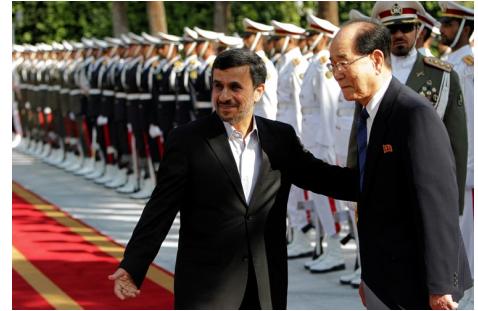


A CUFI PRIMER: What the Experts Say about the North Korea-Iran-Syria Axis

While CUFI does not generally engage on issues outside the Middle East, there are times when issues relevant to Israel take place well outside that region. The alliance between two of the world's most leading sponsors of terror and weapons proliferators, North Korea and Iran, is highly relevant to anyone concerned with American and Israeli security.

For over 20 years, press reports and declassified government materials have provided a window into the relationship between North Korea and Iran, and by direct connection, Iran's client state Syria. From conventional arms and ballistic missiles to nuclear and chemical weapons programs, the cooperation between these three state sponsors of terror should be of grave concern to responsible world powers.



The core of the alliance is the connection between the two more militarily powerful nations: Iran and North Korea. And this relationship goes back to the very founding of the Islamic Republic, as Kim Il-Sung, the founding leader of North Korea, “was among the first to congratulate Ruhollah Khomeini after he seized power from the Shah of Iran.”¹

Shortly thereafter, during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980's, North Korean military aid was provided to Iran, and North Korean military advisors were on hand to support Tehran. Though they do not share the same or even a similar core ideology – save a visceral hatred for the West – the alliance between these two nations endures to this day and has increasingly dangerous consequences.

As far back as 1996, the US sanctioned North Korea and Iran “for missile technology-related transfers.”² Five years later, the US sanctioned North Korea for violating the Iran Nonproliferation Act. In 2009 it was revealed that Iran financed the North Korean built Syrian Al Kabir nuclear reactor,³ which Israel destroyed in 2007 just prior to the reactor's completion. In 2010 a leaked diplomatic cable exposed Iran's purchase of 19 ballistic missiles from North Korea.⁴ And in 2012, Israel revealed that North Korea and Iran were working together to miniaturize a nuclear device to be fitted to an Iranian medium-range ballistic missile.⁵



In 2013, “Iran's top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh-Mahabadi, was reportedly present at North Korea's third nuclear test... while working on a project to develop a warhead that could fit on North Korea's missiles.”⁶ And when President Trump re-imposed sanctions on Iran in August of 2018, the North Korean Foreign Minister met with Iran's President and Foreign Minister the very next day.⁷

This is but a snapshot of the relationship between the nations, but it exemplifies the point the Iranian-North Korean alliance has dramatic and dangerous geo-political implications, including as it relates to Israel's northern neighbor, Syria.

One could argue that without the North Korea-Iranian-Syrian relationship, perhaps best summed up as the merger of Iranian financing, North Korean cooperation and Syria's strategic location relevant to Israel – coupled with shared know-how between the two stronger nations – these countries would not be nearly as threatening to the West as they currently are.



Moreover, with Iran's tentacles reaching all across the Middle East, even well beyond its client state Syria, and around the world through its proxy terror group Hezbollah, this modern axis of terror presents a significant challenge to those who seek to minimize the influence of bad actors and stop the proliferation of the world's most deadly weapons. What is clear is that no conversation about North Korean or Iranian nuclear or missile capabilities can achieve sustainable results if the other country's efforts are not addressed.

As part of our ongoing mission to educate our members, policy makers and journalists about relevant issues, CUFI has compiled the following key facts and analysis in order to aid in providing context to discussions and coverage about these nations.

For well over a decade, press reports and declassified government materials have detailed the relationship between North Korea, Iran and Syria. From conventional arms and ballistic missiles to nuclear and chemical weapons programs, the cooperation between these three state sponsors of terror should be of grave concern to responsible world powers. As part of our ongoing mission to educate our members, policy makers and journalists about relevant issues, CUFI has compiled the following key facts and analysis in order to aid in providing context to discussions and coverage about these nations.

*"According to two intelligence officials, speaking to me on background, there is a growing concern that while the immediate threat of armed conflict with North Korea has diminished, Pyongyang could utilize the lull in tensions to its advantage, selling the know-how behind its most advanced weapons systems to Tehran."*⁸

The Hill (June 19, 2018)

*For decades, North Korea has proliferated weapons, including conventional arms, ballistic missiles, and chemical agents, to states such as Iran and Syria (and by extension to their nonstate proxies), helping them to evade international sanctions and providing them with the necessary technical and military assistance to develop their own weapons programs."*⁹

Foreign Affairs (June 6, 2018)

*North Korea is believed to have exported Nodong missiles to Syria and provided equipment and assistance to Syria's liquid propellant missile program."*¹⁰

PBS Frontline

"Now it appears that Pyongyang is helping Syria reconstruct its program after Damascus surrendered its stockpiles under international pressure during the Obama administration (although not all were handed over to

*the international community)."*¹¹

The National Interest (March 16, 2018)

*North Korea sent Syria more than 40 items used in ballistic missile and chemical weapons programmes in the five years from 2012-17, a leaked UN report has said."*¹²

The Guardian (February 28, 2019)

“North Korea’s history of exporting ballistic missile technology to several countries, including Iran and Syria, and its assistance during Syria’s construction of a nuclear reactor— destroyed in 2007—illustrate its willingness to proliferate dangerous technologies.”¹³

Threat assessment of the US Intelligence Community (February 13, 2018)

“Iran and North Korea had cooperated in the development of missiles and other military technologies over a long period starting in the 1980s. Iran’s Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile was developed based on North Korea’s Nodong, it has been said.”¹⁴

Nikkei Asia Review (September 26, 2017)

“Iran has stationed defense staff in North Korea since late October apparently to strengthen cooperation in missile and nuclear development, Japan’s Kyodo News agency reported on Sunday, citing a Western diplomatic source.”¹⁵

-Reuters (December 1, 2012)

“...In September 2006, Paris Intelligence Online, a French Internet publication that specializes in political and economic intelligence, had published details of an extensive North Korean program to give arms and training to Hezbollah.”¹⁶

Reuters (December 13, 2007)

“The CRS document also cited a report by a prominent South Korean academic, Moon Chung-in, that the Mossad Israeli intelligence agency believed that “vital missile components” used by Hezbollah against Israel came from North Korea.”¹⁷

-Reuters (December 13, 2007)

¹ Any North Korea nuclear deal must involve Iran’s nuclear program <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/385638-any-north-korea-nuclear-deal-must-involve-irans-nuclear-program> (*The Hill*, May 2, 2018)

² Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/dprkchron> (*Arms Control Association*, March 6, 2019)

³ Report: Iran financed Syrian nuke plans http://www.nbcnews.com/id/29777355/ns/world_news-mideast_n_africa/t/report-iran-financed-syrian-nuke-plans/#.XH7QDMBK6s (*Associated Press*, March 19, 2009)

⁴ The North Korean Axis of Middle East Proliferation <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/08/un-report-north-korea-syria-iran-relationship-extensive-long-standing/> (*National Review*, August 31, 2017)

⁵ The North Korean Axis of Middle East Proliferation <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/08/un-report-north-korea-syria-iran-relationship-extensive-long-standing/> (*National Review*, August 31, 2017)

⁶ This is Trump’s Opportunity to Uncover the Iran-North Korea Connection <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/trumps-opportunity-reveal-irans-role-arming-north-korea-26171> (*The National Interest*, June 7, 2018)

⁷ North Korea’s foreign minister visits Iran after U.S. sanctions are reimposed <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-s-foreign-minister-visits-iran-after-u-s-n898611> (*NBC News*, August 8, 2018)

⁸ US intelligence officials: North Korea will sell nuclear tech to Iran <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/392868-us-intelligence-officials-next-fear-north-korea-will-sell-nuclear> (*The Hill*, June 19, 2018)

⁹ North Korea’s Illegal Weapons Trade <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2018-06-06/north-koreas-illegal-weapons-trade> (*Foreign Affairs*, June 6, 2018)

¹⁰ North Korea’s Missile Trade <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kim/nukes/noflashmap.html> (*PBS Frontline*)

¹¹ North Korea and Syria: A Chemical Weapons and Missiles Dynamic Duo? <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/north-korea-syria-chemical-weapons-missiles-dynamic-duo-24959> (*The National Interest*, March 16, 2018)

¹² North Korea sent Syria missile and chemical weapon items, says UN report <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/28/north-korea-sent-syria-missile-and-chemical-weapon-items-says-un-report> (*The Guardian* February 28, 2018)

¹³ Worldwide threat assessment of the US Intelligence Community P.6 <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/2018-ATA--Unclassified-SSCI.pdf> (*Daniel R. Coats*, February 13, 2018)

¹⁴ Could Iran be behind North Korea’s nuclear, missile advances? <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/North-Korea-crisis/Could-Iran-be-behind-North-Korea-s-nuclear-missile-advances> (*Nikkei Asia Review*, September 26, 2017)

¹⁵ Iran stations defense staff at North Korea military site: Kyodo <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-iran/iran-stations-defense-staff-at-north-korea-military-site-kyodo-idUSBRE8B101720121202> (*Reuters*, December 1, 2012)

¹⁶ North Korea may have aided Hezbollah: U.S. report <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-terrorism/north-korea-may-have-aided-hezbollah-u-s-report-idUSN126891920071213> (*Reuters*, December 13, 2007)

¹⁷ North Korea may have aided Hezbollah: U.S. report <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-terrorism/north-korea-may-have-aided-hezbollah-u-s-report-idUSN126891920071213> (*Reuters*, December 13, 2007)