

Congressional Testimony

Breaking the Iran, North Korea and Syria Nexus

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Chairmen Ros-Lehtinen, Chabot, and Poe and Ranking Members Deutch, Faleomavaega, and Sherman, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for inviting me to testify today about the Iran-Syria-North Korea trilateral relationship and the implications for US security policy. Thank you to all three subcommittee for your leadership on this important issue and for calling this joint hearing today.

Thank you also to my co-panelists, Mr. Albright, Mr. Sokolski, and Dr. Takeyh. I am honored to be testifying alongside these three experts, and I look forward to our discussion.

The purpose of my testimony is to analyze the relationship between Iran, Syria, and North Korea, with a particular emphasis on the Iran-Syria relationship and steps that the United States should take to support our national security.

In January of this year, Ali Akbar Velayati, senior aide to Iran's Supreme Leader, warned that Iran viewed the toppling of Syrian dictator, Bashar Assad, as a "red line." "If the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is toppled," Velayati said, "the line of resistance in the face of Israel will be broken."¹

Velayati's comments illustrate the prism through which the Iranians view Syria and how concerned they are about losing their control over it. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Tehran, the Assad regime, first under Hafez then under his son, has been Iran's most strategic Arab ally. The two regimes' relationship has been extensive and has included strengthening the Lebanese Shia terrorist group Hezbollah; military and intelligence cooperation; collaboration with North Korea on developing WMD's weapons; and procurement from Russia and North Korea. China reportedly also remains a key procurement and transshipment point for Iran.² The axis of nuclear proliferation among Damascus, Tehran, and Pyongyang was revealed clearly in 2009 when Iran's former Deputy Minister of Defense, Ali Reza Asghari, who defected in February 2007, disclosed that Iran financed Syria's nuclear weapons program, the centerpiece of which was a North Korean nuclear reactor in Syria.³ The reality is that Iran's "line of resistance" in the region – its power – is underpinned by North Korean arms and technology.

Arming Hezbollah

Syria has long been Iran's main portal to the Arab and Sunni worlds, and, most importantly, Tehran's forward base on the Mediterranean. Given Damascus's domination of its smaller neighbor, Lebanon, Iran has used Syria to develop

Hezbollah into the threat it constitutes today. Velayati's "line of resistance" is also referred to as the "resistance axis" -- a euphemism for the regional bloc led by Iran that includes, alongside Hezbollah, other terrorist groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This axis claims its mission is to "resist" the ambitions and incursions of Israel and the US.

No one should forget the "resistance" bloc's long and bloody history of anti-American violence -- from the bombings of our embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut in the early 1980s, to the seizure and murder of American hostages, to the systematic campaign to derail our efforts in Iraq by facilitating the violent activities of Sunni and Shiite extremists alike, not least those of Al Qaeda in Iraq. As we think how best to deal with this Iranian, Syrian, Hezbollah axis, it bears recalling that the threat they pose to US interests is not some vague future possibility but a dangerous reality in the here and now. We have the evidence of hundreds, if not thousands, of Americans who have died as a direct result of their actions.

Because Syria borders both Lebanon and Israel, it is the primary conduit of logistical support from Iran to Hezbollah. In 2006 Iran and Syria, announced that they had signed a joint military agreement to counter "common threats" from Israel and the US.⁴ One manifestation of this close cooperation was the installment of two Iranian-Syrian signals intelligence listening stations (SIGINT), funded by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and reportedly active since 2006, on the Syrian side in the Golan Heights and in the al-Jazira region in northern Syria.⁵

As the July 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel ended, it also became apparent that Iran and Syria had introduced strategic weapons into Hezbollah's arsenal. Among them: Iranian-made Fajr-5 and Zelzal-2 long-range rockets and the C-802 Iranian variant of an advanced Chinese anti-ship cruise missile.

Following the war, Iran and Syria not only moved to restock Hezbollah's arsenal, but also to drastically bolster its capabilities, as well as those of Hamas in Gaza. Tehran and Damascus developed a sophisticated network in the region to transfer Iranian long-range rockets into both Lebanon and Gaza.⁶ Among the officials running this network were Revolutionary Guard commander, and a founder of Iran's ballistic missiles program, General Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam, Syrian General Muhammad Suleiman, and Hezbollah's military commander Imad Mughniyeh. All three have since been killed.

Syria also transferred strategic weapons of its own to Hezbollah. In 2010, the Assad regime transferred Scud-D missiles,⁷ as well as a number of M-600 missiles (that have a 250Km range and carry a 500Kg warhead) -- a clone of the Iranian Fateh-110. Syria provided Hezbollah operatives with training on using the Scuds at a base near Damascus.⁸

The Assad regime procured systems from Russia, which were to be partially or fully transferred to Hezbollah. Those included advanced Russian anti-air defense

systems— such as the Pantsir S1-E and SA-17 BUK systems – as well as sophisticated anti-ship systems, like the Yakhont P-800.⁹ It was believed that Hezbollah was the end user for some of these systems, which were kept in the group's weapons depots on the Syrian side of the border.¹⁰ Prior to the 2006 war, Syria also transferred Russian-made Kornet anti-tank weapons to Hezbollah, which then used these weapons against Israel.¹¹ As the war in Syria has intensified, Hezbollah began moving some of these advanced systems out of Syria. In January, according to media reports,¹² the Israeli Air Force struck a convoy inside Syria that was likely attempting to transfer SA-17 anti-aircraft systems to Hezbollah.

Cutout Arms Purchases from Russia

Such Syrian straw purchases, as well as other arms deals with Russia for the Syrian military itself, appear to have been bankrolled by Iran.¹³ As part of this deal, some of the weapons that Damascus procured were then passed on to Tehran. This is an old practice dating back to the Iraq-Iran war, when the Assad regime purchased weapons from the Soviet bloc on Iran's behalf and Iranian planes transferred them to Tehran.

For instance, in 2007, *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported that Syria agreed to send Iran at least 10 Pantsir air-defense systems that Damascus was buying from Russia. This deal was part of "the military and technological cooperation mechanism stipulated in a strategic accord signed by both countries in November 2005."¹⁴ Sources indicate that Syria may have received and installed the systems in August 2007, or one month before the Israeli attack on the Syrian nuclear facility at al-Kibar.¹⁵

Also in 2007, the Russian daily *Kommersant* revealed that Moscow's Rosoboronexport arms export company was to deliver five MiG-31E fighter jets and an unspecified number of MiG-29M/M2 fighter bombers to Syria. Iran paid for the purchase may have been the intended end-user.¹⁶ That particular deal seems never to have materialized. However it did reveal an important and dangerous aspect of the Iranian-Syrian partnership – one that extends well beyond cutout purchases of conventional weapons.

Cooperation with North Korea on Ballistic Missiles and WMD's

Aside from Russia, the principal strategic partner of the Iranian and Syrian regimes has been North Korea.

North Korean assistance has been instrumental in developing both Iran and Syria's ballistic missile programs. Pyongyang's cooperation with Tehran is particularly close, so much so that the two countries have been described as maintaining "in effect a joint missile development program."¹⁷ Iranian teams have regularly attended North Korea's long-range missile tests, and Tehran has received North Korean technology. Iran's Shahab-3 missile (1,300-1,500Kms), for example, is based

on North Korea's Nodong missile, the development program which was reportedly financed by Iran.¹⁸

In 2010, there was a debate on whether Pyongyang had sold Tehran BM-25 missiles that could hit Western Europe. At the time, a senior US intelligence official said that while he was unaware of any sale of a complete BM-25, there was probably a transfer of kits, made up of missile components. "There has been a flow of knowledge and missile parts" from North Korea to Iran, he said.¹⁹ Iran's quest for a first strike capability and delivery systems for its nuclear weapons program suggests that cooperation with North Korea will only grow.

Pyongyang and Iran have helped Syria develop its ballistic missile program. Syria relied on North Korean technology to upgrade its Scuds. In 2005, Syria tested Scud-D missiles, but the test ended in failure, as the missile fell apart over Turkey. Another test in 2007 was successful, thanks to technological assistance from North Korea that further improved the Scud-D and extended its range. In the early 1990's, the North Koreans helped the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) construct missile complexes in Aleppo and Hama. The Aleppo facility was also used for fitting chemical warheads on Scud missiles. An explosion at the facility in July 2007 shed further light on the Syrian-Iranian-North Korean triangle.

The explosion took place as the Syrian regime was attempting to weaponize Scud-C missiles with chemical agents. According to a report in *Jane's Defence Weekly* at the time, the explosion resulted in the death of "dozens" of Iranian engineers.²⁰ The Japanese daily *Sankei Shimbun* also claimed that three North Korean engineers were among the dead.²¹

Jane's described the weaponization effort as part of a joint program with Iran. According to the weekly, Iran helped Syria in "the planning, establishment and management" of five facilities designed for the "indigenous production of CW [chemical weapons] precursors." The presence of North Korean personnel at the site indicates that this was in fact a trilateral collaboration.

That wasn't the most audacious aspect of this three-way partnership. A couple of months after the Aleppo explosion, Israel attacked a remote, secret nuclear facility in al-Kibar in eastern Syria. To the world's shock, it emerged that Pyongyang had helped the Syrians develop a reactor, intended for plutonium production, and modeled on its own Yongbyon reactor. Once again, the details that emerged following the strike on the facility revealed the deep cooperation between the three rogue regimes.

As with the explosion at the Aleppo missile facility, Japanese media reported that North Korean scientists – ten in this instance -- were among the dead in the strike on al-Kibar.²² Then, in 2009, reports emerged claiming that Iran financed Syria's nuclear project. The claims were based on information provided by a high-ranking

Iranian Revolutionary Guard official and former deputy defense minister, Ali Reza Asghari.²³

This close partnership with North Korea is being replicated in Iran's own nuclear program. Last September, Tehran and Pyongyang signed a "scientific cooperation" agreement, which appears effectively identical to the one the North Koreans signed with Syria in 2002, leading to the development of Syria's plutonium reactor.²⁴ It should be noted that alongside its uranium enrichment, Iran also is operating a plutonium reactor in Arak.²⁵

North Korean collaboration with Iran and Syria continued apace after the al-Kibar strike. By 2010, Pyongyang had resumed its supply of sensitive military technology to Syria. A report that year in the Japanese *Nikkei* newspaper claimed that North Korea was helping Syria build a production line in Homs for making steel "that can be used in missile skins, chemical warheads and gas centrifuges, a vital component in the uranium enrichment process."²⁶ The steel's "durability and malleability makes it ideal for creating thin missile skins capable of carrying heavier payloads." A couple of months prior to that report, Thailand intercepted a cargo plane carrying a large shipment of weapons and missile parts headed for Iran.²⁷

Some of the weapons on the plane were reportedly destined for Hezbollah and Hamas.²⁸ Syria was again a critical node in this axis of proliferation in the region, underwritten by Iran, supplied by North Korea.²⁹

Qods Force and Hezbollah Helping the Assad Regime

It is hardly surprising then, that the Iranians have drawn a red line around the Assad regime and have gone "all in" to prevent its collapse. The Iranian effort has involved the dispatching of IRGC and Qods Force (QF) personnel to assist, advise, and train regime forces. This includes the organization of a large paramilitary force modeled on the Iranian Basij force, called The Popular Army, which was designated as an entity of the Syrian government by the US Treasury Department last December.³⁰ Iranian officials themselves have admitted to the presence of QF officers on the ground in Syria. In September, IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jaafari admitted at a Tehran press conference that his forces were deployed in Syria and Lebanon, as "advisers."³¹ Similarly, the deputy commander of the Qods Force, Ismail Gha'ani, had earlier admitted to Tehran's ISNA news agency that Iran was present in Syria in support of the regime.³²

Indeed, a number of IRGC elements were abducted in Syria by the rebels and were ultimately released in exchange for Syrians detained by the Assad regime. In addition, Hezbollah fighters also have been deployed in Syria, especially in the border areas near the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon. The bodies of Hezbollah fighters, including senior regional commander Ali Hussein Nassif, killed in action in Syria, have been returning to Lebanon on a regular basis.

The highest ranking Qods Force commander killed in Syria was Hassan Shateri, who was based in Lebanon under an alias, where he worked as the director of the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. Shateri was a military engineer in charge of Hezbollah's military infrastructure in Lebanon.³³ He was likely in Syria to oversee transfers of Hezbollah's strategic weapons, but was ambushed and killed by Syrian rebels in February on the road back to Beirut.

Last but not least, the Assad regime has been dependent on Iranian arms supplies to continue to fight the uprising against it. Iran has reportedly stepped up its military support to the regime, according to Western diplomats and an intelligence report. The types of weapons being sent range from communications equipment to light arms and advanced strategic weapons, as well as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and surface-to-surface ballistic missiles. The weapons are being sent using Iranian civilian aircraft flying through Iraqi airspace and also using Lebanon's airport. These flights reportedly occur on an almost weekly basis, and each carry about five tons of arms.³⁴

I applaud Representatives Ros-Lehtinen, Deutch, Cotton, DeSantis, Schneider, Weber and your colleagues for highlighting the overflight issue in a letter to Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. The letter raised concerns that despite US urging Iraq to ground and inspect Iranian flights attempting to access Iraqi airspace, "after only a short period of compliance, these flights have resumed."³⁵

Iran's objective is clear: if it cannot help the Assad regime reassert control over all of Syria, it seeks at least to ensure its survival in an enclave territorially contiguous with Lebanon and with access to sea ports. Coupled with the insurance policy of chemical weapons, Iran's support would enable Assad to, as my colleague at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) Tony Badran said, "hang on as a warlord presiding over an Iranian and Russian protectorate on the Mediterranean."³⁶ Such an enclave – or "Alawistan" – would prevent the total disruption of Iran's regional network.

Implications for US policy and Policy Recommendations

The US objective in Syria is straightforward: to break this axis linking Iran and Hezbollah, Syria, and North Korea. By ensuring the downfall of the Assad regime and all its structures that have secured Iranian influence, the "axis of resistance" will be dealt a body blow, which is precisely what Iran fears. As former US Centcom commander General James Mattis put it in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee in March of last year, the fall of the Assad regime would represent "the biggest strategic setback for Iran in 25 years."

In addition, inasmuch as Syria sits at the heart of Iran's regional weapons smuggling network, its removal from the equation would disrupt Iranian and North Korean arms supplies to Iran's regional assets and help stem the transfer of strategic weapons to Hezbollah.

With the current US policy, Syria is on track to break up into various parts, which might well preserve an Iranian foothold on the coast in an Alawite enclave. Such an outcome would be detrimental to US and allied interests.

Instead, the United States should take meaningful steps to undermine the Iran-Syria-North Korea nexus, to isolate these regimes from the global financial and economic markets, and to protect US national security interests at home and abroad. In particular, I would like to discuss three policy recommendations:

First, the United States should take a leadership role in supporting the opposition in Syria and preparing the country for a post-Assad leadership.

Legislation has been introduced in both the House and Senate to authorize humanitarian and non-lethal or restricted military aid to the opposition in Syria and to provide support for a post-Assad Syria. H.R. 1327, sponsored by Representatives Engel, Rogers of Michigan, and Sherman – thank you Ranking Member Sherman for your leadership on this issue – and S. 617 sponsored by Senators Casey and Rubio contain important provisions for aiding the downfall of the Assad regime, disrupting the Iran-Syria axis, and supporting US interests.

These measures and others like those laid out by Senators McCain and Levin in their March 21 letter to the President³⁷ should be seriously considered by the administration to ensure that the outcome in Syria advances US national security interests in this region.

As my FDD colleague John Hannah said: “As difficult as the situation in Syria has become, doing nothing poses the greatest risks of all to the interests of the United States and its allies by surrendering the fate of this vital region to Assad's killing machine, Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Hezbollah proxy, and the black flag of Al Qaeda.”³⁸

Additionally, we need to be seriously preparing CIA and military teams to deploy and secure Syria's WMD arsenal at a moment's notice. In order to do this, the CIA needs to front-load deployment by putting a small, elite team of officers in country gathering intelligence. There is no indication that the CIA has teams in country. They should. CIA officers need to be near the sites where we believe the Assad regime has stored or may still be manufacturing weapons of mass destruction.

Second, the United States should work with its allies in Europe to impose stronger financial sanctions against Syria and to go after the regime's overseas assets, using the financial sanctions against Iran as a model.

Iran has provided significant financial support to Syria. The majority of Iran's aid to Syria likely occurs outside the formal financial systems via IRGC smuggling networks and cash in suitcases, however, targeting the formal banking system

continues to be important. Less than six months after the uprising in Syria began, Iranian Supreme Leader Khomeini was reportedly prepared to provide \$5.8 billion in aid to Syria to bolster its economy.³⁹ Despite economic difficulties of their own, Iran has spent upwards of \$10 billion propping up the Assad regime including by paying the salaries of Syrian government troops and providing weapons and logistical support.⁴⁰

More recently, in January 2013, Syria and Iran agreed to a \$1 billion import line of credit deal between the Export Development Bank of Iran and the Commercial Bank of Syria,⁴¹ both of which are under US sanction. While not directly supporting Syria's foreign reserves, the deal enables Syria to purchase goods on credit from Iran at a time when the regime is finding it increasingly difficult to purchase goods from other countries. In March, the governor of the Central Bank of Syria, Adib Mayaleh, told Syrian television that his institution received a \$1 billion line of credit from Iran to support the Syrian Pound.⁴²

Stronger measures should be taken by the United States and the European Union to squeeze the Assad regime's access to foreign reserves both to make it difficult for Assad to fund the extreme oppression and killing he has leveled on his population and to see if the threat to his regime's very existence is the factor that changes his calculus.

These measures can be modeled after our sanctions against Iran.

The United States should use financial sanctions like those included in the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA) to target foreign banks doing business with Syrian financial institutions.

We should also work with our European allies to expel Syrian financial institutions from SWIFT, the Belgium-based network that provides secure financial-messaging services. In March 2012, following an EU Council decision, SWIFT discontinued services to Iranian financial institutions subject to EU sanctions.⁴³ However, according to SWIFT's 2011 annual review, 22 Syrian banks and financial institutions continue to use the network.⁴⁴

We should work with Europe to create a unified and consistent policy regarding both the Iranian and Syrian financial sectors, banning financial institutions and regime persons from both nations from accessing SWIFT as well as Target2, the European Central Bank's proprietary electronic interbank payment system.

So far, no other measures have succeeded in changing Iran's pursuit of illegal nuclear weapons or their domestic repression. Nor have measures taken to date against the Assad killing machine impacted his calculus.

Third, the United States should develop a comprehensive defense system to protect the US homeland and US allies from potential attacks by the Iran-Syria-North Korea nexus and their terrorist proxies.

One issue that is often overlooked in the Iran-North Korea threat analysis is of the possibility of an Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) attack from “Scuds-in-a-bucket.” In such a scenario, agents or terrorists working on behalf of Iran and/or North Korea put a nuclear-tipped Scud missile in a vessel – perhaps one disguised as a freighter or fishing boat – sail close to the United States and launch the missile and detonate the warhead at high altitude. The result would be an electromagnetic pulse radiating down to the surface of the Earth at the speed of light, knocking out power grids and computers for months if not years. We know that Iran has experimented with mid-flight detonations of missiles fired from ships on the Caspian Sea.

Indeed, studies from as early as 2004 revealed that North Korea and Iran were seeking to develop these weapons, which can be unpredictable and difficult to deter.⁴⁵ Defending against this kind of threat requires a multilayered missile defense system that can detect and intercept an attacking ballistic missile while it is still ascending. The administration should work with our allies in Europe and the Middle East to deploy the necessary interceptors to create a robust and effective system. Hardening of the American electrical grid also is possible and relatively inexpensive.

In conclusion, these and other measures can be part of a clear and robust policy to disrupt the strategic relationships among Iran, Syria, and North Korea.

The implications of these relationships are stark for US security interests, as well as for the security of such regional allies as Israel and the Gulf States.

That Iran and North Korea have been able to maintain such a close relationship in the development of nuclear, WMD and ballistic missile programs, even extending it to Syria and Hezbollah, should give pause to anyone who thinks “containing” a nuclear Iran is a viable policy option.

Thank you for inviting me to testify today. I look forward to discussing these issues and am happy to answer your questions.

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