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# Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Influence in Africa Intensive Interventions and Challenges

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Africa attracts many regional and international powers. It is geo-strategically significant in conflicts, important to the balance of power in the Middle East and actively instrumental in regional and international organizations as it has 54 sovereign states in the most densest region in the world. After Western powers had imposed sanctions on Iran over its controversial nuclear program, Iran sought to fight back by targeting their interests and extending the Shiite-Sunni conflict beyond the boundaries of the Middle East. Also, Iran managed to spread its influence over highly strategic land and sea ports to break its international isolation and support its regional proxies. Here, Africa is the perfect battle field for Iran's expansionist project.

Iran exerted all efforts possible to implement its expansionist project abroad by using soft power, along with a range of economic tools. But, it could not achieve its aspired goals; entrenching its influence and threatening its rivals in Africa. Therefore, Iran used the IRGC— the security and military apparatus parallel to the Iranian regular army that carries out Iran’s external ambitions away from the government— in secret operations in several African states, thus threatening African security and inciting strained relations between Iran and African states. The study attempts to explore the IRGC’s role in Africa according to its assigned military missions and tasks under the Iranian political system. And it unveils the implications of this role on African security and on Iranian-African relations.

### **IRGC’s status in Iran’s political system**

The IRGC, Pasdaran in Persian, was formed in 1979 by a decree from Khomeini after just one month of the Iranian Republic. It was formed to export the theocratic ideology of the new regime abroad, to create a new balance of power to offset the regular army—which did not participate in the revolution and was affiliated with the Shah— and to thwart any counterrevolutionary trends. The IRGC is ideologically doctrinal and loyal to the Supreme Jurist Leader. With its leadership directly receiving orders from the Supreme Leader, the IRGC is not, actually, hierarchically structured under the Iranian Armed Forces.<sup>(1)</sup> Within three decades, the IRGC had been transformed into a military institution with missions surpassing the regular army. It has dominated major economic and governmental positions and played an integral role in steering Iran’s foreign and domestic decision-making process. And it has been intensively engaged in economic activities in the export-import field, communications, and oil industry. The Iranian constitution states, “They [IRGC] will undertake the responsibility of not only guarding and protecting the borders, but also the weight of the ideological mission, i.e. striving (jihad) in the path of God and struggling in the path of expanding the sovereignty of the law of God in the world.” Just as any doctrinal and ideological army, the IRGC is based on the most reliable members.<sup>(2)</sup> Post IRGC establishment, Khomeini appointed his representative clerics in the military and doctrinal offices in the IRGC and ordered them to establish land, sea and air forces, and he prevented the IRGC from engaging in political life. But, his successor Khamenei -to have institutionalized cover- ordered two forces to be established in the IRGC: the Quds Force is responsible for oversee operations, and the Basij (The Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed) is mostly responsible for internal security.

The IRGC has gradually involved itself in the economic, political and social affairs of Iran over three stages:

**First**, in the post-Iran-Iraqi War period (1980-1988); in the reconstruction phase the government was not able to fund the IRGC, so it was allowed to engage in

economic projects to meet its financial needs.

**Second**, in the period after the 7<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections in 2003; the IRGC and Basij assisted the conservatives to win the 2003 parliamentary elections and the 2005 presidential elections. **During this period, the IRGC held the platform of political awareness of the IRGC, itself, the Basij, families of old warriors and martyred.** A unit was founded called the, "Political Messengers" to support the Supreme Leader's desired candidates.

**Third**, this stage started when Ahmadinejad became president in 2005. The Ahmadinejad administration did not only give the IRGC variant administrative positions but also several state contracts to companies associated with the IRGC. After the 2009 unrest, the opposition streams united against the presidential election fraud, thus the IRGC's intelligence activities were intensified to thwart the unrest.<sup>(3)</sup>

The Iranian charitable foundations established by the IRGC, known as *Bonyads*, that target social welfare home and abroad, have played an integral role in widening the grassroots support of the IRGC in Iran, especially in the poorest and most remote regions. Post-Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC has had multiple dimensions of power, its status was boosted, and it has become extremely powerful described as, 'a state-within-a-state'. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, the IRGC consists of 350,000 elements. Whereas, the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington states that, in all its branches, the IRGC consists of only 120,000. Several observers believe the IRGC has great influence in Iranian politics; Ahmadinejad – who is a member of the IRGC – when he became president he appointed five IRGC members as ministers, and dozens of parliamentary members are former IRGC members. Moreover, many IRGC elements hold the most significant and sensitive state-positions such as the former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Larijani and the former Mayor of Tehran Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf.<sup>(4)</sup> The IRGC's economic activities targeted only some post-war reconstruction projects. Gradually, it has become actively instrumental in the Iranian economy, controlling a third of Iran's economy. The sea, air and land ports are under the control of the IRGC. Its institutions are tax-exempt, and its entities have replaced big foreign companies such as *Khatam Anbiya*, which replaced the French oil company Total. According to statistics, the annual income of IRGC's economic activities is approximately about 10-12 billion dollars. It has become economically independent, possessing enormous unmonitored human and financial assets. The IRGC managed to develop a huge economic portfolio inside Iran through its retired officers, who control heavy industry.

## **IRGC in Iran's foreign policy**

Despite the fact that the IRGC human resource level is less than the regular army, the IRGC is the dominating military power in Iran, carrying out major military operations home and abroad. The Commander in Chief of the IRGC Mohammad Ali Jafari plays a vital role in implementing Khamenei's policies abroad. The factors and strategies that the IRGC depends on to implement Iran's foreign policy are:

### » **Export of the revolution**

Stemming out of Khomeini's vision to revive the 'united Islamic nation' from Tehran, the IRGC has spearheaded efforts to export the revolution abroad and dynamically develop this mission. If Khamenei was the Muslim Caliph, the IRGC would be his loyal soldiers. Usually, the IRGC's anti-Western military operations are defined under this ideology. The IRGC's efforts to export the revolution are, often, listed under overlapping factors; Implicit military or political interventions to support 'Islamic revolutionists' abroad -except for Lebanon, anti-Western and anti-U.S. acts of aggression, secret operations against conservative Arab states and against the Iranian regime's rivals.<sup>(5)</sup>

### » **IRGC intelligence body**

The IRGC's military divisions are not only confined to conventional land, sea and air forces, but also to unconventional warfare operations; and clandestine intelligence units:

» **Basij:** It is a paramilitary volunteer standby force. It is the largest internal security force in Iran of "90,000 active uniformed personnel with a reserve of 300,000. "<sup>(6)</sup>The total number ready for mobilization is approximately one million. One of the Basij missions is to form a public resistance power against anticipated U.S. occupation, whereas its main task is to control public riots and internal security.

» **Revolutionary Intelligence:** Before 2009, the IRGC Intelligence Branch was the official intelligence arm of the IRGC and consisted of 2000 personnel. It was responsible for gathering intelligence in the whole Islamic world and on domestic opposition individuals and groups. The event in 2009, known as the 'Green Movement', expanded the significance and scope of the Intelligence Branch. Since Khomeini's death in 1989, Iran's intelligence apparatus had undergone major reorganization. Khamenei expanded the Intelligence Branch of the IRGC into new security and intelligence divisions, submitting reports directly to him. The IRGC also carried out a 'secret purge' within the Ministry of Interior.<sup>(7)</sup>

» **Quds Force:** It was formed, after a short time after the establishment of the IRGC, as a military force to export and implement Iran's ideology of 1979-Revolution abroad. It is, the third intelligence unit in the IRGC after the Basij and Intelligence Branch. It is the most complicated: It is primarily responsible for all

Iranian intelligence and covert activities abroad. However, the Quds Force actively operates, usually, with other intelligence units in Iran. The Quds Force is estimated to be of 15,000 personnel, dominant in most Iranian military bases and embassies. The elements appointed in these places are the most qualified, reliable, and loyal to the ideological foundations of the 1979-Revolution.

The Quds Force assists Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza strip. Its military presence was first noticed in 1994 in Bosnia. Later, it infiltrated across the Gulf states, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The IRGC has been gradually spreading its influence until it has become very instrumental in forming Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East and other regions. It carried out operations in the Iran-Iraq War, and backed Ayatollah Mohammad Baqir Hakim in forming the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Post 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the IRGC co-formed Shiite militias, which resisted the U.S. occupation. It also interfered in the Syrian crisis. The Quds Forces carry out most of the IRGC's military operations in Africa. It is worth mentioning here that Qassem Suleimani, the Commander of the Quds Force, was promoted to Major General in 2011, which is the highest military rank in the IRGC.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **IRGC' influence in Africa**

To implement Iran's foreign policy in the ground, IRGC exploited the problems some of the African states suffer. And it collaborated with opposition forces and insurgent groups in the African region. The Quds Force's operations are carried out across the regions where the Iranian goals can be achieved, particularly regions of East and West Africa. The goals IRGC in Africa and in Iran's areas of influence are:

#### **» A market for selling and transferring Iran's arms**

During the past two decades, many IRGC's operations of transferring and selling arms at African land and sea ports were disclosed, that threatens the national security of these African states:

» **Sudan:** It is the country which has formed the most coalitions with Iran over the past decades. It is ideological close to the Iranian regime. Also, it is considered of high geo-political significance. The Sudanese President Gaafar Mohammad Nimeiry played an integral role in Iran's maneuvers in Africa and eventually influencing the balance of power across the whole region. However, upon the Iran-Iraq War in 1980s, Sudan relations with Iran strained. Later, after the toppling of Jafar Mohammad Nimeiry in April 1985, and with the Sadiq Mahdi becoming the president of Sudan in 1986, their relations revived again. Mahdi visited Tehran, reestablishing their mutual diplomatic ties. Their relations were highly boosted when Omar Bashir came to power in 1989. Steven O'Hern, an U.S. officer who served in Iraq and carried out intelligence operations against Shiite militias, clarifies in his book "Iran's Revolutionary Guard: The Threats That Grows while America Sleeps"

the strong ties between the IRGC, the Sudanese Islamic regime, and al-Qaeda, which later stretched out to arm militias in Somalia, which targeted U.S. interests there. O'Hern confirms that during the 1990s the IRGC found a friend through whom it could build a base. The Quds Force forged a coalition with Hassan 'Abd Allah Turabi the leader of the National Islamic Front (NIF) in Sudan. One year later, Osama bin Laden visited the base. In Dec. 1991, the former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani and the Commander of the IRGC visited Khartoum where they promised to give Sudan \$20 million, in arms and military training, to help Sudan counter public uprisings which were seeking separation of the south from the north. The IRGC assisted in forming and training NIF militias, transferring them into a copy of the IRGC's structure, which is separated from the regular army. The NIF later developed and gave al-Qaeda 200 Sudanese passports. It also established training bases, in Southern Khartoum, for Islamic militias from the Horn of Africa and North Africa. Sudan is surrounded by nine Muslim and non-Muslim states, which is a strategic nerve center for IRGC's operations across Africa. In 1994, the Quds Force smuggled weapons from Iran to Algerian Islamic militias through Sudan. At the same time, hundreds of IRGC's troops were fighting Southern insurgents in Sudan. Therefore, Sudan was added to the U.S. list of countries supporting terrorism on Aug. 18, 1993. O'Hern unfolds the role of the IRGC in killing, especially Americans in the United Nations Operation in Somalia II (UNOSOM II). In 1992, a few months before the U.S. deployed its troops in Somalia, Rahim Safavi (the former IRGC's commander), led a joint Iran-Sudan delegation and headed to Somalia to advice radical militias. The IRGC establish a base in the coastal city Bossaso, which was used to support Gen. Mohammad Farih Adid. The Quds Force trained Adid's militias to use RPGs anti-aircraft weapons and remotely controlled mines. Al-Qaeda and IRGC assisted Adid by using Nairobi as a training base. The U.S. troops withdrew from Somalia after the infamous battle of Mogadishu known as "Black Hawk Down". This withdrawal gave the IRGC and the Iranian regime a flashback of the U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon following the bomb attacks. The IRGC believed that hundreds of dead soldiers pushed U.S. forces to withdraw though Iran suffered thousands of casualties in its war with Iraq and did not withdraw. The IRGC concluded that the United States had relatively weak capabilities to continue ground fighting and that the upcoming terrorist attacks would force it to leave. Hezbollah opened its bases for *al-Qaeda* members, who traveled to Lebanon for training. Hezbollah's experts taught them how to bomb huge buildings. Hezbollah influenced the Sunni groups, this can be clearly noticed in the two bomb-attacks against the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and *Dar-e Salaam* in 1998. These bombings were a copycat of the IRGC attacks, operated by Hezbollah, against the U.S. and French peacekeepers in Beirut in 1983.<sup>(9)</sup> Though there is no tangible evidence to refute or confirm this information, and even though the Sunni terrorist organizations have a divergent ideology than that of Shiite Hezbollah and

the IRGC, they meet in seeking to achieve one common goal, which is attacking U.S. interests. Sudan-Iran rapprochement increased interruptions and accusations directed against the Sudanese regime. Ahmadinejad described Sudan as the second homeland full of “dear brothers and pious revolutionists.” In 2006, Khamenei told the Sudanese President Omar Bashir that Iran is ready to transfer its nuclear technology and experience to Sudan. Sudanese officers had trained in Iran. Based on Iranian experience, Sudanese weapons were domestically developed. In March 2008, they signed a joint defense agreement.<sup>(10)</sup> The report by *African Confidential* in Sep. 2008 stated that Iran was involved in supplying arms to Sudan, which were utilized in Darfur, violating the U.N. arms embargo imposed on Sudan. It added that on Aug. 28, 2008 the Unified Leadership of the Sudan Liberation Movement (SLM) shot down an Iranian Ababeel-111 drone. WikiLeaks revealed that the Sudanese regime used Iranian fighter jets in striking Southern Sudan, and the regime ceased publishing indefinitely the opposition newspaper “Ra’e Sha’eb” over it publishing that the IRGC ‘established an arms factory’, Jiyad, to translate the joint defense agreement into action. The factory would supply arms to Islamic insurgents in Somalia and Hamas in the Gaza strip.<sup>(11)</sup> Moreover, the *Daily Telegraph* published on Sep. 23, 2011 that western intelligence reports, were stating, “the weapons stolen by Iran include sophisticated Russian-made SA-24 missiles that were sold to Libya in 2004.... The missiles and other weapons seized from Gaddafi’s abandoned arsenals were smuggled across the Libyan border to Southern Sudan earlier this month where they are now believed to be held at a secret storage facility run by the Revolutionary Guards at Fashir, the capital of North Darfur. Some of the missiles are also reported to have been smuggled into Egypt.” Also, it added that upon the joint defense agreement, hundreds of IRGC personnel were deployed in Sudan to train the Sudanese army and “help to support the Sudanese government’s campaign against rebel groups.”<sup>(12)</sup>

» **Nigeria:** Iran’s influence stretches further to the West of Africa, Nigeria. In Oct. 2010, Nigerian security forces seized smuggled weapons from the Bandar Abbas port in Iran. This violated the U.N. Security Council Resolution 1929, adopted in June 2010, which imposed an arms embargo on Iran. Three Nigerians were arrested though there were two officers of the Quds Force involved in this operation, one of them was a high-rank officer named Sayed Akbar Tabatabaei, who hid in the Iranian embassy in Abuja. The arms were shipped by the Everest cargo vessel- chartered by CMA -CGM, a French shipping company owned by the Lebanese businessman Jack R Side. The illegal shipment was described as “packages of glass wool and pallets of stone.” According to the U.N. report, Bahia Shipping Services, under the IRGC, shipped the weapons. Gambia was the last station of the shipment, which was planned to be sent to the insurgents; the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance in Southern Senegal (MFDC). Because of this operation, Senegal cut its

diplomatic ties with Iran after confirming that the flow of Iranian arms to its territories killed 16 Senegalese soldiers since late December 2010.<sup>(13)</sup> After Nigeria had reported the seizure of an Iranian arms shipment to the United Nations Security Council, Gambia cut its diplomatic ties with Iran in Dec. 2010. To curb the crisis, former Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki visited Nigeria to protect the two Iranian officers: Azimi Agha Jani and Sayed Akbar Tabatabaei, whom were hiding in the Iranian embassy in Abuja and were involved in the arms smuggling operation. Quds Force's series of failures never stopped. Weeks later, in Dec. 2010, the Nigerian authority seized a drug shipment coming from Iran to the Ababa port in Lagos. Tabatabaei is the commander of the IRGC's operations in Sudan, which aim at transforming Sudan into an Iranian military and intelligence base. Even if these operations lead Sudan into a civil war and endless instability. It was reported that the Commander of the IRGC Ali Jafari ordered Tabatabaei to contain the unprecedented crisis in Africa and ensure the minimum amount of damage. In 2013, Azimi Agha Jani and his Nigerian partner were sentenced to five years in prison—in Nigeria.<sup>(14)</sup> After the war erupted in Yemen, Iran was not able to give military assistance to the Houthis because of the imposed arms embargo. Thus, it resorted to forming an army of Africans to be sent to Syria and Yemen. The Nigerian Shiites were chosen for this mission. It was reported that Iran formed an armed African militia to be used in its proxy wars abroad.<sup>(15)</sup>

#### » **Export armaments to insurgent movements and areas of conflicts**

Iran controls and organizes a huge flow of arms to Africa. A report conducted by Conflict Armament Research titled “Distribution of Iranian Ammunition in Africa” investigated comprehensively, from 2006-2012, Iranian ammunition in nine African states. Iran's ammunition is widely spread across Africa, the report observed “14 separate cases of Iranian ammunition in Africa” distributed across areas of conflict. Four cases were in service with state-factions while the rest were handled by armed militias such as the MFDC in Senegal, rebels in Côte d'Ivoire, Zambia, and the movement of Ibrahim Zakzaki in Nigeria. Consequently, some African states had strained relations with Iran.<sup>(16)</sup> In addition, *Fox News* unveiled that “Unit 190”, a secret arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force made up of about two-dozen employees, has for years smuggled arms to these conflict zones [Middle East and North Africa].”<sup>(17)</sup>

#### » **New battlefield against Iran's rivals**

The IRGC has sought to transcend part of its conflicts in the Middle East to Africa through targeting Arab and western interests in some African states:

» **Kenya:** According to Iran, Kenya is a very significant partner. Iran-Kenya rapprochement has dimensions. Mombasa, Iran's goal in Kenya, is the second largest city in Kenya and a significant center of Muslims. Kenya has good ties with Israel

whether in trade or tourism. Israel runs several resorts on the Kenyan coast and the biggest mall in Nairobi. These are tempting targets for IRGC's proxies, who have been trying to launch revenge attacks against Israeli interests over the Israeli program targeting Iranian nuclear scientists.<sup>(18)</sup> Israel had launched operations targeting Iranian scientists involved in its nuclear program. Five Iranian physicians were killed. Iran held Mossad, the American and British intelligence accountable for these assassinations.<sup>(19)</sup> Kenyan authorities arrested on June 20, 2012 two Iranian operatives of the Quds Force: Ahmad Abu Fotooh and Mansour Mosawi, over planning terrorist attacks against western interests in Kenya. They were sentenced to life in prison. On the same day, Kenyan police seized a container originating from Iraq and was suspected to be carrying explosives. The Associated Press reported that Kenyan officials indicated that Iran's proxies planned attacks targeting Israeli, U.S., U.K., and Saudi interests in Kenya. Few days later, the U.S. embassy in Nairobi warned its nationals of a possible terrorist attack in Mombasa, asking them to leave Kenya until July 1. Kenya sought help from international agencies, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) to address the imminent security threats. One of the Iranian convicts stated, at court, that he had been interrogated and tortured by Israeli operatives while in detention. The Kenyan police refuted his statement. In Feb. 2013, Nigerian authorities arrested a Nigerian activist, who was trained in Iran to use weapons—and two others. They claimed that they were plotting to conduct terrorist attacks in the largest Nigerian city, Lagos. The attacks were planned to target the headquarters of United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Israeli commercial interests, and a Jewish cultural center. Also, some reports confirmed that hotels where American and Israeli officials were residing were targeted as well. Military and political officials were in the attack list such as, the retired General and former Nigerian President Ibrahim Babangida, the Sunni Islamist leader Ibrahim Dasuki and the Saudi ambassador to Nigeria. After three months, the Nigerian police broke into Hezbollah's armory, located in the house of the Lebanese consul in Sierra Leone in the North West of Nigeria in Kano. Three Lebanese operatives of Hezbollah were trained to use these weapons. The Nigerian authorities confirmed that they represent a Hezbollah cell.<sup>(20)</sup> In Jan. 2015, two Kenyan police officers admitted that they were recruited by an Iranian group to conduct attacks in Kenya. The Nairobi's police Chief Joseph Boinet affirmed that "two men Abu Baker Sadiq, 69, and Yassin Sambai Joma travelled to Iran many times. They were recruited in an Iranian espionage network, which aims at conducting attacks in this city and targeting national and Western interests." Moreover, the Kenyan authorities in Nov. 2015 dismantled an Iranian espionage network, in which two Kenyans worked under an Iranian operative called "Parsa" to launch bomb attacks in Nairobi. Also, they arrested in Dec. 2016 two Iranian lawyers, Abdulhussein Safa'ey and Sayed Nasrallah Ibrahim— with their driver. They were accused of

gathering information to conduct terror attacks after they had been caught taking pictures of the Israeli embassy. The two lawyers had been in Kenya to follow up the case of Iranian prisoners, who were sentenced to 15 years in prison, after they were found guilty of carrying explosives in 2013. The Iranian Foreign Ministry asked for the two lawyers to be released.

» **Libya:** The *New York Post* published, June 2014, a report titled “Dark Forces” authored by Keneth R. Timmerman. It indicated that Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Quds Force, was behind the 2012 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya in which the U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed. The CIA had “secretly monitored the communications of a jihadist group with the Quds Force... July 30, 2012, the Annex ears picked up chatter in Persian between a pair of operators from the Quds Force.” The United States had been informed that seven Iranians associated with the Red Crescent would arrive. They would conduct an operation against the U.S. Consulate. The author confirmed, “My sources estimate that the Iranians recruited more than 1,000 Libyan fighters for these militias who were “in direct contact with the Quds Force officers.”<sup>(21)</sup>

#### » **A field to support allies**

Amid the dramatic developments in the Middle East, African states have become significantly strategic for Iran’s foreign policy, particularly East and West Africa, to support its regional allies.

As the Saudi-led coalition intensified its military operations against the Iran-backed Houthis, Iran bolstered its ties with Eritrea after losing its best ally Sudan. Iran- Eritrea relations have magnificently developed; in 2008 the Eritrean President welcomed establishing Iranian military bases in the Horn of Africa. Later, they concluded a cooperation agreement on oil. There is an Iranian military presence on the Eritrean coast, the strategic Dahlak Archipelago, as reported by Stratfor. On Feb. 12, 2010 WikiLeaks published documents stating that the Saudi ambassador expressed growing concerns of Iran’s influence, and that Iran supplied the Eritrean Naval Force with weapons. The Saudi ambassador, added, that Houthi rebels have been in Eritrea since 2009.

Moreover, it was reported that Iran used the Eritrean coast to fund and assist Houthi rebels with weapons and train them in three military camps. The first camp is near the Assab port in front of a big military base. Iran managed to build a naval base near the Assab port where the IRGC transferred missiles and elements of the Quds Force to facilitate assisting the Houthis.

The second is the most recent military training camp the IRGC built, in Sawa near the Sudanese border, to train Houthis rebels. The third camp is in one of the three Eritrean islands Iran leased to supply Houthis with tanks through the Midi port. Iran also used these islands as training centers for forces to entrench and spread its

influence.<sup>(22)</sup> In March 2015, the Yemeni military attaché in Cairo accused Eritrea of backing the Houthis. He claimed that Eritrea has become a backyard for Iran and its allies.

*Le Monde* published, July 6, 2011 that French intelligence sources revealed that the Quds Force had a role, under Khamenei orders, in helping President Muammar Gaddafi to address Western intervention in Libya in 2011. The Quds Force sent military elements of the IRGC and weapons to fight the Libyan rebels. Gaddafi suggested to use populated areas to store weapons to justify striking them. The mission of transferring weapons to Libya was carried out by elements of the Quds Force stationed in Algeria and Sudan.<sup>(23)</sup> The IRGC used Sudanese territories to smuggle weapons to Hamas, in the Gaza strip. In 2012, the Israeli raids bombed convoys of weapons and Iranian rockets in Sudan, which were heading to Gaza.

#### » **Field to export the revolution and spread Shiism**

One of the most strategic missions the IRGC handles is to fund and provide logistic support to Iran's expansionist project: exporting its revolution abroad. Iran's expansionist activities are widely spread across some African regions; in the north and west, where Shiite minorities are centered. Morocco cut its relations with Iran because it interfered in Moroccan domestic issues through energizing sectarianism between Moroccan Sunnis and Shiites in 2012.<sup>(24)</sup> Many international and national reports such as, the Annual Report on International Religious Freedom issued by the U.S. Secretary of State, and the 2015 Religion Case Report by the Moroccan Center for Contemporary Studies and Research disclosed that Shiism in Morocco has become a new challenge for the state and community. The Moroccan religious system has been confined within the theological framework of Maliki and the Ash'ri Sunni schools. But, Iran and its allies exploited the religious transformations, —or what the religious scholars called, "Era of Religions", and its complicated waves— to spread Shiism in North Africa.<sup>(25)</sup> After a diplomatic crisis erupted between Iran and Morocco in Feb. 2009, the conflict over the spread of Shiism escalated. They, later, completely severed diplomatic relations because Morocco stood in solidarity with Bahrain, which Iran considers an Iranian province. In June 2015, Iran's Fars News Agency, which is affiliated with the IRGC, published a long report titled, "Morocco is Held Captive in Zionist Policies". It criticized Moroccan foreign policy in its dealing with many cases and issues. It was published just one day after King Mohammad VI of Morocco received the new Iranian ambassador Mohammad Taqi Mu'aed in Rabat in June 19, 2015. It was a move to resume diplomatic ties frozen for six years. Rachid Yalouh, a researcher in Iranian studies argued that there are three parallel possibilities clarifying why Fars – affiliated with the IRGC- published this report. First, it is connected to the complexity of the Iranian ruling system, "dichotomy of revolution and state; it is a deeply complicated problem in the structure of statehood itself," Yalouh

said. The IRGC in allying with the Supreme Leader Khamenei is considered the strongest part in this “dichotomy” while Rouhani’s government represents the statehood, i.e., the weakest part. Second, it is related to the conflict of interests between the IRGC and Rouhani’s government. Third, it is related to the behavior of the Iranian regime and skills in decision-making. Yalouh assumed it is likely that the aim behind the report was to blackmail Moroccan diplomacy and show it in a weak position while resuming diplomatic ties, as well as, it would make Iran look in control of the mutual relations from day one. <sup>(26)</sup> Iran’s expansionist project in Nigeria started since 2006 through soft power tools, such as, cultural and service initiatives. The Shiite *Mizan* magazine has been in publication for more than 15 years. The Iranian embassy in Abuja publishes Shiite books in the Hausa language and its websites promote Shiism. Also, the Islamic Union for African Students is keenly instrumental in attracting African youth in general- Nigerians in particular- sending them to Iran. Iran supports many institutions and public figures promoting Shiism in Nigeria. The Haider Center for Islamic Propagation is one of the most significant Shiite institutions, founded by Hafez Mohammad Said in 1994. Ibrahim Yaqoub Zakzaki, who is described in the Iranian media as the “leader of Nigerian Shiites”, adopts Khamenei’s ideology and completely follows Iranian policies and rules. Zakzaki never hides his loyalty to Iran. He has spoken of his political ambitions through the platform of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria -called “Hezbollah in Nigeria” by Iran- which includes thousands of members. <sup>(27)</sup> Zakzaki said in his interview with the BBC that he trains several of his supporters to work as guards, like the IRGC. However, he insisted that he has not received any direct assistance from Iran contradicting the statements of Iranian officials’, who have been proud that Iran has provided training in guerrilla warfare and in manufacturing bombs and handguns to the Islamic Movement.

#### » **Obtaining uranium**

After the Western blockade on Iran over its nuclear program, Iran has been seeking a rapprochement with Africa, which is exceptionally rich in uranium, Iran needs this material for developing its nuclear program. Here, the IRGC has played an integral role in smuggling uranium from Africa. The United Nations report, July 18, 2006, said “there was ‘no doubt’ that a huge shipment of smuggled uranium 238, uncovered by customs officials in Tanzania, was transported from the Lubumbashi mines in the Congo.” Tanzanian customs officials stated that the shipment was heading to the Iranian port of Bandar bin Abbas and was landlocked in Oct. 22, 2005. The report accused Iran of bartering weapons in exchange for uranium with militias of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), claiming that 700 Somali militants fought alongside Hezbollah in its war against Israel in 2006—which Hezbollah and Somali militants denied. Also, it reported Somalia has a reserve of 6,600 tons of uranium. <sup>(28)</sup> The Somali Foreign Minister Yusuf Garaad Omar disclosed in a letter

he sent to the U.S. ambassador to Somalia Stephen Schwartz that “Shabaab forces have captured critical surface exposed uranium deposits in the Galmudug region and are mining triuranium octoxide for transport to Iran.” It was reported that Iran threatened to resume its pursuit of its nuclear program with high proliferation if the United States re-imposes new sanctions.<sup>(29)</sup>

### **Reflections of IRGC’s activities on Africa-Iran relations**

Africa-Iran relations have dramatically developed since Khatami came to power (1997-2005) and flourished during Ahmadinejad’s presidency (2005-2013), which was marked with an increased number of economic agreements and a boosted Iranian cultural presence. However, when Hassan Rouhani came to power (2013-present) the bilateral relations dramatically reversed. Since 2010, Iran has been facing endless series of political failures because of the plots sewed by the IRGC particularly, the Quds Force, in Africa. This has led to strained relations with some African states, and eventually reversed Iran’s influence in Africa.

African-Iran strained relations, resulted from IRGC’s activities, at different levels:

#### **» Cut diplomatic ties with Iran**

The 2012 disclosed weapon smuggling operation at the Ababa port in Nigeria is one of the most catastrophic failures of the IRGC in Africa. IRGC’s adventures in Africa resulted in Gambia and Senegal cutting their ties with Iran and further strained relations with Nigeria— And the IRGC’S activists were about to undo Iran’s long historical relations with the states of West Africa. Although Senegal resumed its ties with Iran in Feb. 2013, IRGC’s adventures are still looming. Iran used African territories to support its insurgents in some African states, inciting conflicts in Africa, resulting in Iran selling more and more weapons. Senegal used to be Iran’s best friend in Africa. The Iranians believe their relations with Senegal will open the gate for further relations with other African states. Iran-Senegal relations boosted Iran’s image as the ‘leader’ of Islamic states. Iran helped Senegal to host the Summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Dakar in March 2008. The Senegalese criticized time and time again the sanctions imposed on Iran and praised its leading role in the Islamic world. They both had, almost, the same stance on Israel. Mutual visits increased; top-rank Iranian officials visited Senegal such as the Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council Mahmoud Shahroudi, who has a close relationship with the Supreme Leader, visited Senegal in 2007.<sup>(30)</sup> Iran has had strong ties with Gambia since Yahya Jammeh seized power in a coup in 1994. Gambia supported Iran’s right to have a nuclear program. In 2006, Ahmadinejad was a guest of honor at the African Union Summit in Gambia.<sup>(31)</sup> The review clarifies how Iran successfully managed to spread its influence in Africa. But, the African states were internationally and regionally embarrassed by Iran’s misconduct. They were pressured by regional and international powers to

curb Iran's influence, which dramatically affected the balance of power. Thus, their relations with Iran were dramatically reversed until they were completely frozen. Many African states stopped supporting Iran during crises. It is worth mentioning that Iran opened the door to the West after the nuclear agreement, so it does not need, anymore, regional states to break its international isolation. Therefore, Iran's intensive influence over Africa has decreased.

» **African loyalties shifted**

As the Yemeni crisis escalated, the Arabian Gulf states bolstered their ties with Africa, especially with countries of East Africa. They used these African territories to logistically support the Saudi-led coalition forces and block Iran's support to the Houthis through Africa. Many African states welcomed the rapprochement with the Gulf states. Ten African countries- including three Arab countries: Egypt Morocco Sudan- participated in the Saudi-led coalition's "Decisive Storm" against the Houthis. Several African states: Sudan, Somalia, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Comoros, Chad, Togo, Djibouti, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Gabon, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Niger and Nigeria joined the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance (IMA), which began in 2015 with 34-member states. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) concluded an agreement with Eretria to use its Assab Port as a transit and logistical base for its operations. Also 400 Eretria soldiers participated in the war in Aden. Apparently, Eretria changed its alliances; it used to play an integral role in supporting the Houthis with weapons and military training—for Iran's sake. But later it has become one of the most supportive pillars in the Saudi-led coalition. The UAE signed an agreement with Somaliland to build another military base in the port of Berbera. Saudi Arabia concluded a similar agreement with Djibouti. Three Arab states in the Horn of Africa: Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia cut their diplomatic ties with Iran after the Iranians stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran in Jan. 2016. And they expressed their support to the Saudi-led coalition. African states realized that strengthening ties with Iran will not solve their problems. Iran incites crises across the Middle East and uses African territories to support its allies, threatening African regional stability and security. Israel bombed the Yarmouk arms factory in Sudan on Oct. 23, 2012, which it considered as an Iranian military front to send weapons to Hamas. This Israeli operation showed that Iran's strategies are doomed to failure.

After Iran concluded a nuclear accord officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with the West in July 2015, many African states reconsidered their alliance with Iran, especially Sudan which has, with Iran, common motives: fighting the United States and the West. Eretria and Sudan have been suffering international isolation and economic sanctions. But, the JCPOA would only help Iran to reach a settlement with the West while its African allies continue to suffer catastrophic crises. Therefore, they resorted to forming new alliances, which would allow them to invest their geo-political influence and lift economic sanctions.<sup>(32)</sup>

### » **Escalating Counter-Shiism in Africa**

The recent developments in Africa-Iran relations clearly show that Iran failed in spreading its influence through soft power. However, Iran managed to have a foothold for the Quds Force in Africa. Later, a wave of hatred emerged in Africa against Shiism. The Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), the largest Shiite group in Africa led by Zakzaki, was attacked by militants and policemen. On Nov. 27, 2015, 21 people were killed in a suicide bombing that targeted a Shiite parade near Kano in Northern Nigeria. Boko Haram claimed accountability for this attack.<sup>(33)</sup> Moreover, clashes between Zakzaki's Shiite supporters and Nigerian police broke out in Zaria. According to the Human Rights Watch report, 300 people were killed in violence linked to these clashes. The Nigerian troops arrested Zakzaki, and killed three of his sons and his deputy Mohammad Mahmoud Tori. The Nigerian Army accused IMN of staging an assassination attempt on the Commander in Chief of the Nigerian Army. Iran never missed a chance to look like the guard of Shiite minorities. Iran harshly criticized the Nigerian regime for its oppression against Shiites. It also asked Nigeria to release Zakzaki and pay compensation for the Shiites killed. Iran accused Saudi Arabia of sowing conflict among Muslims after Nigeria banned IMN—Later it [Nigeria] recognized it as a terrorist group. After two years of intensive diplomatic activities, Nigeria sought rapprochement with Saudi Arabia— while Nigerian Sunni leaders intensified their counter wave against Shiism.<sup>(34)</sup>

### **Conclusion**

IRGC operations in Africa disclose a major mis-function and mis-coordination between the IRGC and foreign policy bodies in the Iranian system. Possibly, the IRGC has certain goals in Africa, in which it uses the same tools and tactics. But these might not be the same goals of Iran's intelligence foreign policy bodies. Thus, overlapping goals emerge. For example, Iran's foreign policy cannot –alone establish an alliance with any country even with small counties like Comoros because the IRGC dominates all implementation tools on the ground. Despite the fact that the IRCG has control of the Iranian ruling system since 2009, the recent developments in the Middle East and domestic crises have affected its activities in Africa. There was a clear divergence between Iran's goals in Africa- which reflects a mature, ambitious and responsible foreign policy- and its real diplomatic capability. Iran's traditional diplomacy would often fail to reach its goals. Using African territories to smuggle weapons to Hamas and Hezbollah would make Iran lose more allies in the United Nation, throw more blocks in its way for African markets, and would ultimately jeopardize Iran's diplomacy all over the African continent.

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