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Iran in the Face of the International Scramble for Africa

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Iran's subtle infiltration of Africa has increased due to the regional and international rivalry over this continent. In order to achieve some gains and circumvent its isolation resulting from international sanctions, Iran has aligned itself with several African nations to win their votes in international organizations, to achieve its goals, and to preserve its sovereignty and security against any external threat.

The international competition for oil and uranium in Africa has entered a new era; the two key determinants of international relations and foreign policy, whereby Iran gives promises of economic aid in energy and construction and sells them oil cheaply as a way of improving their ties with Tehran.

Based on that assumption, this study aims to tackle Iran's subtle infiltration of Africa and expose its influence on this continent in comparison with other influential regional and international powers that will use any pretext to antagonize Tehran. Furthermore, it focuses on how the Iranian Foreign Ministry has benefited from Israel's infiltration of the African continent to find suitable tools and methods to achieve its goals, especially after Iran's growing role and status as a regional power.

This study will try to answer one main question; what is the impact of the international scramble for Africa with regard to Iran's growing subtle power on this continent through the following central issues?

I. Iran's presence in Africa: its goals and areas of control

Iran has improved its relations with some African nations that antagonize the USA's presence in Africa and gained their support, especially for its civilian nuclear program as follows:

1. The East and the Horn of Africa

Iran's strategy in the East and the Horn of Africa and the neighboring countries on the Red Sea aims to improve its political influence and to establish an anti-Western axis comprising these countries. Nevertheless, the growing Iranian presence in the Horn of Africa has negatively impacted Arabian national security as much as Israel's activities in this region.¹

2. West Africa

West Africa has been a theater for regional and international rivalry due to the increasing discoveries of oil in this region. Moreover, Iran is trying very hard to improve its relations with the uranium-rich countries in this region due to its critical need for this material for its nuclear program. For example, Iran offered to transfer its nuclear energy expertise to Nigeria to help it overcome the shortcomings in its electrical supplies. Gambia also enjoys good relations with Tehran, supports its civilian nuclear ambitions, and shares its hostile position toward the West.²

3. South Africa

Iran focuses on building strong economic and political relations with the most influential nations in the world regardless of religion, especially those rich in oil and uranium. It also seeks to gain these countries' support in the international arena against any new sanctions resulting from its bad human rights record and nuclear program. Consequently, Tehran succeeded in having some of the international resolutions against it abolished thanks to its southern friends – countries to the south of the Sahara desert.³ South Africa, for example, did not vote for the UN resolutions condemning Iran for its human rights violations and nuclear program. Zimbabwe also supported

Iran's right to develop its own civilian nuclear program and signed ten agreements concerning technology and the generation of electricity, as well as investing in the energy and other sectors.⁴

II. Iran's Ambitions and International Influence in Africa

Iranian-African relations cannot be explained without looking at the regional and international influence in this continent that drives the international antagonizing policies toward Iran as follows:

1. Iran's and America's growing influence in Africa

Following 9/11, the US played a major role in Africa due to the US administration's policy of mobilizing the world against so-called, "Islamic Terrorism" and the discovery of oil on this continent. Furthermore, the Bush administration rationed out its economic aid for African nations according to their commitment to countering terrorism, which turned Africa into a strategic US base for oil supplies, the home of many American military bases, and areas for its military exercises.

In fact, the United States used certain procedures to achieve its goals in Africa as follows:

A. Improving political and diplomatic relations.

The US improved its relations with African oil-producing states by intensifying its military presence there and visits by high-ranking US officials to negotiate the security and energy issues on this continent. For example, President Barack Obama visited Ghana in July 2009 and addressed the African Nations, followed by his visit to Nigeria, one of the most important African oil exporters to the United States.⁵

The United States also settled the conflicts in the areas close to the strategic oil fields in the Nigeria Delta, which could have been a threat to its oil supplies, through conducting joint military exercises to protect these oil fields and the international shipping lanes.⁶

Nigeria succeeded in settling its border disputes with both Sao Tome and Equatorial Guinea, which paved the way for American oil companies to invest in these areas.⁷ Washington responded positively to the suggestion by the Institute for Advanced Strategic and Political Studies (IASPS) by establishing a military base in Sao Tome in order to protect the movements of oil tankers in the Gulf of Guinea according to the African Coast Security Program (ACSP). According to this program, the United States naval and air forces will receive all the necessary services to improve its naval capabilities in this region.

With this American support, Equatorial Guinea signed a border demarcation agreement with Nigeria, which is clear evidence of the importance of American interests over any other considerations related to human rights. In fact, the need for African oil motivated Washington to maintain strong political relations with Nigeria, which has become the fourth most important destination for American investments in Africa regardless of its bad human rights record.⁸

B. Political and developmental assistance.

US aid for Africa has increased in recent years, especially health programs to achieve certain strategic goals such as:

1. Promoting strategic partnerships
2. Countering terrorism
3. Democratic transition
4. Enhancing regional security
5. Boosting economic growth and development
6. Providing humanitarian programs and developmental assistance
7. Supporting regional organizations⁹

The United States has also provided significant economic support for African oil-producing countries such as:

1. The Amerada Hess Corporation granted \$18 billion to the Gabon oil industry to increase Angolan oil production by up to 3.2 million barrels per day.
2. It also granted \$368 thousand to generate electricity in Botswana.
3. And \$695 thousand to develop the natural gas industry in Cameroon.¹⁰

C. Military aid.

The US Congressional Committee for Africa adopted an African program for training and aid worth \$660 million spread over five years within the framework of the American partnership with African militaries to improve their capabilities in the peacekeeping processes.

Washington also established the African ARP peace-keeping program with an annual budget of \$30-40 million to finance, train, and support African participation in the peace-keeping processes, especially Nigeria,¹¹ and re-deployed its military bases in oil-rich territories such as the American Unified Military Command for Africa "AFRICOM," which aims to secure American strategic interests on this continent. All in all, US policy relies on preventative security measures in many humanitarian, economic, and social issues along with its military and security precautions.¹²

Based on that assumption, the US is confronting Iran's growing influence in Africa, where Iran is using a joint religious doctrine and selling oil for low prices as a way of improving its relations with African nations.

Iran is also confronting US influence in Sudan because of its strategic location, through improving its political, economic, and military relations with this country to help export the Iranian Revolution, which was evident in Iran's condemnation of the international ruling to arrest President Omar Bashir, which Tehran described as an "unjust rule driven by political perspectives" in exchange for the Sudan government's support for Iran's right to develop civilian nuclear capabilities.¹³

On the other hand, with the beginning of the decisive conflict in the Yemen by the Arab coalition under Saudi leadership, Saudi strategy has started building strong, strategic relations with African nations, which manifested itself in the participation of Sudanese soldiers in the Arab coalition to support the legitimate government in the Yemen after an agreement with Riyadh to decrease Sudan's political and military cooperation with Tehran.

In fact, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia adopted a policy of rapprochement with African nations in order to confront Iran's subtle infiltration of this continent, which became evident through the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Aljubeir's visits to more than one African country to claim Iran's bad intentions toward this continent.

Arab African countries such as Sudan, Somalia, Djibouti, and Comoros responded immediately to Saudi Arabia's call, cut their ties with Iran, and expelled the Iranian Ambassadors from their countries, especially after the attack on the Saudi Embassy in Iran, which resulted in Sudan's participation in the Ra'd Alshamal military exercises in Hafr Albatin in northern Saudi Arabia, along with 20 other countries.¹⁴

Aljubeir briefed the African leaders he visited on Iran's practices in some African countries, which made them stand by Saudi Arabia and establish unconditional partnerships with the Kingdom in many areas, especially after the attacks on the Saudi Embassy in Iran.

In essence, Saudi relations with the countries in the Horn of Africa are hindering the export of the Khomeini Revolution to the African continent.¹⁵

2. Iran in the face of Israeli influence in Africa.

Africa has become a theater for conflict between Iran and Israel to dominate this continent, which is expected to increase in the near future.

Iran recently tried to establish links with all international, African, and Arab communities through all possible means. Following the nuclear deal with the P5+1

group, Tehran adopted the “The Soft Power” policy to lobby for international support, especially on its right to develop a civilian nuclear program and convey a message to the international community that it has the ability to open up to the world and change the stereotype of extremism about Iran.

The Iranian president’s visit to some African countries was evidence of Iran’s interest in this continent. He visited Djibouti to improve Iran’s ties with this country because of its strategic location next to the shipping lanes on the Red Sea and its land borders with Eritrea, which is, along with Sudan, an arms-smuggling corridor. The Iranian president also won his Djibouti counterpart’s support for Iran’s nuclear program and its role as a regional guardian. This rapprochement disturbed Israel and the West, as did the fact that Iran’s influence in Djibouti might extend to the whole of the Middle East based on the Somali, Sudanese, and Eritrean models, which enjoy strong diplomatic relations with Tehran.¹⁶

However, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has adopted a long-term strategy toward African nations through building strong economic and trade partnerships with these countries; this has become a top priority for Saudi foreign policy. For Riyadh, the Horn of Africa occupies a strategic location close to the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait in order to support the Saudi military operations in the Yemen, which motivated the Saudi military leadership to visit some areas in Djibouti in preparation for the establishment of military bases,¹⁷ which is in fact a step toward confronting Iran’s presence in Africa. This message became clearer when Djibouti’s foreign minister announced that his country had felt, from the very start, that their relations with Tehran were suspicious and distrustful, leading to their breaking up with Iran.

In fact, the Saudi presence in Djibouti is of great importance in light of the international scramble for this country as one of the most important international shipping lanes, home of the American Lemonier military base since 2001, and the French base close to Djibouti airport.¹⁸

Saudi’s overtures toward Djibouti began with the gift of five state-of-the-art speedboats to this country, and an intense military build-up on its territory. These developments contributed to the success of the operations by the Arab coalition warships in liberating Mion Island and the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait from the Houthi rebels. Tactically, the Yemeni national army took over this Strait, which passes through Djibouti.¹⁹

Furthermore, Kenya and Uganda maintained strong relations with Iran on one side and the US and Israel on the other. They benefited from Iranian economic aid, technical support, oil, and arms. All in all, the East African countries established a pragmatic model for the competing nations with a foothold in the Horn of Africa,

which raised Israeli fears, as stated by the Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman during his visit to four nations in this region in 2009.

In response to the Iranian-Eritrean military cooperation, Israel deployed its Navy to face any surprise threats that consisted of, according to Israeli General Jacob Amidor, rocket boats, helicopters, and submarines located in critical positions in the Red Sea along the Suez Canal. He also added that Israel has full cooperation with the American Fifth Fleet, and recommended in his report to the Israeli National Security Council the necessity of confronting Iran's infiltration of Africa.²⁰

Israel feared that Iran's strong relations with some African nations might translate into logistical and military support, which made it plan its strategic goals in Africa based on the following approaches:

- A.** Breaking its isolation imposed by Arab countries.
- B.** The attempt to win support and a kind of political legitimacy in the international arena.
- C.** Receiving African countries' support in settling the Arab-Israeli conflict.
- D.** Maintaining Israel's water security, which is considered a pillar of any country's presence and expansion.
- E.** Building a strategic base to achieve regional supremacy and target Arab national security.
- F.** Achieving freedom of navigation in the Red Sea as one of the basic foundations of Israel's security and its military and economic requirements.²¹

Israel has adopted several ways to penetrate the African societies relying on the so called, "The Israeli Model" that has been supported by the international community through the development aids. Many Israeli writers described this strategy as the real application of the Soft Power principle created by Josef Nay.

The development of assistance to Africa

Israel relied on the international cooperation program to achieve its strategy toward African nations by providing agricultural, irrigation, and urban and cooperative planning assistance. It expanded its activities on this continent through the establishment of the International "MASHAV" Cooperation Unit in the Israeli Foreign Ministry to manage and coordinate this program of developmental assistance.

One of the most important types of assistance introduced by Israel in the agricultural and food security fields was the "The African Market Garden" project, which aims to minimize the dangers and increase productivity in small family farms located on barren lands.²²

Military and strategic assistance

Israel has adopted diverse military tactics to increase its influence and assume control of African political organizations. Israel's infiltration has extended to include the establishment of military bases and intelligence agencies, and participate in the protection of some African regimes. In fact, Israel has succeeded in building military relations with more than 25 African nations.²³

Israel's presence in Eritrea is limited but influential, which was evident in the American Stratford Agency's disclosure of information in 2012 about Israeli naval units in the Dahlak Archipelago and Msawi Port, and the monitoring post in the Amba Sweira mountains, which aims to gather intelligence on any unusual activities in the Red Sea, especially by Iran.

The security issue is the biggest motive for Eritrea to improve its relations with Israel after gaining independence from Ethiopia, which has become a landlocked country and is trying to reestablish a water corridor onto the Red Sea by taking control of the Port of Assab.

In order to end its international isolation, Eritrea has established strong relations with Iran, which wants control of the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait and the water corridor leading to the Suez Canal. These developments have indeed turned Eritrea into a theater of conflict between the competing Middle Eastern powers (Israel and Iran), which threaten Arab interests in the region.²⁴

Trade and economic infiltration

This factor has great importance in Israel's strategy toward Africa. The trade exchange between Israel and some African nations increased in 2010 as follows:

A. Kenya: \$67 million in exports and \$18.9 million in imports.

B. Ethiopia: \$19.7 million in exports and about \$45.7 million in imports.²⁵

Israel's ultimate goal is to take control of the African mining industry and natural resources such as diamonds in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone, Ghana, and the Central African Republic, in addition to uranium in Niger. Today, Israel has the biggest companies that dominate African economies such as the agricultural Grid Abb Corporation specializing in the rehabilitation of degraded land, Alra, Motorola, Trading Kon, Solelboneh, African Hotels, and so on.

These Israeli companies won more than \$4 billion in contracts to build governmental complexes, roads, bridges, tunnels, and ports. It also exports passenger airplanes, training airplanes, warplanes, tanks, communications equipment, and missiles to these nations.²⁶

On the other hand, Iran has been using the same Israeli tools and methods to infiltrate Africa, relying mainly on developmental assistance, which provoked Israel against Iran's activities in Africa as a direct threat to its strategic interests on this continent.

III. The "Soft Power" Strategy to Materialize Iran's Infiltration of Africa

Iran's strategy toward Africa has been designed to lessen the impact of the diplomatic and economic pressure resulting from its rivalry with the West, especially the United States. The consequences of this enmity can explain the nature of this competition through the use of Iran's tools and methods in implementing its foreign policy toward Africa as follows:

1. Diplomacy and the Soft Power Strategy:

Iran has adopted a pragmatic form of diplomacy toward African nations in its competition with the US and Israel. Israel's long history of diplomatic, economic, and security ties with Africa have for a long time obstructed the expansion of Iran's influence on this continent. However, Iran made some gains in Africa when Mauritania cut its relations with Israel due to the Israeli war in Gaza in 2010.

In September 2010, Tehran hosted the Iran-Africa summit for two days. Leaders, businessmen, and diplomats from about fifty states attended the conference. In an attempt to stir up the feelings of the non-aligned countries, the Iranian President Ahmadinejad called for more cooperation between the two sides, noting that Iran and the African nations could establish an international system based on respect for these countries' rights and dignity.

Nevertheless, Iran's diplomatic efforts in Africa are still restrained for several reasons:

A. Iran's resources and capabilities, as well as its diplomatic and economic influence, are incomparable with those of the superpowers, especially the United States and China.

B. Although many of the African nations welcome cooperation with Iran, it is expected that these relations will remain restricted in case they harm African relations with more influential and stable powers.

C. Iran's secret arms trade and difficult relations with its proxy extremist factions would complicate Iranian-African relations.

D. Iran's ambitions in Africa are bound by its adverse internal economic conditions and external pressures resulting from the international sanctions.²⁷ For example, South Africa has unstable relations with Tehran but supported Iran's right to develop civilian nuclear technology. Nevertheless, it responded to international pressure and decreased its economic ties with Iran such as the Sasol Corporation, which used to be the biggest producer of coal fuel in the world, but stopped its operations in Iran and reviewed its current projects there.²⁸

Iranian diplomacy has primarily relied on a developmental assistance policy and the International Cooperation Program to achieve its goals in Africa, which is a standard model for the Soft Power policy.

It tried to sell the Iranian model through giving developmental assistance and joint ventures in technology and energy such as drilling for oil, refinery maintenance, petrochemicals and gas, agriculture, health, the construction of dams, and defense and military bases.²⁹

In Tanzania, Iran opened a Constructional Jihad Bureau to carry out any construction projects the Iranian government granted to this country and opened an educational center in the Sarka district. In Nigeria, Iran built the Jao Bridge over the Niger River using Iranian technical expertise, and transferred Iranian knowledge in the agricultural and industrial sectors, including the establishment of several automobile, shuttle, and agricultural equipment factories. In Uganda, Iran built two dams and many electrical stations on the Nile River using Water Fall Technology. In Senegal, it developed the transport sector through granting 300 Iranian-made Smind cars.³⁰

Nevertheless, the US aid programs have played a major role in obstructing Iran's influence in the countries Tehran is trying to approach, which has relatively diminished Iran's presence in Africa.

2. Economic tools and "Oil for Uranium" diplomacy:

Zimbabwe is an example of the Iranian oil for uranium policy. In addition to technology, experts, engineers, and specialist scientists, Iran's efforts to operate one nuclear fuel cycle independently in Iranian nuclear plants need sufficient quantities of uranium. In 2010, Iran signed an agreement called, "The agreement of enhancing and protecting the bilateral investment with Zimbabwe" in exchange for the oil Zimbabwe urgently needs to repair its ravaged economy. According to this agreement, Iran will be able to receive about 455 thousand tons of crude uranium to produce twenty tons of enriched uranium. However, this agreement was rejected by Zimbabwe's Parliament due to international pressure.³¹

Iranian diplomacy succeeded in making several bilateral cooperation agreements in most economical and technical sectors with African nations in addition to public and private investments on this continent. Nevertheless, African fears that Iran's developmental assistance might be linked to the exportation of the Iranian Revolution or to spreading Shiite ideology are hindering Iran's progress on this continent.

3. The sectarian issue and the consequences of Shiite expansion:

Nigeria is home to the biggest Shiite community in Africa. In Zaria, the Islamic movement is the largest Shiite organization in West Africa and looks after Shiite affairs and Al Al-Bait rituals. Fifty Shiite educational schools have been established in the cities of Cano, Baoshi, Wazaria, and Lagos, in addition to the establishment of the Islamic Nation Security library and the Foudiah School. In the media, Iranian radio broadcasts daily messages to the Nigerian people for more than three hours per day.³²

In Benin, the Iranian embassy plays an active role in reviving Shiite traditions, especially significant religious events. The Iranian community is also a major player in building schools and institutes such as the Islamic Al-Kawthar, hospitals, and clinics, and opening preaching and charity organizations and centers such as Ahl Al-Bait Al-Islami lilda'wah Watableegh-Baraco, the Al-Imam Al-Sadiq center for Da'wah and Guidance-Kandi. In most cases, young people who have a high school diploma in this country can get a scholarship in Iran.³³

In Mali, Iran's cultural center was established in the capital Bamako. There are ten schools belonging to this center, from where many Imams and preachers have graduated.

Comoros is a model for Iran's capability of infiltrating and imperialism, as well as the spread of Shiite ideology in this Muslim country. In 2006, a cultural center was established in the capital Moroni called the Al-Thaqalain center to elect and send students from this country to the Iranian Hawzas.³⁴

Closure

An Overview of the International Powers' Strategic Rivalry and their Impact on Iran's Influence in Africa

Iran's infiltration of Africa is the result of intense efforts that aim to lessen the pressure of Western sanctions on Iran. Iran's influence has been increasing in African countries, especially since signing the nuclear deal with the West on July 14, 2015, and the constant US pressure and imposition of sanctions on countries that supply Iran with fissile materials for its nuclear program.

In fact, the US is closely watching Iran's infiltration of Africa and the expansion of its interests on this continent, which was evident when the US Congress extended the sanctions on Iran for another ten years in November 2016 to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons.

Despite the American and Israeli fears of Iran's expansion in Africa, Iran has never

carried out any activities to harm American interests directly, despite the Israeli security experts' prediction of these events in case of any attack on Iran's nuclear plants, which would provoke Tehran to use all possible means to protect its interests. Indeed, Iran's current accounts in Africa are limited to achieving diplomatic and economic gains, supporting its proxies, and employing new ones.

In fact, Iran is still far from building an international coalition to create a balance of power with the West. Iran's inability to achieve its goals results from the active and alert international role of isolating Tehran and preserving the status quo, especially the latest Saudi efforts to diminish Iran's presence on the African continent. The Saudi Foreign Minister's negotiations with some African foreign ministers and officials such as South Africa, Zambia, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Benin, and so on were of great importance in improving relations between both sides. This was an extension of the intensive meetings the Saudi Foreign Minister held with African leaders in Addis Ababa during the latest African summit in addition to the negotiations he held with some Arab African countries such as Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Mauritania, and others, which demonstrated the joint Arab-African work under the leadership of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As a result, the Islamic military coalition for countering terrorism was established, whereby African nations play a major role through severing relations with Tehran and diminishing its role in Africa due to their fears about its influence and intervention, especially after the attacks on the Saudi Embassy in Iran.

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