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CHARTING IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

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Although Tehran's activities in Africa tend to receive far less attention than its machinations in the Middle East, Europe, or Latin America, they form a critical pillar of the Islamic Republic's global strategy. Iran's contemporary presence there lags behind that of both Russia and China, each of which is exerting major efforts to expand its strategic footprint on the continent. Nevertheless, Africa is significant for Iran, providing it with a testing ground for its influence operations, a pathway for sanctions evasion, and strategic depth for its foreign policy initiatives. As such, understanding this dimension of Iran's policy is essential to grasping the full scope of Tehran's strategic ambitions in the "Global South."

THE LOGIC OF IRANIAN ENGAGEMENT

For Iran today, Africa holds out considerable promise. It is a region rich in resources, with religious demographics receptive to outside messaging and fragile political systems that can be influenced by outside actors. Tehran's objectives on the continent are calibrated

to exploit these openings. They include promoting the spread of its activist strain of Shi'a Islam, exploiting regional economic systems to skirt or dilute Western sanctions, forging economic partnerships, fomenting anti-Western sentiment, and accessing critical raw materials (in particular uranium for its nuclear program.¹)

Accordingly, in recent years, successive Iranian presidents have made Africa a key focus of their foreign policy. During his tenure (2005-2013), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad concentrated on the continent as a means of offsetting pressure from the United States and Europe. He did so by leveraging cultural ties, economic engagement, and trade to build rapport with regional governments, enlist their support in multilateral forums like the United Nations, and reduce his government's dependency on Western markets. Subsequently, Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021) deprioritized African affairs.³ However, Ibrahim Raisi (2021-2024) reestablished engagement with the region as a strategic priority for the Islamic Republic.⁴



They have not been alone. Iran's regional rivals, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have hampered or otherwise interfered with Iran's influence on the continent—particularly in the Horn of Africa. In 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE cut diplomatic ties with Iran, pressuring Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia to do the same in 2016.⁵ However, following a Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iranian detente in 2023, Iran's prospects in Africa are once again brightening.⁶

DIPLOMACY, TRADE, AND SANCTIONS EVASION

Iran's engagement across Africa's regions varies significantly. It is most visible today in West and East Africa. In countries like Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali, successive coups have had the effect of displacing Western counterterrorism forces, and Iran has opportunistically sought to fill the void, offering equipment, training, and enhanced diplomatic ties to local juntas battling the ascendant Sunni *jihadist* threat on the continent.⁷ Nevertheless, Tehran is still not as prevalent an actor as Russia in this domain. Even so, Iran has sought to leverage latent anti-Western sentiment and exploit the political opening created by the departure of longtime regional players such as France. Capitalizing on this withdrawal, Tehran seeks to expand economic ties with Sahelian military governments to enhance trade and diplomatic relations with new, ideologically-aligned partners.

In the Horn of Africa, meanwhile, the Islamic Republic has historically enjoyed a strong presence, mainly in Sudan. Although Iran's influence was pushed out of the region temporarily, the Iranian regime's 2023 detente with Saudi Arabia has lessened opposition to its presence and allowed Iran to once again pursue an enhanced regional role.⁸

Economically, Tehran's trade with Africa remains modest—totaling roughly \$800 million in 2024.⁹ However, Iran's stated ambition is to multiply that figure tenfold in coming years.¹⁰ To that end, Iran has made a concerted effort to engage the continent. In 2024, for instance, Tehran hosted its third Iran-Africa Economic Cooperation Conference, at which discussions covered a variety of industries, including agriculture, mining and minerals, and healthcare.¹¹ This engagement is beginning to pay off. A state spokesman recently claimed exports to Africa have already significantly grown in the first quarter of this year, marking an 85 percent increase year-over-year as of July.¹² Through such enhanced contacts, Iran clearly hopes to ease its isolation in global markets and mitigate the effects of the Western sanctions, which have once more become a key issue with the reimposition of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy and the formal activation of sanctions "snapback."¹³

Sanctions avoidance networks, including money and rare gem laundering schemes, have been found to operate in certain African countries in recent years, run by financiers of Hezbollah.¹⁴ The Gulf of Guinea, off the West African coast, also serves as a hub for Iran's illegal oil trade.¹⁵ Enhanced economic cooperation with African states and illicit financial mechanisms highlight how Africa plays into Tehran's long term economic strategy to exploit gray and black markets as a way of diluting the effect of U.S.-led sanctions pressure.

Iran's diplomatic engagement with Africa has likewise grown in recent years. During his tenure, Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi prioritized Africa, visiting Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe as part of a 2023 regional tour that yielded new agreements and deals in a variety of sectors.¹⁶ These expanded contacts, in turn, have allowed Iran to broaden its ac-

cess to the continent's strategic resources. With Niger, for example, Iran struck a deal in late 2024 for some 300 metric tons of uranium ore—a critical input for the Islamic Republic's maturing nuclear program.¹⁷

In parallel, Africa has emerged as an important source of political support for the Islamic Republic. During the June 2025 “twelve-day war” with Israel, ten African nations condemned Israel's strikes on Iran's nuclear program.¹⁸ The same month, Burkina Faso, along with Iranian allies Russia and China, voted against the International Atomic Energy Agency's condemnation of Iran's nuclear noncompliance.¹⁹ Additionally, Tehran has forged a special relationship with Pretoria, and backing from the government of South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has provided Tehran with important diplomatic support on the world stage. The two countries, for instance, have coordinated policy vis-à-vis Israel, with South Africa launching a case before the International Court of Justice—a step that Iran has supported. (Notably, in the case of South Africa, these ties represent part of a larger foreign policy pivot, one which has included strengthened ties to Russia, much to the anger of policymakers in Washington.²⁰)

MILITARY COOPERATION... AND PROXY EXPANSION

Africa has likewise gained importance for Iran as a strategic arena. Militarily, the continent has become a proving ground for Iranian military exports, particularly drones. The prominence of Iranian Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) in the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine has boosted the visibility, and cachet, of Iranian drones, drawing additional consumers. Iran, in turn, has obliged, becoming a notable drone exporter in its own right. The regime has provided Russia with about 1,700 drones

to date, and Israeli officials have warned that Tehran has conducted talks to sell advanced weapons, including UAVs and precision-guided missiles, to “no less than 50 different countries.”²¹ It is also known to arm its proxies, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah militia and Yemen's Houthi rebels, with this technology.

In Africa as well, these drones have become a sought-after commodity. Thus, as part of its aforementioned uranium deal with Niger, Tehran promised the delivery of drones and surface-to-air missiles to that country's military junta.²² Similarly, in Sudan, Tehran's provision of drones for the *de facto* government of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) has constituted a key airpower advantage in its ongoing war against rebel paramilitary forces.²³ And when the rebel Tigrayan People's Liberation Front closed in on Ethiopia's capital during that country's 2020-2022 civil war, advanced Iranian military technology was key to halting its advance. Iranian *Mohajer-6* drones were discreetly flown into Addis Ababa, in violation of an international embargo, and—along with Turkish and Emirati drones—were used to help prevent the collapse of the Ethiopian government.²⁴

Iran's military engagement in Africa extends beyond drones, however. A recent Memorandum of Understanding with Ethiopia seeks to stabilize Addis Ababa's fragile security situation in exchange for an expanded Iranian presence in the Horn of Africa.²⁵ Moreover, Iran's current provision of weaponry to the Sudanese Armed Forces may end up paving the way for an Iranian naval port on the Red Sea—something that remains an Iranian strategic objective.²⁶

Tehran is likewise making common cause with regional extremist groups. For instance, via Hezbollah, its principal terrorist proxy, the Islamic Republic is collaborating with the Polisario Front, an Algerian-supported leftist movement





that challenges Morocco's claims of sovereignty over the Western Sahara. Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita has charged that Hezbollah sent surface-to-air missiles to the Polisario, along with Iranian-made drones.²⁷ Iran has also threatened to leverage its support for the Polisario to threaten commercial interests in the Strait of Gibraltar, through which more than a quarter of global trade flows.²⁸ In Congress, movement to designate the Polisario Front as a Foreign Terrorist Organization under U.S. law has recently gained traction, highlighting growing U.S. concern over the group—as well as over Iran's assistance to it.²⁹ By supplying weapons and training through the proxy group Hezbollah, Iran is able to subvert Morocco, a key American ally, and adversely impact the broader regional trend of normalization with Israel, of which the Kingdom is a significant part.

At the same time, Africa has provided opportunities for Iran to bolster the capabilities of its own proxies. Hezbollah, for instance, has exploited West Africa's large Lebanese diaspora for illicit finance and smuggling, and the continent has become a major hub for the group's fundraising and black-market activities. The Shi'a militia is known to be deeply enmeshed in the continental drug trade, and approximately 30 percent of the profits from cocaine transiting the continent and destined for Western nations can be tied back to Hezbollah.³⁰ Additionally, Hezbollah has been linked to arms trafficking in Africa. A 2013 seizure of weapons by Nigerian security forces in the city of Kano, for instance, was connected to the group, which authorities believed intended to attack American and Israeli targets in the region.³¹ (Notably, while historically one of Iran's most significant proxies in Africa, Hezbollah's capabilities on the continent are now in question in the wake of Israel's Fall 2024 campaign against the group in southern Lebanon, as well

as the subsequent "twelve-day war" between Israel and Iran.)

Likewise, Iran's historically strong relationship with Sudan has allowed the regime to smuggle weapons to Hamas via the country.³² Increased collaboration with other affiliated movements—including Somali *jihadi* groups, which today boast growing connections with Yemen's Houthis—also reinforce Iran's influence network and strengthen the military position of its proxies.³³

Moreover, similar to other world regions, the Islamic Republic is involved with an array of sub-state actors active across Africa. For instance, the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN) has allegedly worked for years as an Iranian proxy group in the West African nation, has been described as "Hezbollah-aligned," and receives an estimated \$10,000 per month from the Islamic Republic (ostensibly for humanitarian purposes).³⁴ Operatives from the Quds Force—the paramilitary arm of Iran's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)—have been implicated in plots in Ghana, Senegal, Tanzania, and others, targeting Western, Israeli, and Saudi interests over the past decade.³⁵ Moreover, the Quds Force has also reportedly supported the activity of a terror network in the Congo and the establishment of a militant group known as Saraya Zahara in the Central African Republic, along with preparing operations in neighboring Chad and Sudan.³⁶

A SOFT POWER PUSH

Iran's soft power comes in different forms, but mainly through the spread of its radical, activist interpretation of Islam. Although predominantly adherents of Sunni Islam, Africa's nearly 500 million Muslims are nonetheless a prime target for Tehran's revolutionary message. This is primarily effective in more northern African countries, where high-

er proportions of the population adhere to the Muslim faith.

Nigeria serves as a prime example in this regard. The country, with a population of some 233 million people, now boasts 3 million adherents to Shi'a Islam, thanks largely to proselytization efforts by groups such as the IMN.³⁷ This, in turn, has created fertile soil for Iran's outreach, and Tehran has acted on it. In 2017, it launched HausaTV to expand informational services, mostly about Iran, to roughly 80 million speakers of the language in West Africa, the majority of them located in Nigeria. HausaTV's YouTube channel now has over 500,000 subscribers.³⁸

Religious and cultural institutions help to amplify this messaging. Cultural institutions like Al-Mustafa International University, which currently operates in 17 African countries, educate students and serve as recruitment centers for Quds Force operatives.³⁹ Iranian soft power is further projected through the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), an umbrella organization that encompasses entities responsible for managing intra-Islamic relations, missionary work, cultural dialogues, events, and academic engagement. Iranian business centers are pervasive, and humanitarian organizations like the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) and food pantries supply free services to local populations, improving the Islamic Republic's public image. The IRCS alone has clinics across the continent, including in Mali, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Uganda, Kenya, and Niger, among other places.⁴⁰ According to Iranian state media, the IRCS has an operating budget of roughly \$155 million.⁴¹

ENGAGE AFRICA

Iran's expanding influence in Africa is aided, at least in part, by long-term U.S. neglect of the continent. Historical inac-

tion by successive U.S. administrations has hampered meaningful American engagement with Africa and provided an advantage to external actors seeking to expand their own influence and activities there. Iran is among them and, as the pages above show, its activities in Africa represent an important prong of its larger, global strategy.

Combatting this growing footprint requires a broader U.S. reconsideration of the continent. Washington should prioritize:

- *Revitalizing African broadcasting.* As part of its efforts to reduce the size of the U.S. government, the Trump administration has taken aim at the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), the parent agency of the Voice of America. USAGM as a whole has been targeted for closure, with Administration officials aiming to defund its constituent parts. A notable casualty of this effort has been VOA's Africa Division, which has been rendered virtually nonexistent on the continent as a result of personnel cuts. As a result, the U.S. has become voiceless in Africa precisely at a time when strategic adversaries (such as Iran and Russia) are actively messaging to local populations and shaping their view of the region, as well as of the West. Revitalizing U.S. outreach to African audiences is essential to countering Iranian messaging—as well as to diluting the effect of Iranian disinformation.
- *Expanding America's diplomatic and economic presence.* Another notable casualty of the Trump administration's current focus has been the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which previously served as a major grantor for aid programs across the African continent. The retraction of traditional U.S. assistance, howev-





er, does not necessarily mean that America cannot meaningfully engage the continent. Providing an alternative source of financing and economic benefits to affected African nations would have the effect of helping to nullify Iranian economic engagement. Through tools like the State Department's new America First Opportunity Fund, the U.S. could strategically invest in select African states, thereby offering an alternative to economic diplomacy with the Islamic Republic. The U.S. should also seek to strengthen trade ties with African countries—now at risk of further decline with the expiration of the African Growth and Opportunity Act this year—as a way of providing additional alternatives for engagement.

- *Disrupting Iran-linked terrorist and criminal networks in Africa.* The Islamic Republic today relies on Africa as a theater for sanctions-evasion, for black-market activities, and for asymmetric advantage over fragile regional governments. It likewise has encouraged enhanced cooperation between its proxies and African extremists—partnerships that, if left unaddressed, could represent a meaningful threat to international trade. U.S. counterterrorism policy should consequently make both Iran's illicit activities in Africa and those of its proxies a major focus.
- *Formally designate Iranian-linked groups as terrorist entities.* A key component to limiting the Islamic Republic's reach on the African continent is to marginalize and outlaw its proxies, while encouraging countries in Africa to designate Iran-backed proxies as terrorist organizations as well. By designating the Polisario Front as an FTO, for instance, the U.S. can diminish its ties with Hezbollah and Iran. How-

ever, it will need to ensure that doing so does not serve to reignite the long-running conflict between Morocco and neighboring Algeria.

Containing Iran's growing reach in Africa will require sustained attention and a coordinated approach that spans information, diplomacy, and counterterrorism. At the core of this approach should be a key realization: Africa is now firmly part of Tehran's strategic map. It needs to register on that of Washington as well.

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Iran Freedom Initiative

Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran represents one of the greatest challenges to American objectives in the Middle East, and to long-term success in the Global War on Terror. Established in 2006, the American Foreign Policy Council's Iran Freedom Initiative is committed to assisting American policymakers to develop and implement strategy toward Iran – and to promoting the spread of pluralism and democratic principles in that country.

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