



# The US Must Not Allow an Iranian Base in the Red Sea

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Recent indications that Iran tried to establish a naval base in Sudan have called the Iranian regime's intentions in the Red Sea into question. A *Wall Street Journal* report last month cited a Sudanese intelligence officer who claimed that Tehran had requested to establish a permanent naval base on Sudan's Red Sea coast in exchange for providing the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) with a helicopter carrier.

The news should be deeply concerning. Such a base, which Iran reportedly wants to use to station warships and for intelligence gathering, would allow Tehran to tighten its grip on one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. It would also confer clear strategic benefits to the Islamic Republic. **(READ MORE: We Ignore Africa at Our Own Peril)**

For one, establishing a permanent military presence in Sudan would solidify Iran as a major stakeholder in that country, allowing it to compete with regional rivals like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who have long been involved in Sudanese affairs. And if the SAF ends up winning the country's current civil war, Tehran will have positioned itself as a major backer of the Sudanese government and will likely receive preferential access to gold mining and other industries thereafter.

The base would also be advantageous for the Iranian regime's own maritime operations. Establishing a presence on Sudan's coast would allow Iranian naval vessels to resupply more easily, paving the way for more frequent Iranian naval deployments along the key waterway. Additionally, Iran's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), could use intelligence collected from the base to better advise Yemen's Houthi rebels, who have been conducting a campaign of drone and missile attacks targeting naval and civilian vessels in the Red Sea. The base could likewise act as an outpost for vessels like the *Behshad*, a repurposed cargo ship that the IRGC used to provide the rebels with intelligence before it was moved to a Chinese military base in Djibouti after a U.S. cyberattack.

Finally, providing military assistance to the SAF is part of a wider Iranian effort to shore up relations within Sudan and the African continent as a whole. Tehran and the SAF only agreed to resume diplomatic relations back in October, seven years after they were severed amid worsening ties between Iran and regional rival Saudi Arabia. Last year, however, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited numerous African capitals in a bid to shore up Iran's presence on the continent amid tensions with the West.

However, it appears that an Iranian Red Sea base in Sudan is off the table — at least for the moment. Reports indicate that the SAF turned down the offer in order to avoid alienating the likes of the United States. The calculus in Khartoum seems to have been that the Iranian government simply would not be able to provide it with enough financial or military support to risk cutting ties with the West. Moreover, partnering with Tehran, given its overt support for Hamas and other radical groups as well as its persistent nuclear program, would make it difficult for the SAF and its leader, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, to assert themselves as the legitimate government in Sudan. **(READ MORE: Iran Makes Inroads in Latin America)**

But another, similar deal could be back on the table in the future if Iran's relationship with the SAF continues to deepen. After all, Tehran has already used its newest export commodity, drones, to secure a foothold in the country. Surveillance footage and other evidence confirms that Tehran has provided the SAF with advanced Mohajer-6 drones, which have helped the SAF regain an edge in its ongoing conflict with the rival Rapid Support Forces. That development, in turn, raises worries that the Iranian regime could one day deploy trainers or forces to the country in support of the SAF, much like it has already done in Yemen and Syria.

Iran's play for Sudan, in other words, is serious — and ongoing. As such, it merits continued attention from Washington and regional capitals alike.