from short-range missiles like the Scud B (300 km) to the new millennium's Taep'o-dong2 (6,000 km) long-range missiles.<sup>6</sup> Unconfirmed reports have estimated that Pyongyang is developing the Taep'odong3 (8,000 km, as yet untested), which will be able to target the US. North Korea is even reported to have overcome initial planning problems in the development of a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM).<sup>7</sup>

Pyongyang began to develop its nuclear industry in the 1960s, with Soviet assistance. In the 1980s, due to changes in the global arena and the Korean Peninsula, it began to develop a nuclear weapons program as a deterrent against the US military presence in the region.

As noted above, the 1994 US-North Korean agreement failed to achieve its goal of terminating Pyongyang's nuclear program.<sup>8</sup> After its signing, the Koreans demonstrated their ongoing nuclear achievements in five tests (on October 9, 2006; May 25, 2009; February 12, 2013; January 6, 2016; and September 16, 2016). Pyongyang had decided to cooperate with Iran and Syria, not just by selling them missiles and other conventional weapons, but also by selling to and cooperating with both states in the nuclear field.<sup>9</sup>

North Korea's military industry and export program has several main goals:<sup>10</sup>

- **National survival.** This is defined, in the minds of the decision-makers, as the survival of the Kim family dynasty.
- **The defense of the nation from external and internal threats.** North Korea perceives the US military forces in South Korea, and the South Korean military forces themselves, as direct and imminent threats to its security. In order to deter these forces, Pyongyang built a deterrent force comprised of three layers: an army of almost one million soldiers at the ready to attack the South; middle and long-range missiles that could target US bases in northeast Asia and even sites in the US; and a nuclear deterrent.<sup>11</sup>
- **Protection of the economy.** Military exports became an important source of revenue income for the North Korean economy.<sup>12</sup> North Korea's missiles became a vital commodity for Middle Eastern countries, which needed them to deter and attack Israel and others. Their inability to purchase missiles from the Soviet Union, China, and other sources made Pyongyang attractive as a source as it was willing not only to sell to these countries but to assist them in developing their own missile industries. These Middle Eastern relationships are valuable to the North Korean economy, which needs foreign currency income and has limited potential customers.
- **Retention of unification as an option.** In the wake of its failure to achieve the reunification of the Korean Peninsula (the Fatherland) during the Korean War, Pyongyang strives to maintain a level of military might that will be sufficient to achieve eventual unification.

## **NORTH KOREAN-SYRIAN RELATIONS**

Relations between Pyongyang and Damascus began in 1966, when the two states established diplomatic relations.<sup>13</sup> Both were allies of the Soviet Union and belonged to the same Cold War camp.

Shortly after the establishment of relations, North Korea sent 25 pilots to Syria to participate in the June 1967 war against Israel. After the war, Pyongyang sent more pilots, soldiers, and technicians to assist Syria. In the October 1973 war, North Korea sent pilots to fly combat missions with the Syrian and Egyptian air forces.<sup>14</sup>

Since that period, bilateral relations have been upgraded to include political, economic, and military cooperation. North Korean and Syrian political, military, and diplomatic delegations have frequently visited one another's capitals, reflecting the regional and global interests of both states. North Korean military exports to Syria include military equipment and training, scientific cooperation on missile development, and chemical and nuclear weapons.

For Pyongyang, relations with Damascus served not only its ideological interests, but its economic interests as well. Military exports to Syria earned Pyongyang millions of dollars, though they were not always paid directly by Syria. For example, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union funded Syrian military imports from North Korea. By underwriting this trade, Moscow was supporting both of its allies.

Syria has received military financing from other states as well. Saudi Arabia funded around US\$2 billion in Syrian military purchases as a reward for Syrian participation in the 1991 Gulf War against Saddam, and Iran, which has very good relations with both North Korea and Syria, funds some Syrian military equipment imports.<sup>15</sup>

The end of the Cold War changed Moscow's interests in the Middle East and Asia. Moscow was neither willing nor able to increase its financial support to Syria, and began to decrease its assistance to North Korea as well.<sup>16</sup> The reduction in foreign aid from both Moscow and Beijing forced Pyongyang to look for other ways of increasing its foreign currency income. The answer was military export.

Syria needed military assistance, and Pyongyang was willing to step in – even during the periods when Moscow was selling military equipment to Syria. Pyongyang offered Damascus military equipment and technological assistance at lower prices than other nations were willing to consider. North Korea assisted Syria not just in building missile production facilities, but in developing chemical and nuclear industries as well.<sup>17</sup> At the turn of the millennium, President Vladimir Putin decided to reclaim Moscow's position in the Middle East and Asia by improving relations with Damascus and Pyongyang via enhanced financial support to both states.<sup>18</sup>

### *Missiles*

Damascus was, and remains, one of Pyongyang's missile industry's main customers.<sup>19</sup> Robert Gates, while CIA Director, confirmed in 1992 that Syria was one of North Korea's missile recipients in the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Pyongyang not only sold missiles that enabled Syria to reach any target in Israel (such as the Scud B, C, and D), but it assisted Damascus in upgrading its arsenal and developing its missile industry. As a 2009 US State Department report to Congress indicates, over the past decade, Syria has focused on enhancing the capabilities of its SRBM [short-range ballistic missile] force while also achieving self-sufficiency in indigenous missile production. With North Korean assistance, Syria has made progress toward domestic production of Scud missile variants.<sup>21</sup>

The North Korean missile trade and technological cooperation continued during the Syrian civil war. Damascus needed more military equipment, including missiles to be used against the rebels, and Pyongyang was willing to sell.

Sometimes, when accidents take place, intelligence communities can gather information about state or terrorist organizations and their acquisition or development of specific weapons systems or new technologies. This was the case with Syria, where a few accidents occurred as the Syrian army tested missiles and chemical weapons. These failed tests provided further indication of the extent of Syrian-North Korean military cooperation and of Tehran's involvement in the Syrian missile and unconventional weapons industry.

An accident or failed missile test has occurred in Syria almost every two years since 2005, enabling the American and Israeli intelligence services to gather important information about Syria's missile capabilities. In 2005, a failed test launch of a Scud D missile landed near the Turkish border. The intelligence agencies were able to glean from this test that the missile was an improved version of a SCUD D (700 km), which would cover most of Israel – and it was capable of carrying a chemical warhead.<sup>22</sup> The missile had been manufactured by North Korea and sold to Syria.

Two years later, on July 27, 2007, another accident occurred. This time, Iranians, Syrians, and even North Koreans died during a missile warhead test in Syria. Intelligence reports indicate that the Syrians were testing VX and sarin gas in a warhead, indicating an intensification of conventional and unconventional cooperation among the three states.<sup>23</sup>

The failed VX and sarin chemical warhead test raised serious concerns about the Syrian regime's willingness to use chemical weapons in a war against Israel, especially after its having used them against its own citizens during the Syrian civil war. Damascus did partially disarm its chemical weapons capabilities, but may decide to reverse the disarmament process, possibly with North Korean assistance – a threat that should be taken into account by foreign intelligence agencies.<sup>24</sup>

The last known missile failure occurred in 2009, when a SCUD D test caused the deaths of 20 Syrians. This test, like the others, was attended by North Koreans and Iranians.<sup>25</sup>

Damascus has elected to refrain from launching missiles at Israel in retaliation for Israeli attacks in Syria over the past four years, but Pyongyang's missile assistance has strengthened Syria's deterrent power. Israel is concerned, too, that North Korean-Syrian missiles will reach Hezbollah in Lebanon. This is why Israel has repeatedly struck missile shipments from Syria (some of them from Iran) destined for Hezbollah.

## *Unconventional North Korean Weapons*

### **Nuclear Weapons**

On October 9, 2006, North Korea held its first nuclear test. Since then, it has held four more nuclear tests that have demonstrated its ongoing technological prowess. Western intelligence agencies consider the worst-case scenario to be export of North Korean nuclear bombs to the highest bidder, with the Middle East a potential destination. They have long professed that Tehran and Pyongyang were pursuing nuclear cooperation, pointing as evidence to the number of North Korean and Iranian nuclear scientists who have visited one another's states.

It was thought that the Assad regime would not try to develop a nuclear program out of fear of an Israeli preemptive strike like the one that took place in Iraq in 1981. But, as was proved in 2007 when Israel destroyed the Syrian site, the 1981 attack had not, in fact, deterred Assad.

In the late 1990s, the American and Israeli intelligence agencies learned that North Korean scientists and officials were visiting Syria to discuss nuclear cooperation. In addition, there was intelligence indicating that the two states were building a suspected nuclear site in Syria that might resemble the Yongbyon nuclear reactor.<sup>26</sup> (Israel probably made this determination by monitoring missile and nuclear shipments from North Korea to Syria through the Tartus port.)<sup>27</sup>

Though satellite photos showed the facility being built in Syria to be highly suspect, they were not sufficient to authorize an attack. The smoking gun was brought in by Mossad agents who were able to hack the computer of a Syrian official and obtain photos of the site, some of which contained images of North Koreans. It was that additional evidence that gave the green light to Operation Orchard. After the Israelis demolished the nuclear reactor site, the Syrians tried to destroy all evidence that it had ever existed.<sup>28</sup> Because Damascus denied that there had ever been such a site, it was unable to retaliate for its destruction.

The Syrian government, unlike the Iranian government, did not make the right strategic assessments when it decided to collaborate on a nuclear project with North Korea. Iran built several nuclear sites, some of them

underground and defended by air defense systems. Syria built only one site. The thinking appeared to have been that the project could evade detection by intelligence agencies until it was active, at which point no one would dare attack it.

It remains unclear who funded the North Korean-Syrian nuclear cooperation. Was Syria able to fund it from its own financial sources? Or, as some scholars state, did Tehran pay Pyongyang \$2 billion for the project?<sup>29</sup> The conventional and unconventional weapons cooperation among North Korea, Iran and Syria over the years, as revealed in declassified reports, appears to support the argument that Tehran assisted and financed the North Korean nuclear project in Syria.

The nuclear cooperation between Damascus and Pyongyang is alleged to have continued after the Israeli strike on the Deir ez-Zor site. According to a Der Spiegel report, North Korea is now assisting Syria in building a new nuclear site in Qusayr.<sup>30</sup> Two main questions about this suspected site remain unanswered. First: if the report is accurate, why hasn't Israel attacked the site? Second: how has the Assad regime managed to develop a nuclear weapons program in the middle of a civil war?<sup>31</sup>

North Korea assisted Syria not just in building its missile and nuclear capabilities, but in building its chemical weapons production facilities as well.<sup>32</sup> Damascus was obliged to disarm its chemical weapons – but for all we know, it still retains some, and will be ready to rearm with North Korea's assistance.<sup>33</sup>

### ***The Syrian Civil War***

For the past four years, Syria has been a battleground. On one side are Syrian government forces, assisted by Iran, Hezbollah, and, since September 2015, Russian forces. On the other are rebel forces, some of which have received assistance from the US, Turkey, and other European and Middle East states (although there are often disagreements between states on the same side).

After the November 2015 terror attack in Paris, France increased its involvement in the civil war by attacking Islamic State (IS) forces in Syria. North Korea took a political and diplomatic stand at the outset

of the war in 2011, when it accused Washington of funding dissident groups.<sup>34</sup> In 2014, while the war was raging, the North Korean ambassador in Damascus publicly defined the bilateral relationship as “historical, strategic and comrades in arms.”<sup>35</sup> President Assad “expressed thanks to Kim Jong-un for expressing [his] conviction that the Syrian people would achieve victory in the fight against the challenge of hostile forces inside and outside the country and highly appreciated Kim Jong-un and the friendly DPRK's stand of supporting the just cause of Syria.”<sup>36</sup>

According to intelligence reports, Pyongyang assisted the Assad regime not only via public diplomatic declarations, but by exporting military equipment, such as artillery, tanks, and ammunition.<sup>37</sup> Pyongyang also sent advisors and in some cases even pilots to take part in the war against the rebels.<sup>38</sup> Pyongyang has denied these allegations, calling them “misinformation,” but it also denied allegations that it helped Syria build a nuclear reactor.<sup>39</sup>

Why has Kim Jong-un continued to support the Assad regime during the civil war in Syria? Both states were, first of all, client states of the Soviet Union, and they share the same anti-US and anti-imperialist worldview.<sup>40</sup> This joint philosophy is on display in the Supreme People's Assembly (SPA) Chairman Choe Tae Bok's statement about North Korea-Syria relations, prior to the Syrian civil war:

The unity of our two peoples fighting in the same trench against the common enemy is everlasting, though Syria and Korea are geographically far away from each other. Our bilateral relations of friendship and cooperation will grow stronger and stronger.<sup>41</sup>

Kim Jong-un appears committed to maintaining the close relationship that his father (Kim Jong-il) and grandfather (Kim Il-sung) had for many years with Hafez Assad. Another explanation is regional geopolitics, particularly relations with Iran and Russia. As economic assistance from the Soviet Union and China to North Korea declined, the importance of its military exports rose, netting it over \$100 million per annum.<sup>42</sup> However, the number of states that are willing to buy North Korean military equipment has decreased since 2000, giving the Syrian relationship greater weight.

The attempts by Washington and its allies to intercept North Korean military shipments in the last two decades on their way to the Middle East and West Africa is another reason why Syria and Iran became important destinations for North Korean military exports.<sup>43</sup> Over the years, Syria became a hub through which military equipment shipments could be made to Hezbollah in Lebanon.<sup>44</sup> From Pyongyang's perspective, relations with Hezbollah serve its economic and geostrategic interests.

## **NORTH KOREA AND IRAN**

Pyongyang's relationship with Tehran poses a challenge to Israel, the GCC states (mainly Saudi Arabia), and the US – even after the P5+1 agreement, which few believe will alter Iran's foreign and security policies.<sup>45</sup> The two states' involvement in the Syrian civil war is of serious concern to these countries. According to P5+1, Iran may not build up its nuclear military program, and may improve its centrifuges solely for non-military purposes for at least 10 years. Iran can, however, become a threshold state without breaching the agreement by developing its nuclear military program beyond its territory – in North Korea, for example. There is indeed a chance, if slim, that Tehran will allow Pyongyang to be its nuclear “backdoor” in this way.<sup>46</sup>

The North Korean case demonstrates the failure of verification mechanisms to prevent the development of a nuclear program. Pyongyang has succeeded in conducting four nuclear tests: in 2006, 2009, 2013, and 2016. It could, in principle, assist Tehran in developing a nuclear weapon by testing it on its soil. That would be detected as another North Korean nuclear test, without pointing a finger at Iran. From a North Korean standpoint, such a maneuver would strengthen its nuclear deterrence and entitle it to financial assistance from Tehran. For its part, Iran would enjoy the best of both worlds. It would continue to enjoy the financial benefits attending the P5+1 agreement while proceeding towards becoming a nuclear state without violating the agreement.<sup>47</sup>

Supporters of the P5+1 agreement see it as an opportunity to change Iran, as the agreement's economic profits will supposedly drive Tehran to greater moderation in its foreign and security policy. Over the long run, they argue, changes within Iran will lead to deep political changes, including

perhaps a regime change. Pessimists, on the other hand, have many doubts about the agreement, and question this mercantilist/liberal approach. They argue that the agreement gives Iran the latitude to invest more money in strengthening its military power, including assisting militant forces such as Hezbollah and Hamas as well as continuing its military cooperation with North Korea on both missiles and nuclear weapons.

The North Korean case supports the pessimistic view. Economic incentives did not drive Pyongyang to pursue more moderate policies but instead allowed it to exploit financial profits to strengthen its nuclear power.<sup>48</sup>

### ***The Beginning: The Missile***

Pyongyang established diplomatic relations with Iran in 1973 during the Shah era.<sup>49</sup> In 1979, the Shah was overthrown and Ayatollah Khomeini took power, establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran. Shortly thereafter, the Iran-Iraq War began (1980-88).

Toward the end of the war, the two states launched missile attacks on one another's civilian populations, in what was later dubbed the "War of the Cities" (March-April 1988).<sup>50</sup> During that period, Iran launched 77 missiles at Iraqi cities.<sup>51</sup>

The Iran-Iraq War was an important stage in the development of Tehran's relations with Pyongyang, leading to an agreement on the development of missiles with North Korean help.<sup>52</sup> One of the first achievements of this cooperation was the production of the Iranian Shahab-1 and the subsequent Shahab-2, which were based on the North Korean Scud-B, C, Hwasong-5 and 6 missiles.

For Pyongyang, the Iran-Iraq War represented the beginning of a beautiful friendship with Tehran based on joint political and economic interests. North Korea needed cash to develop its missile capabilities for deterrence and export. Iran needed missiles to deter its enemies, and was prepared to fund a portion of North Korea's missile development in order to acquire those arms.<sup>53</sup> As Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Khomeini's successor, put it in 2012, the two states have "common enemies." Together, they established "an anti-hegemonic front."<sup>54</sup>

The Iran-Iraq War was very profitable indeed for the North Korean military industry. In 1987, for example, it sold Iran at least 100 Scud-B missiles at a cost of \$500 million. Missile export was a critical source of foreign currency income for Pyongyang, which is why, as it has openly stated, missile export to Middle East states was so vital for its economy.<sup>55</sup>

Another factor that influenced relations between North Korea and Iran was the international constraint placed on both countries in the new millennium, especially the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council and regional states. Since the 1980s, North Korean-Iranian relations expanded to include not only missile sales and development but also nuclear cooperation.<sup>56</sup> In 1998, Tehran held one of its first Shahab-3 Medium-Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) tests. The Shahab-3, which resembles the North Korean Nodong missile, is another example of the missile cooperation between Pyongyang and Tehran.<sup>57</sup> Nor is it the only Iranian missile that has North Korean fingerprints on it.<sup>58</sup> Over the years, Pyongyang has sold a variety of missiles to Tehran, including BM-25s (range 1,500-2,200 km).<sup>59</sup>

Israel is concerned that medium-range missiles might be shipped to Hezbollah, but that is not the only danger. Pyongyang's military assistance to Hezbollah has included more than equipment. According to intelligence reports, Hezbollah members have visited North Korea for extensive training.<sup>60</sup> Tehran assisted in funding the development of the Nodong 1 MRBM, and in March 1993, an Iranian scientist and official attended the Nodong 1 test in North Korea.<sup>61</sup>

Although Tehran has launched its own missiles, it can bypass restrictions on its missile capabilities by cooperating with Pyongyang, including the development of missiles on North Korean soil.<sup>62</sup> An example of this cooperation can be seen in the KN-O8 (Hwasong-13) April 2016 test. Intelligence reports hint that the purpose of this test was to evaluate the 3,000-12,000 km range missile on Iran's behalf.<sup>63</sup> If launched from Iran, the KN-08 could threaten any target in Israel.

North Korea sold missiles to Middle Eastern and North African countries and subsequently assisted several of those states in building research centers and production plants for missiles by

sharing technologies and sending in North Korean experts. In 2000-2005 Pyongyang helped Tehran build production lines that would allow Iran to manufacture the above-mentioned Nodong-1, the Hwasong-6 missile as the Iranian Shahab-2,<sup>64</sup> the Iranian version of the Shahab-3, and ultimately the Nodong-2, which became the Shahab-3M.<sup>65</sup> The two states are thought to be collaborating on the development of a nuclear-capable ICBM, the DPRK Taepodong-2 and Iranian Shahab-6, which has a 5,000-6,000 km range. This range will allow Iran to hit any target in Israel and the Gulf, as well as US strategic sites in the Middle East.

In September 2012, Pyongyang and Tehran signed an agreement for extensive technology and scientific cooperation.<sup>66</sup> The two states argued that this cooperation was strictly for the purpose of developing civilian technologies, but the number of mutual visits by missile and nuclear military experts suggests otherwise.<sup>67</sup>

Over the past decade, the US and its allies have tried to curtail Pyongyang's military exports to the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia by intercepting its military shipments. Nevertheless, as US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates asserted in August 2010, "The fact is that North Korea continues to smuggle missiles and weapons to other countries around the world – Burma, Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas – and they continue with their development of their nuclear program."<sup>68</sup> During both the George W. Bush and the Obama administrations, the US State Department preferred to downplay or simply ignore reports on the intense relationship between North Korea and Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas. Even when there were reports of a delegation of North Korean nuclear and missile experts visiting Iran in May 2015, the US government chose to downplay it.

It is arguable that the Obama administration minimized the Iran-North Korea missile and nuclear cooperation in order to safeguard the legitimacy of the P5+1 agreement during negotiations and after its finalization.<sup>69</sup> Even as it increased sanctions on Pyongyang after the fourth nuclear test, the administration continued to downplay its military relations with Tehran, especially on the nuclear front.

### ***North Korean-Iranian Nuclear Cooperation***

There is some debate over the reality of the nuclear cooperation between Pyongyang and Tehran. Some claim there is no evidence that any such cooperation exists. One individual propounding this thesis is Muhammad Baradei, former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), who has repeatedly stated that despite Israel's claims, there is no "smoking gun" that proves that Iran is working on any military nuclear program.<sup>70</sup> On the other hand, some policy makers, researchers, and intelligence experts claim that North Korea and Iran have been conducting nuclear cooperation for years, including visits to both states by nuclear experts and officials who deal with the nuclear industry.<sup>71</sup> There have been many reports indicating that Iranians attended North Korean testing sites, and North Korean nuclear and missile experts visited Iranian nuclear sites such as Natanz and Qom.<sup>72</sup>

The nuclear cooperation between the two countries poses a huge challenge to the West, especially after the P5+1 agreement. The agreement opens windows of opportunity to Tehran to gain significant economic incentives, including billions of dollars in sanctions relief, provided it desists from developing nuclear weapons for at least ten years. The agreement also legitimizes Iran's regional status, including its involvement in Iraq and Syria.

Optimists like President Obama hope such benefits will drive Tehran to lose interest in developing nuclear weapons altogether, but this assessment seems overly sanguine. As discussed, the Iranian-North Korean nuclear cooperation allows Tehran to continue its nuclear development through the "back door" without breaching the agreement, while at the same time allowing Pyongyang to earn foreign currency. Once Iran becomes a threshold state, the West will not be able to force it to give up its nuclear weapons, as demonstrated by the North Korean case.<sup>73</sup>

### **ISRAEL'S NORTH KOREAN DILEMMA**

Although the state of Israel and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea do not share a common border (they are almost 8,000 km apart), Jerusalem considers the DPRK a potential security threat, both directly and indirectly.

To begin with, since the late 1960s, delegations of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), and other Palestinian militant organizations have visited North Korea and received political support, military training, and ammunition.<sup>74</sup> For its part, Pyongyang viewed its military support to these organizations as part of its fight against “American imperialism.”<sup>75</sup> The PFLP’s notorious May 1972 terror attack at Israel’s Ben-Gurion Airport, also known as the Lod Airport Massacre, in which 26 Israelis and tourists were murdered, is presumed to have been sponsored by Pyongyang, which is believed to have trained the perpetrators and provided them with weapons.<sup>76</sup>

North Korea has publicly supported militant Palestinian organizations by condemning Israel on many occasions. For example, when Israel targeted Hamas leaders in 2004 and during Operation Protective Edge in 2014, Pyongyang accused Israel of violating their rights.<sup>77</sup>

Then there is Pyongyang’s military support for the Arab states fighting Israel, or the “confrontation states” as they called themselves. As noted, North Korean pilots flew combat missions during the 1973 war,<sup>78</sup> and military cooperation with the confrontation states continued throughout the years.

Needless to say, Pyongyang’s political and military support for the Arab states and terrorist groups poses a direct threat to Israel’s security. Jerusalem cannot replicate its occasional actions in Syria by attacking missile shipments to Middle Eastern states on North Korean soil. Nor can it impose sanctions on the DPRK. Israel’s military and diplomatic options are limited by physical distance, the fear that any attack on North Korea might endanger South Korean security and US forces in the region, and the lack of adequate intelligence on North Korea.

In Israel’s view, North Korea poses two main threats to its security. The first and most important are its nuclear sales to the Middle East, particularly its cooperation with Iran and Syria. Once North Korea develops the technology that will allow it to arm its missiles with nuclear warheads and sells that technology to Iran or Syria, Israel’s threat perception will shift, and Israel will have to recalibrate its deterrence towards these two states.

The second concern is the conventional military threat, which includes missile export and technological cooperation, light ammunition exports, and technological assistance for the building of tunnels and fortifications. All of these add to the threat to Israel's security.

### ***The Nuclear Threat and Israel's Military Option***

The Israeli government attempted to persuade the international community to get a better deal to contain Iran than the P5+1, a process that involved an acrimonious public feud between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama. This feud carried the risk of a serious price tag, and Netanyahu's willingness to take that risk demonstrated the extent of Israel's concern over the development of Iranian nuclear weapons.

Israel views a nuclear Iran as an existential threat to its security, and is willing to use military force to forestall that eventuality if necessary despite the serious implications of such a move (as illustrated by its 1981 destruction of Iraq's nuclear reactor). Israel closely followed the evolving nuclear cooperation between Pyongyang and Tehran and stated several times that it might attack Iran's nuclear sites if the P5+1 failed to prevent a nuclear Iran and if it perceived those sites to be an imminent threat.<sup>79</sup>

Likewise, several years ago the Israeli and American intelligence agencies began to gather information indicating that Syria was developing a clandestine nuclear program with Pyongyang's assistance. North Korean nuclear scientists were spotted working side by side with their Syrian counterparts at the nuclear site in Syria. Israel understood that once the reactor became active, the Syrian nuclear program would be an imminent threat to its security. Jerusalem was aware, furthermore, that neither the international community nor the IAEA could halt or dismantle the Syrian nuclear program before the reactor became active.<sup>80</sup>

Washington informed Israel of its opposition to a strike on the Syrian nuclear site. Israel therefore had to weigh the extent of the threat and decide whether it was sufficient to justify incurring the American administration's displeasure and facing down the risk of war should Damascus perceive the attack as a *casus belli*. In the end, as noted, Israel destroyed the reactor, killing several Syrian and North Korean scientists in the process.

One might have expected global condemnation of the air strike, but Syria preferred to keep a very low profile about it. An international uproar might have forced Damascus to acknowledge that it was, in fact, developing a nuclear program, an admission that might force it to define the Israeli attack as a *casus belli*.

Pyongyang was one of the only states to condemn the Israeli strike, albeit without noting its support for the Syrian project:

Early in the morning of Sept. 6, Israel's warplanes illegally intruded the territorial air above Syria and dropped bombs in the desert in its northeastern area before fleeing. This is a very dangerous provocation little short of wantonly violating the sovereignty of Syria and seriously harassing regional peace and security. The DPRK strongly denounces the above-said intrusion and extends full support and solidarity to the Syrian people in their just cause to defend national security and regional peace.<sup>81</sup>

Another denunciation was voiced by IAEA Director General Baradawi, who condemned Israel for attacking the Syrian nuclear site rather than allowing the IAEA to resolve the matter peacefully. In Israel's view, working with the IAEA on the Syrian nuclear issue would have allowed Damascus to continue to develop its reactor and would not have prevented its activation.<sup>82</sup>

Because limited resources, lack of intelligence, and potential regional consequences prevent Israel from singlehandedly intercepting every military shipment from North Korea to the Middle East, Jerusalem cooperates with the US and South Korea on the problem. In September 2009 and November 2012, North Korean nuclear equipment shipments to Syria were intercepted by South Korea.<sup>83</sup> Nor were these the only shipments destined for the Middle East to be intercepted. In a debate in the Israeli parliament on December 20, 1993, then-Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and other members said Pyongyang was seeking new routes of transportation for military shipments to the Middle East out of concern over US and Israeli interceptions.<sup>84</sup>

There were many cases, most of them unknown to the public, where Israel succeeded in intercepting weapons and ammunition shipments from North Korea to militant groups in the region via Teheran, Damascus, and

North African routes. During the Syrian civil war, the Israeli government often stated that it would not allow missile shipments from Iran-Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon, and that it was willing to use military force to intercept them. Some of these missiles were built with North Korea's assistance. The Israeli Air Force attacked missile shipments and storage houses in Syria several times over the past three years in order to destroy the missiles before they reached Hezbollah.

Israel is not the only state to face obstacles in intercepting Pyongyang's military exports to the Middle East. One of the difficulties in limiting those exports is the Chinese route, which has been downplayed for a long time by the US and others for political reasons. As a result, for a long time Pyongyang has been able to send a portion of its military exports to the Middle East through Chinese ports and airports.

China banned the export of North Korean items that might have military use in 2015, but did not completely block the export of such equipment to the Middle East. Does it permit these exports in order to allow Pyongyang to earn foreign income for its survival, or is it in order to use Pyongyang as a proxy destabilizer in the Middle East? This question has no clear answer, and Beijing's commitments and goals in the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula remain subject to doubt.

### ***The New Underground Threat***

For tourists in South Korea, the Third Tunnel, one of the tunnels dug by North Korean forces under the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in the 1960-70s, is a well-known tourist attraction. At the same time, it is a potential tactical threat to South Korean forces based near the border.

Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon understand the tactical advantages of tunnels, knowing full well Israel's extreme sensitivity to civilian casualties and the kidnapping of soldiers. During Operation Protective Edge in Gaza in the summer of 2014, the IDF was surprised to discover a highly developed tunnel network. Hamas tactical units were able to move undetected through these tunnels in order to attack IDF soldiers posted inside Gaza as well as IDF units within Israeli territory.

North Korea had a hand in this development. Not only has it sold missiles and light ammunition to the militant groups that fight Israel, but over the past decade it has assisted Hamas and Hezbollah with the digging of tunnels and the construction of underground shelters and fortified posts.<sup>85</sup>

Israel, like South Korea, faces a serious technological challenge in locating these tunnels – particularly if some of them are 140 meters below ground level, as is the North Korean tunnel under the DMZ. The IDF is currently developing new technologies that will enable it to locate these tunnels.

### *The Diplomatic Option*

Because Israel's diplomatic and economic leverage over North Korea is so limited, it has attempted to employ indirect channels to convince Pyongyang to abstain from selling missiles to its enemies. In the early 1990s, the deputy director of the Israeli foreign ministry, Eitan Bentzur, was approached by someone with contacts inside the North Korean regime offering a secret deal that would grant Pyongyang financial assistance. Bentzur obtained Foreign Minister's Peres's permission to pursue that route.<sup>86</sup>

Pyongyang's interest in a deal with Israel was built on two main pillars: the perception that Jerusalem had extensive leverage in Washington, and the hope for an Israeli-organized financial investment in a gold mine at Onsan in North Korea and the fuel industry in the country's north. The businesspeople managing these projects hoped to assist Pyongyang in obtaining a \$1 billion loan that it could not get on the global market.

During the negotiations, Pyongyang claimed that its missile sales to the Middle East were designed solely to obtain foreign currency. Bentzur told his interlocutors that the deal could work only if Pyongyang stopped selling missiles to Iran, Syria, and Lebanon, not least since the anticipated income from running the gold mine and the energy project would exceed the missiles' proceeds.<sup>87</sup>

Israeli foreign ministry officials met with North Korean delegates several times in the early 1990s to negotiate the deal, which came close to conclusion when two Israeli delegations were sent to Pyongyang to review the final details – the first headed by Bentzur, the second by Mossad Director Efraim Halevy. But when the two delegations met with

North Korean officials, they reached contradictory conclusions about the likelihood that the deal could work. The foreign office delegation believed the deal could lead to the end of North Korean missile sales to the Middle East, but the Mossad delegation concluded that the chances of securing a deal with Pyongyang without being cheated were very slim.<sup>88</sup>

Ultimately, Washington pulled the plug on the initiative, demanding that Israel abstain from pursuing any such deal without getting a green light from the US. Prime Minister Rabin understood that Washington was not willing to allow Israel or other countries to interfere in North Korea in any way that might endanger American interests and acquiesced in the administration's veto.<sup>89</sup>

## CONCLUSION

North Korea has been very active militarily in the Middle East over the decades, from sending pilots to assist Egypt and Syria in the October 1973 war to cooperating with Damascus on a nuclear reactor in the new millennium. Pyongyang has sold missiles of different ranges as well as light ammunition to Middle Eastern states, and has even sold to terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah.

Pyongyang's technological advancement has allowed it to develop submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and missiles that can carry nuclear bombs. Its military exports to the Middle East and North Africa, as well as its development of its own conventional and nuclear weapons programs, has continued despite efforts by the international community to halt such efforts. The North Korean issue should accordingly raise concerns in Asia, the US, and Israel.

Kim Jung-un, the leader of North Korea, is challenging the world even more than did his father, Kim Jung-il. He is conducting nuclear tests and testing middle- and long-range missiles, including SLBMs, in the hope that Beijing or even Moscow will step in to prevent any serious aggravation of international sanctions, especially in the UN Security Council. Still, the existing sanctions, and the difficulties faced by the North Korean economy, increase Pyongyang's need for foreign income, making the Middle East an important trading partner. North Korea's

interest in expanding its military exports to the region, mainly to Iran and Syria, will likely increase in order to generate more income.

Israel might be able to intercept some North Korean military shipments to Syria or Hezbollah, but it will not be able to halt the majority of Pyongyang's conventional and nuclear exports to the Middle East without the assistance of the US and its allies. That is why Israel should continue to work on convincing the US, Europe, and its Asian allies that North Korea is a rogue state that threatens the stability not only of Northeast Asia, but of the Middle East through its conventional and nuclear power.

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