

# BOOK REVIEW

## IRAN'S INFLUENCE IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Review by

Dr. Abdel-Raouf Mostafa al-Ghoneimi



Book by

Dr. Mohammed bin Saqr Alsulami

Mahmoud Hamdi Aboulqasem

Over the past four decades, the theocratic regime in Iran has been attempting to create spheres of influence and possess further bargaining chips across sub-Saharan Africa. This region is of particular importance for the greater Iranian strategy which aims to turn Iran into a force so that its policies and strategies influence regional and international equations in a significant way.

This strategy also aims to increase Iran's involvement in global affairs, enable it to achieve its political interests as well as economic and geopolitical goals, and disseminate its ideology within its living spaces (Lebensraums). The latter is part of the most sublime Iranian goal: the establishment of an allegedly global Islamic government led by the guardian jurist in Iran.

The significance of Africa for Iran is attributed to a number of factors such as its location overlooking international waterways through which strategic commodities and international trade pass. The continent also has vast resources, strategic commodities and a massive market over which world powers vie for control. Several international companies are competing to enter the African market because of the continent's fertile environment for investments. For Iran, Africa's resources could help it to mitigate the impact of sanctions. Africa has long been an Iranian political ally, particularly because of their shared anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialistic outlook. Moreover, the continent possesses a sizable voting bloc that could help Iran in international organizations. Furthermore, given current regional and international efforts, Iran seeks to create areas of influence in Africa and limit Saudi Arabia's religious reach in several African countries.

The book provides an analysis of Iran's clout in sub-Saharan Africa with the aim of examining the nature and extent of its influence. The book specifies the stages of Iran's expansionism in its living spaces and how this has led to the spread of Shiism, the politicization of Shiism, and the militarization of Shiism. The extent of Iranian expansionism differs from one stage to another, with the aim being to create areas of influence and possess further bargaining chips to achieve strategic objectives in Africa. The cost of confronting Iranian expansionism differs from one stage to another. It decreases in the stage of spreading Shiism and increases in the subsequent stages, particularly when countering militarized Shiism. The book also sounds the alarm bell about the dangers of Iran transitioning from the stage of spreading Shiism to its politicization and militarization, citing examples of Iranian expansionism in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. In these countries, Iran resorted to militarizing Shiism. These countries have buckled under political, security and economic crises and sectarian conflicts, rendering some of them to be designated as failed states.

The book, by the questions it raises through its different chapters, attempts to reveal the dimensions and features of Iran's role in sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter one sheds light on Iranian clout in East Africa through touching on the significance of this African region in Iran's strategy, the limits of its influence in this region, and the tools it possesses to influence the countries that fall within this region. In this chapter, the book measures the scope of Iranian influence and its presence in the East African countries, given

that Iran's relationship with these countries is regarded as among the most enhanced within sub-Saharan Africa. Chapter two, meanwhile, spotlights Iran's relationship with West Africa within the context of Iran's strategy to influence the African continent, and its pursuit to create alternative space for maneuverability, particularly after it began to face challenges in North and East Africa.

Chapter three also casts light on the dimensions of the Iranian presence in Central Africa through touching on the importance of this African region in the Iranian strategy, particularly at the economic and political levels. This is in addition to Iran's tools of influence to expand its clout in Central Africa, and the extent of its presence in this region. Chapter four reviews Iran's relationship with the Southern African countries in light of its unique historical relationship with these countries which has been affected by the shifts in the global order and the US-Iran dispute. It also discusses the ebbing Iranian ideological and religious influences in the region and the impact of such ebbs on Iran's relations with the Southern African countries, which are pragmatic in nature and distinct from Iran's patterns of relations with countries in other African regions.

In chapter five, the book specifies the strategic dimensions of the Iranian presence on Africa's eastern coast. This region is of particular importance for Iranian policymakers. The chapter provides a strategic vision regarding the motives behind the Iranian presence on the eastern coast of Africa and its attempts to expand its maritime deployment to encircle the Arabian Gulf and to achieve its strategic objectives in the face of regional and international pressures. This presence is definitely not without hints of Iran's desire to expand its maritime clout in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea to the Syrian coast. This maritime clout is in line with Tehran's planned corridor linking it to the Mediterranean via Syria.

Chapter six discusses Iran's relations with Africa's countries in the context of regional and international competition and the new tussle over Africa — particularly given Turkey's presence in Africa and the nature of relations between Tehran and Ankara in this context. This is discussed in light of the disagreements between Iran and Turkey and possibilities for future rapprochement between the two countries. Chapter seven focuses on Iran's response in light of US and Israeli attempts to contain its influence on the African continent. These attempts are against the backdrop of Iran seeking to create areas of influence and possess further bargaining chips that it could potentially deploy against the United States and Israel to maximize its room for maneuverability and the scope of its clout.

The eighth and last chapter touch on the Gulf states' policies to counter the growing Iranian clout in sub-Saharan Africa due to the danger it poses

to the vital interests of the Gulf. As a result, the Gulf states have taken the initiative to counter Iranian tools to prevent Iran's deeper penetration into the continent. They sought to reestablish their soft power in Africa by providing bilateral and multilateral humanitarian aid to combat diseases and pandemics, as well as forging long-term partnerships and relationships with the sub-Saharan African countries. Gulf efforts to establish a strong presence in Africa are ongoing, as it is one of the most important arenas of influence and competition among regional and international actors.

Through its varied chapters, the book identifies outcomes that are very important for understanding the dimensions and challenges facing Iranian clout in sub-Saharan Africa and its future across the continent. Iran's schemes in East Africa are facing impediments, with it facing difficulties in creating a politicized base which conforms to its agenda. This is due to the limited Shiite community in East Africa and the growing concerns of governments in this region about Iran's campaigns to disseminate Shiism. Cases of Iranian interventions in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen have painted a negative picture about Tehran's intentions and motives, which were essentially ideologically-driven, with the aim to export its revolutionary model and create proxy groups to implement Iranian schemes to the detriment of the security and stability of the aforementioned countries. Therefore, some East African countries now view Iran as one of the sponsors of sectarian strife and confessional infighting. Seven East African countries have already severed their ties with Iran, meaning that Tehran's relationship with these countries is suffering from a noticeable deterioration and retreat.

Additionally, Iran has turned into an unreliable partner for West Africa as a result of it not honoring its obligations and agreements due to the sanctions. Iran is also accused of inflaming internal conflicts and supporting armed militias in countries such as Senegal and Nigeria. This is one way in which Iran threatens the security and stability of West Africa, similar to its intervention in Syria. In light of this pattern of Iranian intervention, the West African countries have imposed severe restrictions on Iranian activities.

The Central African region is where Iran wields the least clout. Additionally, since the shifts in the global order in the early 1990s, Iran's relations with the sub-Saharan African countries have been ebbing and flowing. Iran failed to establish a long-term military presence on the Red Sea coast of Eritria, while other world powers did. Its presence was limited to fixed and insignificant maritime outposts, particularly after the formation of the Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen, as well as regional and international recognition of the need to limit Iran's role in Africa. As a result, some regional and international powers repositioned themselves in the region by establishing military bases, reducing the scope of Iran's clout in the region. Among the

key revelations of the book is that Iran has been incapable of confronting rival global powers in Africa, particularly the Gulf states. Iran lacks economic potential, financial surpluses and effective cooperation agreements with several African countries. Internal and external challenges, economic sanctions, and international isolation have impacted Iran's acceptance as a partner by a number of African countries. As a result, Iran's competitors have had no trouble countering its clout in this arena. The Iranian project primarily rests on self-destructive factors. In this context, it is critical to examine Iran's role in this arena, its scope and impact, as well as the scope of its impact on the regional and global balance of power in comparison to that of its rivals. Saudi Arabia is playing a prominent role in this context by reactivating its diplomacy and warning of the danger posed by Iran and its expansionist project in the continent. These Saudi efforts have served as a wake-up call for many African leaders and decision-makers, prompting them to reconsider their relations with Iran. They have demanded that ties be built on mutual respect, rather than Iran's ideology and its regional or international disputes.

The book reveals a variety of impediments that Iran faces in Africa, primarily because of its ideological orientations and expansionist ambitions. Its orientations are influenced by its long-running dispute with regional and international powers. Iranian orientations mean that Tehran's visions and relations with others are one-sided, i.e., based on exploitation and employment of the other. Thus, Iran did not establish ties based on equality, balance, shared interests, and mutual respect. So, this relationship with Africa lacked continuity and sustainability and remained limited and confined to serving Iranian objectives. In the end, it declined after its project was exposed in some regional countries. For example, Iran's project made great advances within the Arabian arena, where it progressed to the stage of militarization and integrating its Shiite proxies into political systems that fall within its spheres of influence such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Further, its schemes in sub-Saharan African countries remain limited to the stage of spreading Shiism. Only a few countries have entered the stage of politicization and an even fewer number have entered the stage of militarization such as Nigeria. Africa represents a backdrop to the Arab region within the framework of Iran's strategy to export its revolutionary model which it seeks to spread throughout the world.

In its conclusion, the book sheds light on Iran's failure to present a model state in any of the countries where it created armed proxies such as in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and the African countries. Moreover, Iran has never been an appealing development model for the African countries, all of which aspire to eradicate poverty. Most of the agreements and protocols of cooperation signed between Iran and several African countries have not come into force and

remain merely ink on paper. This has led to resentment in African countries. Furthermore, there are no major interests that make the relationship sustainable, nor is there strong cooperation making it impossible to abandon Iran. According to the Iranians, Africa is a vast arena which can be penetrated in order to promote their expansionist agenda. This has compelled African countries to reconsider their relations with Tehran and develop policies to counter the Iranian project before it progresses to a point where it cannot be reversed or reaches the advanced stages of politicization and militarization to the detriment of security and stability. African countries want to avoid repeating the experiences of other countries where Iranian clout reached the stage of militarization and witnessed the integration of Iran-backed Shiite proxies.