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# Iran's Influence in the Red Sea Targets and Outcomes

Gen. Misfer Saleh Ghamdi

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Maritime Security Researcher

Iran's geographical landscape stretches across the eastern coast of the Arabian Gulf, with it starring at the Arab Gulf States. Besides this, it co-controls the strategically important Hormuz Strait's with the Arab Gulf States. Iran's main strategic importance stems from its geographical location, which serves as the intersection of the world's land and sea routes. It is the heart of the old world, as it connects with Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. It is the only land corridor between the Arabian Gulf and the Caspian Sea. Iran is the route that links the Indian Subcontinent to the Mediterranean. Iran's regional policies are resulting from its historical depth and geopolitics. From an historical angle, Iran's multi-directional expansionist impulses were visualized via its movement towards the Fertile Crescent, the Caucasus's, Central Asia and the Southern Arabian Peninsula. However, currently Iran's expansionist plans have moved towards the neighboring Arab Gulf States, given that it is sandwiched between nuclear powers in the North and the East.

Iran's ambitious role in expanding and spreading its influence across the Middle East is not only linked to the 1979 revolution. During the Pahlavi monarchy, Iran's policies in the region were a concern for some regional players, especially the Arab states. While the Arab world was in a state war with Israel, Iran provided Israel with all its oil requirements during the Arab-Israeli wars. Its regional policies were linked to foreign plans that were close to America, resulting in Iran-Israel relations being cordial.

The Shah of Iran had always dreamed of restoring the glory days of Iran, and liberating Iran from Western dependence. He sought to elevate Iran in the Arabian Gulf, given the importance of this region for his country's security. He was convinced that Iran is the only country capable of upholding peace and security in the Middle East, and that Iran is the natural dominant power in the Arabian Gulf region.<sup>(1)</sup>

The Arab-Iranian relations experienced tensions and turbulence since Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (the Shah of Iran). This predicament came on the back of Iran violating the Iraqi frontiers more than once and occupying the three islands in the Arabian Gulf (Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb). Also, the close rapprochement with Israel -which was at the expense of the Arabs- and occupying Arab territory (i.e. the Ahvaz province, an Arab emirate located on the eastern coast of the Arabian Gulf). Moreover, Iran consistently threatened to occupy Bahrain, along with its flagrant interference in the affairs of the Arab Gulf States.

Arab-Iranian relations have passed through periods of coexistence, although conflict has been a dominating factor, particularly in the period when Iran's government had a political or doctrinal expansionist project in the region, or when there was a vacuum of power in the region.

The last Iranian project targeting the Arab region was after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which soured relations with the Arab states.<sup>(2)</sup> Iran tried to interfere in Arab internal affairs, disrupt their stability by triggering chaos in the pilgrimage season, deploy spies across the region, and expand its circle of influence at the expense of Arab security. Iran sought to be the first regional power in the region under the pretext of resisting Western powers in the region.

The current Iranian project stems from several targets and ambitions. Some are linked to its national security need, while others are associated to its sectarian and doctrinal characteristics. Iran aims to focus its influence in the regional neighborhood to leverage its negotiations with the West on several issues and gain strategic concessions; recognizing the sovereignty of Teheran in the region.<sup>(3)</sup>

### **First: Characteristics and Targets of Iran's Foreign Policy**

Iran's foreign policy is multi-dimensional, influenced by domestic, regional and international factors. It has a variety of implementation tools; diplomacy is used with Western and Latin countries, whereas military support for proxies and force is

used with the Arab and Islamic countries. One of the constitutional basis's defining Iran's foreign policy is Article 154 that confirms that Iran "supports the just struggles of the freedom fighters against the oppressors in every corner of the globe." To abide by this article, Iran has carved out the sphere of its operations and the proxies to back in a selected group of countries in the Middle East and the developing world.<sup>(4)</sup>

However, instead of standing with the oppressed people, as stated in the Iranian Constitution, Iran has mobilized its resources to defend those involved in oppression, as in Syria. The most important targets of Iran's foreign policy can be reviewed as follows:

- A. To consolidate its political influence as part of the anti-Western axis that it seeks to establish in Third World countries.
- B. To break the wall of international isolation and show itself as an international competitive power.
- C. To control the waterways in case of any possible conflict with the West, and to keep the international sea-lanes in the region under never-ending tension.
- D. To gain the support of African countries in the U.N. and to circumvent U.S. and Israeli influence in Africa.
- E. To export the Iranian revolution by establishing cultural centers in several countries to spread Shiism.
- F. To provide economic assistance and aid as part of its soft policies.

Iranian policy is clearly visible and embedded in Khomeini's speech on the -1 year Iranian revolution anniversary, February 1980, 11, when he said, "We should try hard to export our revolution to world." And the Iranian leadership that succeeded him reiterated this policy.<sup>(5)</sup>

After the Iraq-Iran war and perpetual threats with exporting the revolution to the regional states, Iran resorted to use various new methods to influence Arab public opinion, such as the media and smart diplomacy;

- A. To show the love of Ahl Al Bait (the family Prophet Muhammad) and to use their special rank in the neighboring countries to expand its influence. For this objective, Iran has supported research centers, conferences and symposia, in this regard.
- B. To promote eye-catching slogans such as, social justice, freedom, and liberation from Western hegemony.
- C. To improve the image of Iran's regime and Twelver Shiism (Imamah)

Iran's project aims to impose itself as a regional power and to embed its role in the region to serve its interests. Iran's regional project is pivoting around Velayat-e Faqih and exporting the revolution. These two have a religious and ideological background, along with a legal dimension, given their inclusion in the Iranian Constitution.

Chapter 1 in the Iranian Constitution upholds the importance of the Jurist Leader. As he is the ruler by God's command on earth and the guardian of all Muslims. In Article 11, Chapter 1, Iran's duty to the Islamic nation is defined, to bring about political, economic and cultural unity to the Islamic world.<sup>(6)</sup>

Iran's regional project is ideological, as it is ambitious for universality and alliances with regions such as Africa, Asia and Latin America. However, Iran clashes with European powers in more than one issue. The most famous means of tension is its nuclear program, as well as it clashed with the U.S.-Israeli project in the region. Iran exerts all its energy to implement its 'global' project in all fields. In this regard, Warren Christopher, the former U.S. Secretary of State, spoke in 1995 about Iran's activity to implement its global project, "wherever you look around, you'll find the devilish hand of Iran in the region."<sup>(7)</sup>

The Shah's project restored the old glory days of Iran and attracted the attention of the great powers towards Iran's regional role that would be converted into a political project with extreme religious components, after the revolution. This project did not only seek to attain the recognition of Iran's role, but also the Islamic and regional role of Iran. So to "Export the revolution" become critical to Iran's Foreign policy and decision-making processes. Some promote that Iran's projects in the Middle East are a substitute to the Greater Middle East Project and similar projects proposed by the U.S. The export of the Iranian revolution has taken on a new dimension, which is to make the Arab region a vital area for Iran's security and a pivotal field in confronting opponents outside its borders, which is quite like the U.S.-Israeli strategy. According to Arab-Iranian affairs, Iran has exploited the Zionist-Western offensive on Arabs by attacking them in Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, the Arabian Gulf and the Red Sea region. Consequently, allowing Iran to achieve wider regional influence and elevate its international status to support its interests.<sup>(8)</sup>

Moreover, it has exploited the Arab region as a battlefield to show off its regional power in confronting the U.S. after it succeeded in transferring the battle to outside its borders. Particularly to the Arab territories (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen). Also, it has succeeded in imposing new rules in its ongoing tensions with the U.S, given its strong grip over major regional issues and becoming a key player that cannot be ignored in many crises, like the last one with ISIS.<sup>(9)</sup>

Iran has become a real threat to the Arab states as its weapons program has exceeded its defense requirements, along with its controversial nuclear program. Also, Iran has interfered in Arab affairs aiming to expand and occupy the vacuum of power in areas such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Iran's regional project in the Middle East was confirmed by Khomeini's advisor, Hossein Shariatmadari, when he stated, "we completely control the situation in Middle East."<sup>(10)</sup>

Accordingly, Iran set up -50year plans to spread Shiism across the region to implement its expansionist project. Moreover, it has a plan particularized for each

country to penetrate it and bring it under Iranian control.

The Israeli and American projects have contributed in entrenching Iran's project and opening the gate to its existence on the ground in the region. Also, they have indirectly helped in implementing Iran's strategy in the region, as the U.S. project removed the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq. These two were the worst archrivals towards Iran, holding back its ambitions in the East and the West.

During President Obama's reign, the U.S. and Europe opened the door for negotiations with Iran which were strengthened with the election of the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani in 2013. The first call ever between the Iranian and American Presidents since the Iranian Revolution 1979 came during President Rouhani's visit to the U.N. headquarters in New York in 2013, which was described by those who are interested in U.S.-Iranian relations as a spark to take for granted Iran's role as a nuclear power. This policy was under the U.S umbrella of restraining the role of oil in the Gulf States. Especially, since the U.S. had become the largest producer after discovering shale gas and oil. Along with an expected increase in Iraq's oil production. Taking into consideration that Iraq is under Iranian influence—along with Iran's oil and gas production- western investments would be attracted to this troubled country. Besides this, the U.S. and Europe believe that Iran has a deep history and is a polarizing power. It is reliable enough as a counterbalance to the region's Sunni powers, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

### **Second: The Red Sea in Iran's policy**

Africa has been significant for Iran's ambitious foreign policy. Iranian naval activity in the Red Sea and Suez Canal has increased since the last decade, as well as Iran reinforcing its presence in Port Sudan. This is supported with its military existence in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Somali coast under the pretext of combating maritime piracy.<sup>(11)</sup>

Iran has been paving the way for its projects in Africa by having its officials visit many African States. The former Iranian President, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, visited in 1996 six African states; Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Tanzania. Later, in 2005 the Iranian President Mohammad Khatami visited seven African states; Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali, Benin, Zimbabwe and Uganda. However, during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reign Iran's activities noticeably increased in Africa, as he visited Comoros, Djibouti, Kenya, Zambia and Senegal in 2009, followed with a visit to Zimbabwe and Uganda in 2010. Not only that, Iran also hosted the Iranian-African Rapprochement Forum with 30 African States; embracing presidents, foreign minister's, elite intellectuals and academics in economic and scientific affairs to augment their mutual relations.<sup>(12)</sup>

It is worth mentioning here that Iran has a special relationship with Sudan. Many Iranian Presidents have successively visited Sudan. President Rafsanjani paid two

visits to Sudan in 1991 and 1996; President Khatami visited Khartoum during his African tour in 2006; and President Ahmadinejad twice visited in 2008 and 2011. The Sudanese President Omar Bashir reacted positively and in return visited Iran many times. His first visit was in the Islamic Summit Conference in 1997 and the second one was in 2006.<sup>(13)</sup>

The Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Mohammad Baqri called on the Iranian private sector to strengthen economic ties with Africa highlighting that Africa is an important Iranian field by stating, "Iran has a comprehensive plan in Africa including politics, economics and culture... this is the curtain where the great powers hide their ambitions behind, in Africa."<sup>(14)</sup>

Iran through its influence across Africa has managed to get an observer seat at the African Union (AU). It endeavors to win the hearts and minds of Africans by infrastructure projects and energy generation.

Iran's role is overlapping with many regional and international powers by undertaking Africa as a battle field. Iran believes that Africa is fertile soil in which the seeds of Shiism and Persian culture can grow and resist western culture and ideology that has been rooted since colonialization.

Iran pays great attention to the Horn of Africa because it is considered a key player in the future of the Middle East. Given Iran's disagreements with the west, it looks to generate new leverage (i.e. Horn of Africa) for its nuclear program which has become the most controversial issue in the world.

By establishing economic ties with African States, Iran tries to find substitute markets to overcome the western blockade and import uranium for its nuclear program. Also, Iran has strengthened its bonds with African countries bordering the Red Sea to have a strong grip over the seaports, given it real leverage with the West, as the possible shutting down of seaports hangs as a dark cloud over the West.<sup>(15)</sup>

The Red Sea, particularly the Strait of Bab Mandeb is a key strategic channel for international trade movements. Iran, because of its conflict with the West, tries to take control of the most strategic locations, so it can preempt any imminent attack and maintain its influence across the region. Iran has always exerted itself to improve its influence in the countries bordering the Red Sea and East Africa. Iran seeks to get rooted near the strategic straits of the Arabian Peninsula (Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Bab Mandeb) to support its position in the current international equation.

Iran is aware of the strategic importance of this region. It is the gate to the world through the key seaports linking the Atlantic and Indian Ocean. It is the perfect area to carry out political, economic and military activities. Iran's strategy in Africa aims to strengthen its political influence, improve its economy, export the Iranian Revolution, and establish a transport network that facilitates smuggling weapons and transferring cross-border fighters in to conflict areas. It also aims to counter Arab stimulus in East Africa and the Red Sea.

Taking control over the Red Sea is one of the targets of Iran's 2025 military strategy. In 2010, Djibouti and Iran conducted a joint naval exercise near the strategic Strait of Bab Mandeb threatening navigation freedom. However, in 2015, Djibouti cut diplomatic ties with Iran, affecting greatly this strategy<sup>(16)</sup>.

Iranian newspapers reported that Iran sent submarines to the Red Sea "with the goal of collecting information and identifying other countries' combat vessels," without stating the exact number, Fars News Agency reported that sending these submarines was after "senior Iranian military officials announced their willingness to send these submarines to carry out long-term missions."

After the Arab Spring, Iran conducted intelligence surveys in the Red Sea and its bordering states, and deployed security forces in this region. It funded the security forces which were supported by Colonel Qaddafi to reactivate its operations. It also recruited several Yemenis and Eritreans especially fishermen to carry out intelligence missions. And it gave the fishermen working from Bab Mandeb to the Suez Canal advanced fishing boats. Eritrea leased some parts of Dahlak Archipelago to Iran to break the embargo and penetrate the security system in the Red Sea. However, the Saudi-led Arab coalition managed to revoke these agreements and overcome this collaboration, subsequently Iran lost one of its key strategic partners in the region. Without a shadow of a doubt, Iran legitimizes its military existence across the region under the pretext of countering Israel.<sup>(17)</sup>

Iran's regional project has numerous targets and ambitions linked to; national security, doctrine, sectarianism, and increasing its dominance over the weakest regional territories. Iran has become a strong regional player because of many factors:<sup>(18)</sup>

A. The major countries of the moderate camp in the Arab world have been weakened and unable to propose a well-defined project for the future of the region. They are sinking deep by trying to maintain a fragile status quo and fighting to survive the consequences of supporting either implicitly or explicitly the U.S. invasion of Iraq, turning a blind eye to the Palestinian resistance, and blindly following the U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

B. The terrible failure of the U.S. in Iraq paved the way to Iran's growing influence.

C. The dangerous divisions between Arab States isolated Syria, which has subsequently become tied firmer with Iran.

### **Third: Iran and the driving forces in the Red Sea**

Iran seeks to defend its allies and interests, break its blockade, and relieve international sanctions. By working actively to gain international support and by playing a key role beyond the region, Iran can manipulate the balance of power and contest international pressure.<sup>(19)</sup>



## 1- Iran and Yemen

The great triumph Iran achieved in penetrating Yemeni territories through the Houthi rebels made Yemen its top priority. Subsequently, Iran's strategy in the Red Sea changed to meet the new conditions. Iran's policy in Yemen has two dimensions:

**A. Metaphysical:** It is asserted in the theology books of Twelver Shiism that Yemen is one of the signs of the arrival of Imam Mahdi (the absent Imam), and other signs have been emerging in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. According to the Shiite belief, the prophecy says Yamani is a fighter who will come out from Yemen and lead an Islamic revolution to Makkah in Saudi Arabia. After taking over the Arabian Peninsula, he will head to Iraq to support the Imam's followers against Sufyani army.

**B. Geo-strategical:** It stems from the metaphysical and Iran's regional and international conflict. Iran has become a very active player in the region and has expanded its influence across the most significant areas. Its presence in the region facilitates its linkage with its network of proxies whether with the Houthis in Yemen, or with Palestinian resistance factions. Also, it secures its economic interests and contributes in spreading its ideology and sectarian revolution.<sup>(20)</sup>

Iran co-founded and mobilized the Houthis rebels in northern Yemen. It supported them with money and weapons to implement its plans in the Arabian Peninsula. The Interior Minister Rashad Alimi confirmed that the Houthis movement was founded in 1982 immediately after the Iranian-Iraqi war, but it was officially formed –with Iran's support- between 1984<sup>(21)</sup>-1983.

Since the Arab Spring, dramatic changes have happened in Yemen, so Iran has updated its strategies and plans to meet the continuous changes. It has strengthened its presence in the Red Sea to counter the Decisive Storm Operation to restore the legitimate government in Yemen – that was toppled in a coup by the Iranian-backed Houthi militia. The war for dominance in the Red Sea between the Saudi-led coalition and Iran has become never-ending and deepened.

## 2- Iran and Egypt

Iran cut all diplomatic ties with Egypt in 1980 over its Camp David agreement with Israel. It named a street in Tehran after Khaled Islambouli who assassinated the Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, resulting in Egyptian-Iranian relations remaining in a deep freeze for thirty years. In 2009, Egypt accused Iran of sponsoring and funding an organization aiming at spreading Shiism across Egypt. The leader of this Shiite organization visited Iran several times where he met Shiite clerics, as well as receiving large amounts of money.<sup>(22)</sup>

During President Hosni Mubarak's reign, Egypt was much more stable and stronger which made Iranian dominance over the Red Sea basin quite difficult. Egypt did not allow the Iranian vessels to pass through the Suez Canal. However, after the Egyptian Revolution, Egypt collapsed and became unstable and fragile because of

numerous internal crises. Iran seized this opportunity and penetrated slowly in to the Red Sea. Iran backed the Arab revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt claiming that it supports freedom, justice and self-determination. But, it fought back the Syrian revolution politically, economically and militarily. The ousted Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi expressed a desire of re-establishing diplomatic relations with Iran. The Egyptian Foreign Minister Nabil Araby stated, "Iran is a regional country. We had long lasting relations during different phases. Egypt has opened a new page with all countries of the world, including Iran."<sup>(23)</sup>

Iran responded positively and quickly to the new Egyptian posture. It had the permission to pass two navy ships through the Suez Canal- heading to Syria to support Bashar Assad. The Egyptian-Iranian relations improved as they had mutual visits by high-ranking officials in international and Islamic forums. Egypt welcomed Iranian tourists. Also, it was announced the establishment of the first Shiite party in Egypt founded by Ahmad Rasem Nafis who said, "Egypt's security is Iran's security."<sup>(24)</sup>

Everything has changed after the Muslim Brotherhood was excluded from the Egyptian government. The Egyptian-Gulf relations reunited again, especially after General Sisi became president. Egypt participated in the Decisive Storm Operation in Yemen, joined the Arab-coalition and international Counterterrorism Alliance. It deployed its navy ships across the Red Sea in coordination with the Arab-coalition forces which led Egypt into direct hostility with Iran.

### **3- Iran and Sudan**

Iran successfully managed to deeply entrench its relations with Sudan. Sudan and Iran signed a corporation agreement in 2010 in Khartoum, which focused on deeper cooperation in the fields of economics, military, technology and training. This agreement is complementary to the 2008 Mutual Defense Agreement signed by Iran's Defense Minister. Iranian presidents and high-ranks officials have always visited Sudan such as, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (who visited Sudan with a large delegation of more than 150 members in 1991), President Khatami (2004), and President Ahmadinejad (visited Sudan twice in 2007 and 2011). There is no Arab country that has as strong relations with Sudan as Iran has. These continuous visits by Iranian presidents over the years clearly shows how Iran is truly interested in Sudan.<sup>(25)</sup>

Iran paid 300\$ million on behalf of Sudan for the Chinese arms deal it signed. In return, Iran signed an agreement with Sudan to use Port Sudan facilities for a period of 25 years, Iran uses the port now as a logistical base.<sup>(26)</sup>

Iran used Sudan as a strategic link to support Hezbollah and as a corridor allowing weapons to reach the Palestinian resistance factions. Iran's navy operations were carried out smoothly in Sudan. The helicopter carrier Kharg and the destroyer Naqdi arrived at Port Sudan, in October 2012. This collaboration was turned upside down

after Sudan froze its diplomatic ties with Iran over attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and consulate in Mashhad. Later, Sudan joined the Saud-led coalition. It was a major blow to Iran; its expansionist project and interventionist activities in the East Africa and Red Sea coastline were almost dead.

#### **4- Iran and Israel**

Since the establishment of Israel in 1948 until the Shah's down fall, Iranian-Israeli relations were strong and active. Tehran was the center of Israeli Mossad activities where its intelligence missions were simply accomplished. The new Israeli State was supported in all the wars it had against Arabs by Iran. Oil was a key factor in the Arab-Israeli conflict, so Iran supplied Israel with all its oil needs by establishing an oil pipeline from Eilat-Mediterranean Sea without crossing the Suez Canal- it was officially established in 1957. Later, in the 1950s-1960-s, Iran, US and Israel converged against the growing dominance of communism in the Middle East to protect US regional interests. They collaborated and exerted all their energy to restrain the Arab ambitions to have their own national Arab union, and stigmatized them as 'Radical Arabs'. The Arab dreams were clearly displayed in Abdul Nasser's reign in Egypt and the July 14 Revolution in Iraq. The Iranian-Israeli relations greatly developed during the reign of the last Shah of Iran Reza Pahlavi. Zahra' Operation was one of the most significant cooperation agreements between Israel and Iran. In 1977, they conducted a secret agreement to develop Israeli medium-range ballistic missiles, Jericho II, and Iran paid 260\$ million in oil to Israel, also permitted the Israeli air force to conduct reconnaissance flights over Iranian territory.<sup>(27)</sup>

After the Iranian Revolution, the US- Israeli-Iranian relations explicitly were cut but implicitly remained the same. Israel supplied Iran with the needed weapons in its war against Iraq. They had one main goal; to demolish Iraq. The U.S. overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan has indirectly supported Iran's strategy in the region. The US had simply uprooted Iran's two worst enemies. It did not cost Iran a penny. In 1986, the Iran-Contra scandal (a political scandal involving the sale of arms to Iran) happened during President Donald Reagan's tenure. The Israelis sold weapons to Iran; four months later, the U.S. sent arms directly to Tehran. Israel had handed Iran 100 Taurus KEPD missiles on Aug. ,30 1985; Iran received 408 missiles of the same type on Sep. 1985 ,14.<sup>(28)</sup>

Iran and Israel have been competing for influence in the Middle East. Iran seeks to curtail Israel's influence because it is the strongest competitor in the region. Trita Parsi, author of the book 'Traacherous Alliance' said, "There is no ideological conflict between Iran and Israel, but there is geopolitical rivalry."<sup>(29)</sup>

Despite their common interests, the Israeli still believes that the Iranian nuclear program is its biggest existential threat. Israel wants to remain as the only nuclear power and sees Iran's nuclear program as a real threat. The U.S. policy supports the Israeli position, as it does not allow any Middle Eastern country beyond Israel to

have a nuclear program. Yossi Beilin, the former Israeli Justice Minister said, “Iran under Khatami’s reign, Iran post-election, is a state of multi-interpretations and complexities, much more than we used to. With the positive changes merging in Iran, there is a need to change our methodology with them, and there is a golden opportunity in our hands.” He called for reuniting the old ties between Israel and Iran. “Our problem started with Khomeini who used Israel as a pretext to enhance unity of the Iranian people. Today, I’d like to see Iran from a different perspective than what we used to, twenty years ago,” he added.<sup>(30)</sup>

Israel is part of Iran’s expansionist strategy in the region. So, Iran intensifies its enmity with Israel to justify its takeover of the main water lanes in the Red Sea, which also can be used as a bargaining lever in any anticipated attack or political crisis.

### **5- Iran-Palestine Cause**

Iran has always seemed supportive to the Palestinian cause and it has assailed the two-state solution. The aforementioned author Trita Parsi said, “Most of the Arab masses believe Iran’s supportive position towards the Palestinian Cause is deeply rooted in the revolutionary regime’s ideology, Islamic unity and solidarity. Iran’s position is- unlike what most people think about- pragmatic in dealing with international relations seeking to dominate the region at the expense of its neighboring states. This ideology had been formed and implemented during the rule of Shah Reza Pahlavi.”<sup>(31)</sup>

Iran is Hamas’ most important and explicit sponsor. The Hamas-PLO disagreement had become much more divergent and complicated for such a long time until it reached a reconciliation point in 2011. The long-term disagreement negatively affected the Palestinian cause. The Palestinian reconciliation will negatively affect the Iranian role, as Iran cannot anymore exploit the Palestinian divisions to justify its interventionist activities.

### **6- Iran and Eretria**

Eretria possesses is of the most strategic areas of the world given its geographical and geopolitical significance. It is strategically located in the Horn of Africa, on the Red Sea and includes the Dahlak Archipelago and other islands along the Red Sea coast. Iran has strongly spread its influence across Eretria, while the U.S and Israeli presence is barely noticed. This sounds quite paradoxical, as the two adversaries coexist in one place.<sup>(32)</sup>

It seems that the U.S and Iran have already agreed upon their respective spheres of influence. In 2010, the Iranian mask fell off; the Houthis rebels received logistical support from Iran, it committed violations across the Saudi borders, and smuggled weapons to the Houthis through its naval base in Assab Eritrea. Al-Hayat newspaper reported “Yemeni Coast Guard seized ships in Eritrea heading towards Yemen through the Red Sea to funnel weapons to the Houthis in 2009 and 2010.”<sup>(33)</sup>

Iran continued to leverage its relationship with Eritrea in conducting bilateral ties and agreements. The Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki paid a visit to Iran on 21 May 2008 where they signed cooperation agreements. The Eritrean President stated, “We formulated a plan to confront the Western dominance in the region.”<sup>(34)</sup>

The Iranian military presence in Eritrea has always raised questions about the secretive transactions and funneling arms and military advice to the Houthi rebels in Yemen – given the evidence of smuggling by Iran to the Houthis in 2010. The former Yemeni Foreign Minister, Dr. Abu Bakr Qirbi stated in an interview with the Middle East Newspaper, March 2007, 17 “The Houthi rebels had received weapons and money from Arab countries and religious institutions in and outside Iran.”<sup>(35)</sup>

Iran and Eritrea signed a military and security cooperation agreement granting Iran exclusive control to develop, supervise and revamp Eritrea’s Assab Oil Company. Also Iran refines the crude oil which will be exported. The IRNA reported that Ahmadinejad said in May, 2009, “There is no ceiling on how far cooperation and bilateral ties between Iran and Eritrea can go.”

After reviewing thoroughly the key strategic geopolitical location of Eritrea explains why and how Iran was attracted to use Eritrea as a strategic base to increase its dominance over the region. Eritrea granted Iran complete control over its islands and ports on the Red Sea and Horn of Africa to facilitate Iran’s military operations. Eritrea hopes to have some economic gains, in return. If Iran managed to control the strategically most important straits of the world; Bab-el-Mandeb and Hormuz, it would smoothly implement its expansionist project in the region.

## **7- Iran and Djibouti**

Djibouti is a center of international and multilayered influence. The U.S, China France, and other western countries have footprints in this highly strategic country. Iran, however, found a way to muddle through and embed its influence there. Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh’s official visit to Iran in 2006 was a sparkling opportunity to conduct bilateral agreements on the economy, education, and security. Iran granted scholarships to Djiboutian students and funded the building of the Djibouti parliament. The reasons behind this Iranian generosity was the great gains it would have by using the strategic location of Djibouti on the Southern Red Sea near the Strait of Bab Mandeb. However, Djibouti denied facilitating Iran’s military operations on its territory.<sup>(36)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Iran has imprinted its dominance over the countries of the Horn of Africa, the Nile Basin, and the Red Sea. It achieved its goal and spread its influence near the strategic straits of the Southern Red Sea region. It soft power by signing cooperative agreements and providing monetary support to persuade the African countries to the Iranian plan. Though, it managed to partially remove the Arab strategic

role in these countries, its expansionist ambitions faced 'Arab resistance', which circumvented Iran in some strategic sites. Also, its strategy in Sudan collapsed via Sudan's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and its participation in the Decisive Storm Operation. Later, Sudan, cut all diplomatic ties with Iran over the attack on Saudi embassy and consulate in Iran. Iran has also lost Egypt as a future partner after the Muslim Brotherhood was removed from power. Iran was endeavoring hard to improve its diplomatic ties with Egypt when the Muslim Brotherhood was in power. Later, Egypt moved towards Saudi Arabia and backed the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Finally, Iran received a hard blow from the Palestinian reconciliation process, which resulted Gaza being handed over to the Palestinian Authority and as a result lost its final bargaining chip, Hamas.

The Iranian existence has been weakened by regional developments. Its military presence and collaboration with the countries along the Red Sea coast resulted in a massive backlash. It is worth to mention that Iran would face new challenges as the U.S. has devised a new strategy to counter its expansionist project in the region. The U.S and the Gulf States are working shoulder to shoulder to implement this strategy, which will curtail Iran's growing influence in Yemen, Lebanon, and Palestine. This means that confronting Iran's influence in the Red Sea region is highly important as well.

In fact, Iran's growing influence in the Red Sea region is much stronger than that of the Arabs, which threatens their national security and navigation freedom. Therefore, the Arab States must counter Iran's expansionist project and find the best ways and means to strengthen ties with the African countries. In this regard, establishing a regional organization uniting the Arab and African countries would be a very positive step forward. This organization would coordinate economic, political and security affairs between these countries; set security plans to protect navigation routes in the Gulf of Aden and Red Sea; open new promising markets for oil and non-oil exports; and improve trade relations. If this policy is implemented on the ground, Iran's influence will be minimized. Only then can the Arab and African countries enjoy long-term peace and stability.

## Endnotes

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