

# Iranian Infiltration of Africa

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**IRAN**

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## Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran advances its interests on the African continent on multiple fronts, employing some of the same tactics Tehran utilizes in the Middle East. Iran is infiltrating Africa not only to spread the regime's Shiite Islamist ideology and terrorism against Western interests but also to develop political and economic partnerships. This resource, "Iranian Infiltration of Africa," seeks to show where, when, and how the Islamic Republic has made strides toward its foreign policy objectives and notable failures on the continent.

The first section of this report introduces Tehran's foreign policy interests on the African continent. The second section provides a historical overview of Iran's Africa policy, referring to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign from 1953 to 1979. The third section comprises country reports detailing the Islamic Republic's political, economic, and ideological interests and the presence of Iran-backed terrorist activity in each profiled state. Each country report takes stock of Iranian foreign policy successes and failures and concludes with policy recommendations.

## Iran's Interests on the African Continent

Iran's interests in Africa run the gamut, from strategic interests in its ability to provide arms routes for the regime's various [proxy wars](#) to Tehran's more ideological and diplomatic battle with Saudi Arabia over influence on the continent. The Iranian-Saudi dispute has spurred many of Iran's sectarian activities in Africa. The Islamic Republic has established a clerical network in a bid to radicalize the Shia religion and recruit individuals for terrorist operations. Still, these sectarian endeavors are only one dimension of Iran's multifaceted campaign. Iran has notched other victories in Africa, including docking its naval assets at ports in the Red Sea and deploying [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) operatives to the Horn of Africa. Iran remains motivated by the continent's strategic and diplomatic stakes.

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Map of the Middle East (Source: [Trip Savvy](#))

Historically, Iran had strategic interests in East Africa, particularly in the Horn of Africa. Red Sea ports used to serve as a critical link in Iran’s arms distribution network. The Iran-sponsored Houthi rebels in Yemen have been from [armed](#) Eritrea via the Red Sea and from Somalia via the Gulf of Aden. When dictator Omar al-Bashir ruled Sudan, the country’s Port of Sawakin and Port Sudan were also common destinations for weapons intended for Palestinian militants, with supply lines running through Sudan, Egypt, and the Sinai Peninsula and into Palestinian territories. Additionally, the Red Sea connects to the Suez Canal, through which weapons may be shipped to the Mediterranean and received at ports in [Lebanon](#) or [Syria](#). As land routes through [Iraq](#) and Syria are vulnerable to Israeli airstrikes, Iran has sent vessels through the Suez Canal—even on one occasion with a Russian naval [escort](#).

East Africa’s strategic value to Tehran should not be underestimated, even though the region has become more resilient against Iran’s malign activities. Throughout the 1990s, Sudan provided refuge and training for Islamist insurgencies opposed to Western-aligned governments like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. Iran [transferred arms](#) to the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria through Sudan in the early 1990s. Sudan, a U.S.-designated sponsor of terrorism between 1993 and 2020, also cooperated with Iran-backed militias and terrorist organizations, including the Palestinian terrorist group [Hamas](#).

Moreover, Sudan and Eritrea allowed Iran to deploy its naval assets and challenge the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a vital shipping lane, given that [nearly nine percent](#) of the total seaborne oil trade transits. Starting in 2008, Iran [deployed naval vessels](#) at Eritrea’s Port of Assab, with the purported mission to combat piracy off the coast of Somalia. In 2012, the regime [docked](#) a destroyer at the Port of Sudan on a visit. These docks provided an advantage to the IRGC Navy, whose modus operandi is to menace international shipping to extract leverage.

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However, the late 2000s and early 2010s marked the highpoint of Iranian political influence in East Africa, as the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia have accumulated more sway in the region since then. Sudan, Djibouti, and Somalia [severed](#) diplomatic ties with Iran in January 2016 under pressure from Saudi Arabia, which had broken relations with Iran after an attack on its embassy in Tehran. Eritrea did not follow suit but allowed the Saudi-led coalition to access its ports and airspace to conduct anti-Houthi operations in Yemen. Thus, after years of estrangement, which saw improved ties with Tehran, Eritrea repaired its relations with Western powers, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In 2018, it reached a UAE-brokered peace deal with its regional rival, Ethiopia, at Tehran's expense. Sudan signed the declarative part of the U.S.-sponsored Abraham Accords to recognize Israel in January 2021.

In addition to protecting strategic arms routes and challenging Red Sea shipping lanes, Iran holds geopolitical interests in Africa. Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, Iran and Saudi Arabia have competed for leadership in the Muslim world, including in Muslim African countries. Iran's activities in Africa have sparked fears it seeks to extend and operationalize its religious footprint in Sub-Saharan Africa as it has done throughout the Middle East in its proxy wars. While neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia have deployed overt military force to change political events in Africa, both use soft power to spread their unique brands of Shia and Sunni Islam.

Iran's third set of interests on the continent derives from Africa's sizeable Muslim population. Just over [three-quarters](#) of Africa's approximately [500 million](#) Muslims practice Sufism, a mystic set of practices found in Sunni Islam. These beliefs differ from Iran's version of Shiism, so Sufis are less susceptible to Iranian weaponization than the [ten percent](#) of Africa's Muslim population who are Shia. The Shia Lebanese [diaspora](#) in West Africa, for example, has proven vulnerable to Hezbollah, Iran's Shia proxy based in Lebanon. In 2013, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) a network of Hezbollah operatives in Sierra Leone, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and the Gambia, where the group was engaged in massive [money laundering](#) operations. Islam's prevalence in Africa appeals to Tehran because it creates a constituency that sympathizes with Iran's self-image as the defender of Islam against Western powers.

The Iranian regime's sectarian interests in West Africa dovetail with its fourth objective: terrorism. Iran spreads its extremist variant of Shia Islam, with a [focus](#) on Nigeria, Senegal, and Tanzania. Moreover, Iranian regime officials believe that enmity toward the U.S. can be exploited to coopt groups that adhere to different Islamic movements. The most striking example of an Iran-backed Sunni terrorist group in Africa is al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate active in Somalia and East Africa that has conducted multiple deadly attacks against the U.S. With the support of IRGC-Quds Force operatives [deployed](#) in Eritrea, al-Shabaab waged a violent insurgency against Somalia's central government in the mid-2000s.

Iran's main vehicle for exporting the Islamic Revolution is the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#)—and, in particular, its special operations branch, the Quds Force. To export the Revolution, the IRGC employs violence and subversion, especially directed at governments that are aligned with the U.S. and with Israel. The Quds Force commander, [Brigadier General Esmail Qaani](#), was in charge of the Quds Force's Africa portfolio under his predecessor, [Major General Qassem Soleimani](#). In 2010, Qaani was [implicated](#) in the shipment of 240 tons of arms destined for the Gambia but seized in Nigeria. In 2012, the U.S. [designated](#) Qaani for his role in financing Quds Force elements in Africa.

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In 2020, following Soleimani's assassination in a U.S. Reaper drone strike in Baghdad, the IRGC-linked Tasnim News published a piece [claiming](#) that U.S. interests are vulnerable in Africa and calling on the IRGC to train and arm non-state actors in the region. Quds Force Unit 400 is thought to be one of the units involved in organizing and directing anti-Western and anti-Israel terrorist elements in Africa. A commander named Hamed Abdollahi [leads](#) the unit in close coordination with Hezbollah.

From a terrorist financing perspective, the IRGC-linked Fars News Agency published a piece [highlighting](#) how transactions in gold facilitate sanctions evasion in [Venezuela](#) and stating that this strategy should be applied to Africa. Given that Iran has transferred proceeds from Venezuelan gold to Hezbollah, Iran could seek to exploit Africa's natural resource wealth as well.

Iran also seeks to break out of its international isolation through diplomatic channels with African countries. Iranian [Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian](#) was formerly deputy foreign minister for Arab and African affairs and has close ties to the IRGC. He has sought African governments' diplomatic and economic cooperation to circumvent Western sanctions. Many African states take a neutral position on Iran's nuclear program, condemning nuclear weapons on the one hand and [affirming](#) Iran's "right" to nuclear energy on the other, disregarding Iran's noncooperation with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) investigations. African countries are generally receptive to Iran's messaging when it comes to its nuclear program, international sanctions, and its knack for denying and deflecting attention from its engagement in terrorism and other malign behaviors.

As a result of Iran's diplomatic endeavors in Africa, several African countries have allied with Tehran. Tehran's most important partner on the continent is South Africa, which, in December 2023, filed a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice. South Africa [called](#) for lifting all sanctions against Iran in 2007, advocated for Iran's accession to BRICS in 2017, then joined a unanimous vote in BRICS supporting Iran's entry in 2023. Other states like Kenya hedge when it comes to Iranian malign activities. Kenya has repeatedly refused to condemn the Iranian regime for its covert activities on Kenyan soil, as Kenya wants to preserve its relations with the Islamic Republic for commercial and technological reasons (discussed below). Despite Africa's receptivity to Tehran, Iran has fewer than [20 embassies](#) on the continent, underscoring its lack of diplomatic partnerships compared to Western capitals, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Finally, there are economic reasons for Iran to involve itself in Africa. For instance, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea, and Ethiopia are experiencing [5-9 percent growth](#) annually. However, because the Horn of Africa prefers [financial incentives](#) from Gulf states over cooperating with Tehran, these nations don't serve as a lucrative alternative to Western markets for Iran. Nor does Africa more broadly provide access to large investment or trade deals. Iran's foreign ministry [expects](#) \$2 billion in trade with Africa in 2023, up from \$500 million in 2022. Even if Iran realizes its expectations, which seems unlikely, it lacks economic depth compared to its adversaries. UAE-Africa trade, for instance, reached \$50 billion in 2022.

In addition to gold, other significant natural-resources in Africa also attract Iran. For instance, uranium deposits exist in many African countries, such as Malawi, Niger, Sierra Leone, Togo, and Uganda. Because former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who served from 2005 to 2013, sought to maximize negotiating leverage by escalating Iran's nuclear activities, he [prioritized](#) relations with these countries to ensure access to uranium.

## Historical Overview of Iran's Africa Policy

This section provides a brief historical overview of Iran's policies towards Africa, from the Shah's reign (1953-1979) to the current Raisi administration in Iran. It shows how, after the change of regime in 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has demonstrated a consistently anti-American foreign policy in Africa through each of its presidents, especially under the Raisi administration.

The Shah's overall policies towards Africa reacted to the dual threats he saw from the African continent in the 1960s and 1970s: pan-Arabism and communism. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was the chief proponent of pan-Arabism, an ideology that calls for unity among Arab nations. He [referred](#) to the Shah as a "tool of imperialism" and a "traitor to Islam" because of his relations with the West and Israel. The Shah, in turn, [aligned](#) with pro-Western governments in Africa to counter Nasser's ideological influence. In 1970, Nasser's death and the rise of the more moderate Anwar Sadat in his place paved the way for Egypt to ally with Iran. Furthermore, the Shah deepened [relations](#) with the new Egyptian president, the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, South Africa's anti-communist apartheid regime, and the Moroccan monarchy to contain communism. He sought these alliances to [prevent](#) the spread of communism to the Middle East and curry favor with the U.S. in the context of the Cold War.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution transformed Iran from a secular, Western-oriented monarchy into a Shia theocracy staunchly opposed to the West and Israel. The Islamic Republic's new foreign policy—geared toward ideological rather than national interests—upended Iran's diplomatic relations, not only across the Middle East and with the U.S. and Israel but also in Africa. Iran's strategic interests on the continent were fundamentally reassessed in terms of regime security and the new leadership's allegiance to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's unconventional system of religious thought. That system's doctrine, known as *velayat e-faqih* (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), endowed Khomeini with the divine right to rule as the preeminent religious and political leader of the Islamic Republic and Muslims worldwide.

Iranian presidents have exhibited notable differences in foreign policy, with some claiming reform and others proposing hardline opposition to the West. However, the president is not the chief decision-maker in Iran; the [supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei](#), is. This fact explains the pronounced consistency in foreign policy throughout the history of the Islamic Republic. Further, even the so-called reformist presidents like Mohammad Khatami and [Hassan Rouhani](#) have been regime insiders committed to the regime's revolutionary tenets. Steadfast loyalty to the supreme leader drove the policies of each successive administration, with none going so far as to challenge Khamenei's strategic vision.

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*Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in Egypt after the Shah's exile from Iran (Source: [Radio Farda](#))*

Where the Shah sought to build alliances with Western-aligned African governments, the Islamic Republic viewed these governments as a potential threat and actively sought to undermine them. Like the Shah, the Islamic Republic tied political developments on the continent to its security interests but immediately reversed many of the Shah's cordial diplomatic relations. For example, after Morocco received the deposed Shah in exile, Khomeini [severed](#)

[diplomatic ties](#) with that country and later recognized the sovereignty of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Western Sahara, an area in West Africa that Morocco claims as its sovereign territory. Iran [severed](#) diplomatic relations with Egypt in May 1979 in protest of the newly-signed Camp David Accords between Israel and Egypt, and tensions [escalated](#) when Egyptian President Anwar Sadat gave the Shah refuge in Egypt and refused to extradite him to Iran.

The most striking examples of Iran's post-revolutionary policy shift in Africa were driven by the regime's ideological interests, which contrasted with the national interests that motivated the Pahlavi monarchy. The Shah had supplied oil to South Africa despite international sanctions on the latter since [the early 1960s](#) for its apartheid policies. The Islamic Republic, in contrast, [joined](#) the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) oil embargo against South Africa, slashing oil exports, even though South Africa was then a large importer of Iranian oil. Further, the Islamic Republic claimed to oppose South African apartheid as grounds to express support for the then-outlawed South African political party, the African National Congress (ANC), and severed diplomatic relations with South Africa.

Iran's revolutionary goals abroad prompted other policies in Africa. By the spring of 1982, Iran had repelled Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran. Then, it attempted to press a counteroffensive to claim Iraqi territory, causing the war to continue for another six years. As Tehran at this time was utterly isolated on the international stage, it sought African states' condemnation of Iraq's invasion at the UN.

Throughout the 1980s, Iran intensified its religious outreach on the continent through its revolutionary goals, implementing an effort to build a Shia clerical network that has since been operationalized for several aims, including terrorism. A 1984 U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) declassified [report](#) revealed that Iran's Ministry of Islamic Guidance sent clerics to Africa to encourage Shia Muslims to resist what they viewed as illegitimate governments. The clerics used ideological propaganda to instill in their followers that it was their religious duty to establish Shia-dominated governments loyal to the supreme leader of Iran. The CIA's report cited eyewitness accounts from hundreds of students from Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Niger, and Senegal attending theological institutions in Iran.



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The Islamic Republic gained its first foothold in Africa in Sudan as the latter's relations with the West deteriorated after Omar al-Bashir's rise to power in 1989. In 1991, Bashir attended a conference in Iran [intended](#) to promote the Islamic Revolution and undermine the U.S.-sponsored Middle East peace process. This event conveyed the regime's intention to continue to export its revolution despite eight costly years of war with Iraq. In December 1991, Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani traveled to Sudan and [declared](#), "The Islamic Revolution of Sudan, alongside Iran's pioneer revolution, can doubtless be the source of movement and revolution throughout the Islamic world." Both Bashir and Supreme Leader Khomeini derived the legitimacy of their rule from Islamic and revolutionary ideologies, making the two militant Islamic regimes natural partners. Both became state sponsors of terrorism and developed relations with Hamas and other U.S.-designated terrorist organizations.

However, Iran's influence in East Africa was weakened during Mohammad Khatami's 1997–2005 administration as African countries' relations with the U.S. improved. Most critically, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks precipitated warmer relations between the U.S. and African countries, such as Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Kenya, and even Sudan—each of which cooperated with American counterterrorism objectives. With the exception of Eritrea, which was at war with Ethiopia at the time, East Africa primarily aligned itself with the West. Still, Khatami [visited](#) Sudan in 2004 and Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali, Benin, Zimbabwe, and Uganda in 2005, his last year in office.

The virulently anti-Western and anti-Israel Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president of Iran in 2005. Once in office, he amplified the regime's rhetoric about American exploitation of Africa's resources. As the face of Iranian public diplomacy, he attempted to shame the U.S. and presented Iran as a global leader against oppression. His pursuit of allies in Africa intended to achieve moral and diplomatic cover for Iran's nuclear and terrorist activities while also [compensating](#) for Iran's then-deteriorating relations with Europe and Asia. He sought to immunize the Iranian economy against Western sanctions and undercut international efforts to isolate the regime.

However, he faced challenges with African countries, most favoring the West. Iran notched a diplomatic victory in 2006 when it [attended](#) the African Union (AU) summit as a guest of honor. Still, Ahmadinejad's policy, if not his anti-American rhetoric, largely failed to achieve significant success—except for with Sudan and Eritrea. In late 2010, following Ahmadinejad's state visit to Uganda, each of the African members of the UN Security Council (Gabon, Nigeria, and Uganda) [voted](#) in favor of sanctions against Iran for its nuclear program. The vote resulted in UN Security Council Resolution 1929, further underscoring Tehran's isolation on the continent.

The Rouhani administration, which took power in 2013, prioritized a nuclear deal with the West and downgraded Africa as a priority. Rouhani focused on outreach to the U.S., China, Russia, the U.K., France, and Germany (also known as the P5+1). He never traveled to Africa during his tenure, and the only presidents of African countries who [visited](#) Iran were those of Ghana, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. After [the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action \(JCPOA\)](#) was signed in 2015, Africa didn't feature in Iran's efforts to open its economy to the world. Despite the JCPOA, Iranian-African trade relations stagnated because Rouhani prioritized Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Trade with Sub-Saharan Africa reached an all-time low in 2015 and [never exceeded 1 percent](#) of Iran's total trade during Rouhani's time in office.

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Nevertheless, Rouhani began paying more attention to Africa after Iran’s tensions with the U.S. ratcheted up during the Trump administration. The U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018. Iran then sought ways to circumvent U.S. sanctions with the help of African companies. In March 2020, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo [announced sanctions](#) against several South African companies for their illicit Iranian oil trade involvement.



*Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi receives an honor guard during his state visit to Nairobi in July 2023 (Source: [CNN](#))*

The 2021 election of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi marked another turn in Tehran’s foreign policy. Iran’s centers of power [aligned](#) in opposition to détente with the West and in favor of intensifying Iran’s nuclear program and terrorist activities. To compensate for the costs of this escalation, Iran sees Africa as an alternative to Western markets. Raisi’s [July 2023 trip](#) to Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe—the first trip to the continent by an Iranian president since Ahmadinejad went in 2013—is evidence of Iran’s re-prioritization of Africa. Raisi has viewed Africa as an element of the supreme leader’s concept of a “resistance economy” to neutralize sanctions. Iran’s trade with the African continent is small compared to its [oil trade](#) with China because Africa complies

with U.S. sanctions on Iran’s oil sector whereas China does not. The ongoing economic relations between Iran and Africa are meant to stabilize Iran’s political partnerships, essential to Iran’s wide array of endeavors on the continent.

## Iran’s Relations with African Countries

The following country reports provide historical context and discuss recent developments in Iran’s relationship with each nation. They aim to expose Tehran’s political, economic, and ideological interests in each country and determine whether it has advanced those interests. Africa is not the main arena of Iranian terrorism and destabilization to undermine Western security interests; the Middle East is. But Tehran has applied the same methods to its Africa portfolio to the same ends. Therefore, each report also traces Iran’s subversive activities in the country in question, focusing on the IRGC and Hezbollah.

### Algeria

*Overview:* Algeria is a North African country that borders Morocco, its rival. The Tindouf refugee camp in Algeria at the border with Morocco, Mauritania, and Western Sahara doubles as an operational and recruitment center for the Polisario Front. This Algerian-backed militia receives support from Tehran and Hezbollah to contest Morocco’s Western Sahara sovereign claims. Iran’s support for the Polisario Front and its cooperation with Algeria serve as vectors to impose costs on Morocco, which joined the Abraham

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Accords in December 2020. Algeria also serves as a ripe ideological breeding ground with a long history of anti-Israel sentiment and has taken measures to obstruct Israeli diplomatic initiatives on the continent. Algiers stands with Tehran on issues ranging from the latter's nuclear program to its recent charm offensive in the Middle East.

*Historical Background:* Algeria, a former French colony that gained independence in 1962, [sympathized](#) with the Islamic Revolution due to the Revolution's ostensibly anti-imperialistic stance. This sympathy—framed in terms of resistance against Western powers—contributed to Algeria becoming a palatable interlocutor to Iran throughout the November 1979 Iran hostage crisis after armed followers of Khomeini seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran and captured the diplomats inside. The U.S. severed diplomatic relations with Tehran and eventually settled on the Algeria-brokered Algiers Accord in January 1981, which freed the hostages.

Notwithstanding this history of ideological similarity, Algerian-Iranian diplomatic relations were strained in the early to mid-1990s when Iran began supporting the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). This Algerian Islamist party started an insurgency in 1992 after the military [canceled](#) elections and dissolved the party. The FIS was on the verge of winning the elections and framed the military's intervention as a U.S.-backed coup. By appealing to anti-imperialist ideas and Islamic religious and cultural [identity](#), the FIS was able to recruit members and attract Tehran's attention. The FIS became a vehicle for Tehran to win ideological points and undermine U.S. regional interests.

In 1993, Algeria accused Tehran of backing the FIS and [severed](#) diplomatic relations. The following year, the New York Times [reported](#) that Sudan was allowing its territory to be used as a transit point for Iranian weapons destined for the Algerian guerillas and was the site of training facilities. The guerillas also received training in Lebanon, suggesting Hezbollah's involvement. The FIS would wage an insurgency against the government for the next decade within the context of a civil war involving various other radical Islamist groups. According to some [estimates](#), the civil war claimed 200,000 civilian lives by the end of the 1990s.

*Political Interests:* Iran's first political interest in Algeria is obtaining Algeria's support for Iran's nuclear program. In 2000, diplomatic relations between Algeria and Iran were [reestablished](#), one year after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's rise to power. After Algeria issued statements claiming that Iran's nuclear program was exclusively intended for peaceful purposes, in 2007, Iran offered Algeria support in developing its civilian nuclear program. Although Algerian officials [toured](#) a uranium conversion facility in Esfahan soon after Iran made the offer, Algeria did not ultimately accept it.

Iran's second goal in Algeria is to ensure that the latter continues to align with Iran-backed Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad. In 2012, Algeria and Iran were the only countries in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that [opposed](#) that body's decision to suspend Syria's membership over its brutal armed response to a popular uprising in Syria. In 2022, Algeria [supported](#) Syria's return to the Arab League. It also benefits Tehran that Algeria has [refused](#) to join the Saudi-led coalition fighting the [Houthis](#) in Yemen.

Thirdly, Iran stokes tensions between Algeria and Morocco to counter Israel. In August 2021, Algeria [severed](#) diplomatic relations with Morocco, citing Morocco's alleged use of Pegasus spyware, its support

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for a separatist group in Algeria, and its failure to uphold bilateral commitments over Western Sahara. Iran welcomed the decision, [claiming](#) it showed Algeria's support for the Palestinian people in the context of the newly signed Abraham Accords, which included Morocco. Algeria also obstructs Israel's diplomatic efforts on the continent. In February 2023, an Israeli diplomat attending the African Union (AU) as an observer was expelled, a move that Israel [blamed](#) on Algeria, South Africa, and Iran. Israel obtained its observer status in 2021 despite Algeria's [objection](#) that it would violate the AU's previously adopted pro-Palestinian resolutions. In 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Abdollahian [praised](#) Algeria's commitment to the Palestinians.



*Algerian Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf meets with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran (Source: [Tehran Times](#))*

Algeria also supports Iran's recent charm offensive in the Middle East, which includes diplomatic outreach to its arch-rival, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states in the Persian Gulf. On a July 2023 trip to Tehran, Algerian Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf met with senior regime officials, including [President Ebrahim Raisi](#), and indicated his preference for Iran's regional integration. Attaf characterized the Chinese-brokered Saudi-Iranian normalization agreement from a few months before this meeting as a "[positive movement](#)" in Arab-Iranian relations. Abdollahian, for his part, expressed his government's interest in [expanding](#) cooperation with Algeria in various non-military fields.

While relations between Saudi Arabia and Algeria were tense due to Saudi Arabia's ties with Morocco, Amwaj Media [finds](#) that Saudi Arabia and Algeria "have taken important steps towards détente," mainly since President Abdelmadjid Tebboune came to power in December 2019. The Saudi-Iranian normalization agreement could open Algeria to pursue relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. In contrast, Iran's proxy war in Yemen against Saudi Arabia led Saudi Arabia to pressure African countries to sever ties with the Islamic Republic.

*Economic Interests:* In 2007, Ahmadinejad traveled to Algeria, [urging](#) Algerian companies to engage in cooperative trade and investment agreements with Iranian companies in the automobile, petrochemical, and gas sectors. Over the following year, bilateral trade [doubled](#) to \$50 million. In 2009, Algeria and Iran—the world's second and sixth largest natural gas producers, respectively—discussed forming a gas-producer cartel similar to the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). That year, they [coordinated](#) oil production cuts. In 2016, Iran Khodro [established](#) an automobile manufacturing plant in

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Algeria. In 2018, Iran exported [29 million dollars worth](#) of goods to Algeria. Iran has expressed optimism about continuing to increase bilateral trade, with Iranian media [reporting](#) that between May 2023 and July 2023, Iran exported twice the quantity of non-oil products to Algeria compared to that period in the prior year.

*Ideological Interests:* Iran has targeted Algerian Shia with propaganda [since the early 1980s](#). Tehran amplified its anti-Israel messaging in Algeria during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, attracting some Algerians to travel to the Middle East to convert to Shiite Islam and then build a clerical network in their home country. In early 2015, Iranian sectarianism intensified as a result of Amir Mousavi, who is [believed to have been](#) an Iranian intelligence agent and brigadier general in the IRGC, being stationed as cultural attaché at the Iranian embassy in Algiers. Known for [supporting Hezbollah](#) and the Popular Mobilization Force (PMF) in Iraq, Mousavi [set up](#) “cultural exchange programs that aimed to spread Shiism through mosques and educational institutions.” In 2018, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita [alleged](#) that Mousavi “supervis[ed] the spread of Shia [religion] in the Arab world and in Africa” and served as a liaison between Hezbollah, Algeria, and the Polisario Front.

These soft-power initiatives paid off. Between 2000 and 2022, the total number of Shia with sympathy for the regime in Tehran, if not outright allegiance, [reportedly](#) doubled. Further, Algeria has [sought](#) to provoke a backlash against Israel in response to Morocco’s [entry](#) into the Abraham Accords in December 2020. Algerian security services [blame](#) Israel and Morocco for supporting separatist groups in Algeria and perceive Morocco’s relations with Israel as a security threat. The [prospects](#) for a joint Moroccan-Israeli military base south of Melilla, situated on the Mediterranean Sea to the north of Morocco, probably heightened this perception. In 2022, Israel [sold drones](#) to Morocco. Tehran has taken advantage of this situation to inculcate loyalty and cultivate pro-Palestinian views among Algerian Shia.

*Terrorist Activity:* The IRGC and Hezbollah maintain ties with the Polisario Front, an independence movement seeking to realize its sovereign claims over Western Sahara. Since Morocco and Mauritania established control over Western Sahara after Spain unilaterally [withdrew](#) from the area in 1975, Rabat has remained in conflict with the Polisario Front. Algeria [provides](#) sanctuary for Polisario Front members and may also offer arms, but it has denied the latter charges.

Hezbollah’s support for the Polisario Front dates back to 2016 when Hezbollah [established](#) the Committee for the Support of the Sahrawi People in Lebanon. The following year, Kassim Tajideen, a U.S.-[designated](#) senior operative in Hezbollah’s Africa financing arm, was arrested on an Interpol warrant at Casablanca airport for fraud, money laundering, and terrorism. Morocco extradited Tajideen to the U.S., where he [pled guilty](#) to roughly \$1 billion in unlawful transactions. According to Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita, Hezbollah retaliated for the extradition by [transferring](#) a variety of surface-to-air missiles (SAM) to the Polisario Front under the supervision of the Iranian embassy in Algiers.

Since 2017, the IRGC and Hezbollah have [allegedly](#) used the Tindouf refugee camp in Algeria to provide the Polisario Front with military training. Hezbollah deployed advisors to assist the group as it upgraded its anti-air capabilities to deter the Moroccan Air Force. Consequently, Morocco [terminated](#) diplomatic relations with Iran in 2018. A Polisario Front member [claimed](#) in 2022 that Algeria would facilitate Iran’s transfer of drones to the group, though it is unclear if such transfers occurred.

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*Conclusion:* Algeria opposes the Abraham Accords, partly because they resulted in the U.S.'s [recognition](#) of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Algeria, which already [receives](#) Russian arms, could look to Iran to bolster its capabilities, mainly if the Israeli-Moroccan security partnership deepens. The U.S. should, therefore, consider how facilitating a deeper Israeli-Moroccan partnership could benefit both Israel and Morocco, which share an interest in countering the Islamic Republic. Additionally, the U.S. must take the necessary steps to support Morocco's capabilities to disrupt the flow of arms and training into the region, especially as Iran aims to escalate vis-à-vis Morocco because the latter joined the Abraham Accords. To those ends, the U.S., Israel, and Morocco should share intelligence and monitor the supply routes that could be used to transfer weapons to the Polisario Front or Algeria, including the Mediterranean Sea.

## Central African Republic (CAR)

*Overview:* Known for its [weak and unstable central governance](#), including multiple coups, the Central African Republic (CAR) provides a fertile breeding ground for terrorist activity. CAR also has gold and diamond mines, which [attract](#) illicit actors, including the Russian private military contractor, the Wagner Group. The IRGC-Quds Force remains active in CAR but does not appear to have sought illicit financing in Africa through a stake in the aforementioned mineral resources.

*Historical Background:* The Seleka group, a coalition of primarily Muslim armed organizations, seized control of CAR's government in 2013, ousted President Francois Bozize, and brought Michel Djotodia into power. That same year, President Djotodia [announced](#) that the Seleka group would be disbanded, though many of the militia commanders did not comply with his order. Only a few months later, Djotodia [resigned](#), reportedly in a bid to end the violence between Christian and Muslim militias that had engulfed the nation since his rise.

*Terrorist Activity:* Amid this sectarian strife, the IRGC-Quds Force has recruited and worked with Ismael Djidah—a former member of Seleka—to [target](#) Western, Israeli, and Saudi interests in several countries. Djidah, who is believed to have been recruited by the IRGC-Quds Force in 2014, [allegedly](#) received tens of thousands of dollars from the IRGC-Quds Force on his trips to Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran. He was arrested in his home country of Chad in April 2019.

Djidah's former boss, former CAR President Djotodia, also reportedly assisted the IRGC-Quds Force's and Djidah's efforts to carry out attacks against Western interests. However, the extent and timing of his contributions were unclear based on reporting. Furthermore, IRGC-Quds Force Unit 400 has [recruited, trained, and armed](#) the terrorist group Saraya Zahara in CAR to coordinate cells in Chad and Sudan and stand up new ones in Cameroon, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Niger. There are up to [300 militants](#) in the network that take their orders from cells in CAR. After his arrest, Djidah admitted that he had worked with the IRGC-Quds Force to form Saraya Zahara. Between 2017 and 2018, Djidah recruited militants from rebel groups in CAR for firearm training at Iran-run camps in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria.

*Conclusion:* Iran-backed terrorism is a potential threat to Western interests in failing and weak states. CAR falls into that category, with the current president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, showing an inability to prevent terrorism from metastasizing and to provide his citizens with necessities. [According](#) to a U.K.

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delegate to the UN, some progress was made in electoral reform in CAR, but terrorism and violence remain pervasive. The IRGC-Quds Force's activities in CAR have not made headlines like the Wagner Group's human rights abuses in the country have. Still, the country's instability and weak central government remain conducive to the IRGC's operations.

## Eritrea

*Overview:* Bordering Djibouti, where the U.S. has a naval base at the mouth of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, Eritrea is strategically positioned to allow external navies to challenge a key international shipping lane. In the mid-2000s, Iran reached an agreement with Eritrea that gave Tehran's naval assets extended access to the Port of Assab. While Iran [claimed](#) to be combatting piracy, its true intentions were clear: to counter the U.S. naval presence in the region, to seek leverage by endangering passage through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait as the Houthis have done from Yemen by targeting international shipping, particularly vessels headed towards Israel, and to establish the logistical routes needed to transfer weapons to militants in Egypt for onward transfer to the Palestinian territories. Iran's naval assets in this region gave the regime a degree of strategic depth that would allow it to target shipping and conduct operations further from its territorial waters, a core military objective.

*Historical Background:* Iranian-Eritrean relations were historically influenced by Eritrea's alignment with the West in the 1990s and its international isolation, which resulted from its war with Ethiopia. After Eritrea gained independence from Ethiopia in 1993, it [aligned](#) with the U.S. and Israel against Sudan, then Tehran's ally in East Africa. Eritrea received U.S. and Israeli support to contain Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir's anti-Western, Islamist military regime. Eritrea and Sudan backed armed opposition groups in each other's countries, leading to tensions between Eritrea and Iran, given that Tehran sought to protect Bashir's rule.

A 1998 border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea led to the latter's isolation on the international stage. Although hostilities officially ended in late 2000 with the signing of the Algiers [agreement](#), which established the Eritrea-Ethiopia Boundary Commission (EEBC) to draw up the new borderlines, conflict over the border would persist for the next two decades. In 2003, Ethiopia [rejected](#) the EEBC demarcation line. Still, because the U.S. viewed Ethiopia as its chief Global War on Terror partner in the Horn of Africa, it did not censure Ethiopia. In 2005, a Hague Commission [blamed](#) Eritrea for the 1998 border dispute, which further underscored Eritrea's isolation at this time.

In 2006, the year in which Iran attended the African Union (AU) as a guest of honor, Ethiopia invaded Somalia and spearheaded [U.S.-backed](#) efforts to oust Somalia's Islamist government. Eritrea, in turn, supported Somali Islamist insurgents against the subsequently formed Ethiopian-backed government. Some of the deposed Islamists took sanctuary in Eritrea and [received support](#) there as they sought to regain power. These actions deepened Eritrea's international isolation. The U.S. Department of State [banned arms sales](#) to Eritrea due to concerns it was aiding terrorists in the Horn of Africa. The UN also found that Eritrea supported militant Islamists in Somalia, and so it [imposed an arms embargo](#) on the country.

Therefore, the border dispute between Ethiopia and Eritrea had a major impact on Eritrea's foreign relations. Eritrea opposed the U.S., which was working in concert with Ethiopian interests. Given that

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Eritrea's relations with the West were in shambles, Iran was able to expand its influence. In 2008, an Eritrean opposition website [alleged](#) that Iran transferred long-range missiles to Eritrea's Port of Assab. That year, Iran began docking its warships at the port. Additionally, Iran [deployed](#) IRGC-Quds Force operatives, naval officers, and military experts to Eritrea to support Eritrea's proxy war in Somalia. In 2009, ostensibly in exchange for Eritrea's open statement of support for Iran's nuclear program, Iran [deposited](#) \$35 million in Eritrea's Central Bank.

In 2012, despite Iran's naval deployment and despite the IRGC-Quds Force's presence to assist in the planning and coordinating of Eritrea's subversive operations in Somalia and Ethiopia, Eritrean officials [allowed](#) Israel to deploy naval and intelligence assets in its territorial waters. Iran and Israel, therefore, were vying for permission to establish military positions at Eritrea's ports. In addition to a listening post, Israeli submarines and ships were present in the Dahlak Archipelago to monitor Iranian activities. Given that Israel and Iran both deployed naval capabilities to Eritrea at this time, Eritrea was a potential flashpoint for conflict between Israel and Iran.

That same year, Ethiopia, frustrated by Eritrea's support for rebel groups in its territory, [launched a ground offensive](#) into Eritrean territory, killing several Eritrean military personnel. However, this still did not turn international opinion in Eritrea's favor. Eritrea would remain isolated until the outbreak of war in Yemen in 2015, which allowed it to reverse course by joining the Saudi-led coalition of states fighting the Iran-backed Houthis. In exchange for allowing access to the Port of Assab and its airspace, Eritrea [received](#) an unspecified amount of Saudi and Emirati funds. Additionally, Sudanese contingents moved through the Port of Assab into the Yemeni theatre, and the UAE's air force flew sorties out of Eritrea. Eritrea itself contributed [400 troops](#) to deploy in Emirati units.

Eritrea's international position improved in April 2018 when the UAE brokered a deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia that effectively ended the two countries' border dispute. The agreement [restored](#) Eritrea's relations with Somalia, resolved its conflict with Djibouti, and lifted some international sanctions due to Emirati lobbying. On some accounts, Eritrea began [providing military aid](#) to Ethiopia as part of the deal that would be used to degrade the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), their shared adversary, which had ruled Ethiopia for almost three decades and partnered with the U.S.

*Political Interests:* The war in Yemen was the initial impetus for Eritrea's positive relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The war effectively forced Eritrea to choose its partner—either Riyadh or Tehran—and it chose Riyadh. However, given the cessation of hostilities between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, partly due to the Chinese-brokered normalization agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, there will likely be less pressure from Saudi Arabia on Eritrea to avoid relations with Tehran. Saudi Arabia appears intent on preventing another escalation with the Houthis, mainly as it focuses on its economic development. This initiative could be jeopardized by cross-border Houthi missile and drone strikes. Saudi Arabia did not participate in the U.S. and U.K. [airstrikes](#) against Houthi targets in January 2024. If hostilities flare up again in Yemen between the internationally recognized government and the Iran-backed Houthis, Iran's interest in Eritrea will be to ensure that Eritrea does not allow the Saudi-led coalition to conduct anti-Houthi operations from Eritrea.

When Saudi Arabia was under regular cross-border attacks from the Houthis, Eritrea angered Saudi Arabia in 2017 by [maintaining](#) diplomatic relations with Qatar, despite Qatar's support for terrorist



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groups and its warm [relations](#) with the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, the Islamic Republic. Eritrea did not join the Saudi-led diplomatic and economic embargo against Qatar. The Eritrean government, however, backed a Saudi censure of Qatar, [saying](#), “[the censure was] one initiative among many in the right direction that envisages full realization of regional security and stability.” In 2018, Saudi Arabia welcomed Eritrea and Ethiopia to a summit in Riyadh, where the two former rivals [signed](#) agreements building on the UAE-brokered peace deal from earlier that year. Eritrea's relations with Saudi Arabia appear to be in a more advanced stage than Iran's. Saudi Arabia's ability to offer various forms of financial compensation likely continues to entice Eritrea.

*Conclusion:* Eritrea became estranged from the U.S. in the mid-2000s due to its support for terrorist organizations in Somalia and due to its efforts to destabilize Ethiopia, its adversary, and the U.S.'s counterterrorism partner. It moved closer to Tehran, but the outbreak of the Yemeni civil war in 2015 allowed Eritrea to part ways with Iran. The UAE-brokered peace deal in 2018 further guards against Iranian infiltration, as it restored Eritrea's positive standing internationally, making Iranian support less critical. However, Tehran's historical ties with the former pariah state should not be understated. Eritrea may be increasingly open to improving relations with Iran, given that the March 2023 Saudi-Iranian normalization agreement took the pressure off Eritrea to remain distant from Tehran. Therefore, Tehran's use of Eritrea's ports to smuggle weapons must be closely monitored. To that end, Combined Task Force 151, a counter-piracy 38-nation naval partnership, must [implement](#) tracking and interdiction efforts that target Iranian weapons shipments through the Red Sea.

## Ethiopia

*Overview:* Ethiopia is one of Africa's [fastest-growing economies](#). Over the past two decades, Iran's exports to Ethiopia increased at an [annualized rate of 6.68 percent](#), reaching \$1.5 million in 2021. In addition to these burgeoning economic ties, Iran has become a security partner to Ethiopia's Abiy administration since the start of a civil war in November 2020 between the Ethiopian government and the Tigrayan rebels. Ethiopia's longstanding ties with the U.S. and Europe were damaged because of Abiy's brutal military campaign against the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF), which ruled Ethiopia for over three decades and acted as an important partner in the U.S.-led Global War on Terror in East Africa.

*Historical Background:* Under the Shah, Iran allied with pro-Western Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, who ruled Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. A Soviet-backed military coup ousted Selassie in 1974, causing Iranian-Ethiopian relations to deteriorate. In 1977, Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam came to power in Ethiopia and implemented the Ethiopian Red Terror, a violent purge of his political rivals. That year, the Shah [backed](#) Somali dictator Mohamed Siad Barre in the year-long Ogaden War against Mengistu's Ethiopia to prevent Soviet penetration.

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*Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in Ethiopia (Source: [Iran Politics Club](#))*

After the Islamic Revolution, Iran's relations with Ethiopia's pro-Soviet military junta, also known as the Derg, improved. Mengistu sided with the Islamic Republic, [establishing](#) bilateral relations and opposing the U.S. Moreover, he took Iran's side in condemning Iraq's invasion.

In 1991, Ethiopia's military junta fell, and the TPLF took power, shepherding better relations with the West. After the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, the U.S. re-prioritized the Horn of Africa and formed closer relations with the TPLF. Following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the U.S., additional [American military aid](#) was surged to the TPLF, much of which was directed to counterterrorism efforts in Somalia. Israel also contributed military aid to Ethiopia's counterterrorism program. In 2009, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman [visited](#) the country.

Ethiopia was a reliable U.S. partner throughout the Global War on Terror. In 2018, however, a change in Ethiopia's leadership called into question this arrangement. Abiy Ahmed took

power, ending the TPLF's almost thirty-year reign. The TPLF was forced to relocate its operations to the Tigrayan region, where it is still based. The UAE then [brokered a deal](#) between Ethiopia and Eritrea in which both states agreed to cease hostilities towards each other.

Abiy's rise to power marked a turn in the political fortunes of the TPLF. Its standing in the government was diminished as the new administration [removed](#) high-profile Tigrayan officials, whom it accused of corruption and repression, from their posts. Abiy sought to institute reforms to the federal system of government that would curtail the Tigray region's influence. In late 2020, these tensions came to a head when the TPLF attacked the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF), triggering a civil war. Abiy's brutal response as commander-in-chief of the ENDF caused Western capitals, including the U.S., to withdraw support for him.

*Political Interests:* In the absence of American support, Abiy sought military assistance from Tehran. The Iranian regime likely noticed a rift between Ethiopia and the U.S. after Washington [demanded](#) that Abiy end his military campaign in May 2021. Ethiopia was angered because it viewed the Tigrayan rebels as responsible for the war and control of the Tigray region as integral to its security. After the rebels took control of Mekelle, the capital of the Tigray region, in June 2021, Iran [began sending](#) the Mohajer-6 unmanned combat aerial vehicle (UCAV), one of its most advanced drones, to Ethiopia to put down the

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uprising. The U.S. Treasury Department [confirmed the transfers](#) in an October 2021 sanctions package targeting Iran's drone proliferation network. The U.S. Department of State [noted](#) that the transfers violated UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which requires the Council's approval to import and export certain weapon systems to and from Iran. However, because that provision of Resolution 2231 [expired](#) in October 2023, Iran now has legal cover for its drone exports, which could result in more shipments to Ethiopia.

However, Iran's ability to influence the Abiy administration is not a foregone conclusion. Iran competes for influence in Ethiopia with the UAE, which also has positive relations with the Abiy administration. The UAE, for instance, [trained](#) Abiy's forces and directed drone strikes against Tigrayan positions. Emirati support flights [regularly trafficked](#) supplies from the UAE, including the Chinese-made Wing Loong drone, which was [delivered](#) to Ethiopian air bases by the UAE throughout the civil war. Ethiopia's dependence on the UAE likely [checks](#) Iranian influence.

*Terrorist Activity:* In the fall of 2020, Iranian intelligence operatives activated a sleeper cell in Addis Ababa to attack the Emirati embassy and gather intel on the U.S. and Israeli embassies. Ethiopia uncovered the 15-person cell and a cache of weapons and explosives and thwarted the plot. The East African country didn't blame Iran for the alleged plot. Still, U.S. and Israeli officials [indicated](#) it was part of a broader effort to seek revenge for the assassinations of high-ranking Iranian officials. The Emirati embassy might have been targeted due to the UAE's normalization of ties with Israel in September 2020.

*Conclusion:* The civil war in Ethiopia ended in November 2022, as both officials from the Abiy administration and the Tigray region [agreed to a peace deal](#) contingent upon the disarmament of the Tigrayan rebels. In March 2023, Ethiopian lawmakers [revoked](#) the TPLF's designation as a terrorist group, signaling that the peace deal was durable. The U.S. should no longer seek to impose costs on the Abiy administration for its brutal conduct during the war because doing so would force Ethiopia further into a nascent security partnership with Iran. The proliferation of drones in this volatile region could further destabilize it. Therefore, the U.S. Department of the Treasury should publicly identify and sanction the Iranian actors involved in producing and increasing drones in Ethiopia and the Ethiopian actors responsible for their procurement.

## Kenya

*Overview:* Located on the shore of East Africa, Kenya is a gateway into the continent. Indeed, its major port in Mombasa is a critical transit hub. It is a relatively stable country, making it a safe bet for foreign investment. The former British colony prioritizes its relations with the U.S., but Iran has achieved key ideological goals in Kenya, allowing it to commission various anti-Western plots. The sheer volume of thwarted Iran-linked plots and arrests indicates that Iranian clandestine activity—targeting U.S., Israeli, Saudi, and British interests in the country—is significant and ongoing.

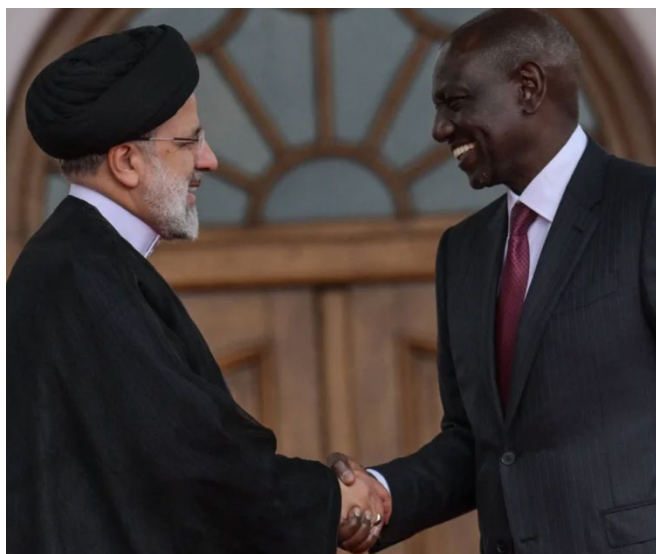
*Historical Background:* Kenya was a fixture in the Ahmadinejad administration's African outreach. In 2009, Ahmadinejad traveled to Kenya to solicit trade and investment from the East African country. It was the first Iranian presidential delegation to Kenya since President Rafsanjani traveled there in 1996. Ahmadinejad's team persuaded Kenyan officials to deepen bilateral relations, and the two nations [agreed to establish](#) a shipping route between Bandar Abbas and the Port of Mombasa. Kenya also, at this

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time, allowed Iran to set up a commercial center in Nairobi. Further, Kenya [reportedly](#) sought Iranian technical advice on developing a nuclear program and had already employed Iranian companies to build hydroelectric and gas-powered plants in the country.

After the Trump administration withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA, Iranian companies contacted Kenya. In 2019, Kenya [engaged in talks](#) with them over sharing water management, environmental protection, and renewable energy technology but did not reach any publicly reported agreements. Kenya's foreign ministry released a [statement](#) in January 2021 promoting mutual trade and technological ties and noting that a delegation of Iranian tech companies would travel to Kenya to discuss cooperation in various fields. Still, it was not clear that the delegation ever went to Kenya. The lack of a public record of business deals at this time indicates that they were probably not a priority for President Rouhani.

The Raisi administration continued to pursue economic relations with Kenya as it sought alternatives to Western markets. The Iranian regime downgraded nuclear diplomacy and accelerated the nuclear program, making such options more critical. In 2023, Raisi traveled to Kenya, where he visited Iran's House of Innovation and Technology, an Iranian network of knowledge-based companies. [According](#) to IRGC-linked media, this center comprises more than 35 Iran-based companies that export products to Kenya. During this visit, Kenyan President William Ruto [announced](#) that Iran would set up an automobile manufacturing plant in the port city of Mombasa and requested greater access to Iranian tea, meat, and agricultural markets and trade routes through Iran to Central Asia. The two foreign ministers [signed](#) a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on information technology, fisheries, livestock, and investment promotion.



*Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Kenyan President William Ruto in Kenya in 2023 (Source: [CNN](#))*

*Political Interests:* Kenya is a foreign policy priority for Iran, as Raisi's recent trip shows. Meanwhile, Kenya seeks to preserve its relations with the West and Iran, so it tends to avoid making statements critical of either. Kenya does not voice its opposition to Iran's brutality at home or its support for terrorism abroad.

Iranian operatives have been caught red-handed in several attempted terror plots in Kenya, and Kenya has made efforts to thwart and detain those responsible. Still, it has seldom pointed a finger at the Islamic Republic. In 2012, two Iranians were found with 33 pounds of RDX explosives. A Kenyan Anti-Terrorism Police Unit official [admitted](#) that "the [suspects] have a vast network in the country

meant to execute explosive attacks against government installations, public gatherings, and foreign establishments," but the official fell short of identifying an Iranian intelligence operation. Other [reports](#) indicated that Kenyan officials did say the Iranian suspects were members of the IRGC-Quds Force and

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that the highest levels of the Iranian regime must have authorized the operation. This admission was a notable exception to Kenya's approach, which centers on charting an independent foreign policy.

*Economic Interests:* Although Kenya complied with post-JCPOA U.S. sanctions on Iran's oil sector, it continues to foster cooperation with Iran, where it believes its commercial and technological interests are beneficial. Instead of openly flouting U.S. sanctions, Nairobi engages Iranian companies in niche markets that are not easily sanctioned. Beginning during the latter half of the Rouhani administration and continuing to this day, Iranian companies are [looking to access](#) markets for goods classified as humanitarian and exempted from sanctions. According to U.N. data, in 2021, Kenya [imported](#) \$34 million worth of goods—mostly mineral fuels, oils, and distillation products—from Iran, exploiting a loophole in the U.S.'s energy sanctions to Tehran. Iran continues importing Kenyan tea, Kenya's [number-two](#) hard currency earner.

*Ideological Interests:* Kenya is ripe for Iranian ideological infiltration, given its population of [over half a million](#) Shia. When Ahmadinejad arrived in the capital in 2009, he was greeted by a massive crowd of Muslims [chanting](#) "God is great" in Arabic. With a network of cultural and religious centers in Kenya, such as the Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO), Iran has the institutional cover it needs to deploy elements tasked with radicalizing and recruiting members of the Shia community. These types of institutions tend to be sheltered from sanctions and efforts to close them down because of their seemingly innocuous humanitarian value, which makes them useful tools for the Iranian regime.

*Terrorist Activity:* The 1998 U.S. embassy suicide truck bombings in Kenya and Tanzania led to an American foreign policy focus on East Africa. Al-Qaeda carried out the bombings, which closely resembled Hezbollah's bombing of a Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983. A U.S. federal court later concluded that the Islamic Republic and Hezbollah had [aided](#) al-Qaeda chief Osama Bin Laden in conducting the attacks. In response to the bombings, President Clinton authorized cruise missile strikes against the terrorist infrastructure in Sudan and Afghanistan. Israel [assassinated](#) Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Osama Bin Laden's deputy and the mastermind behind the Kenya and Tanzania bombings, in Iran in 2020.

Iran has planned and directed several (mostly unsuccessful) terrorist plots in Kenya over the years. In 2012, [33 pounds](#) of RDX explosives were found in Kenya in the possession of two IRGC-Quds Force operatives: Ahmad Abolfathi Mohammad and Sayed Mansour Mousavi. The Iranian nationals admitted to targeting U.S., Israeli, Saudi, and British interests in Kenya and were [convicted](#). Their arrest gave Kenya a pretense to [cancel](#) an [announced](#) deal from 2009 in which Iran was supposed to ship four million metric tons of crude oil annually to Kenya, but [reports](#) indicated that Kenya probably would have made this decision anyway, given international pressure to comply with U.S. sanctions.

In 2015, Kenyan authorities arrested two individuals employed by Iran's security services to conduct attacks against Western interests. Abubakar Sadiq Louw, 69, and Yassin Sambai Juma, 25, [admitted to plotting](#) the attacks in Kenya and allegedly [traveled to Tehran](#) on several occasions. Louw was a leader in Kenya's Shia community. In 2016, Iranian operatives [were arrested](#) in Kenya for targeting the Israeli embassy there. In January 2020, days after the U.S. struck and killed Soleimani, al-Shabaab [attacked](#) Manda Bay, a U.S. military installation in Kenya, killing 3 U.S. citizens. Again, in 2021, an Iranian national

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[was arrested](#) in Kenya for planning terrorist attacks against Israeli interests. Iranian agents remain active in Kenya, recruiting terrorist cells and plotting attacks against Western interests.

*Conclusion:* Kenya wishes to preserve its relations with Iran, but the threat of economic costs has disrupted this relationship. Most notably, in 2012, Kenya canceled the announced agreement to import oil from Iran. Therefore, the U.S. Department of the Treasury should target Kenyan individuals and entities seen to be doing business with Tehran to disincentivize new deals and raise the costs of business in the Iranian market. It must pay particularly close attention to trade in goods that have been deemed humanitarian. U.S. diplomacy should also promote cooperative projects between U.S. and Kenya-based companies to support Kenya's technological advancement in the fields where Iranian companies currently have a foothold.

## Morocco

*Overview:* Morocco is a pro-Western North African country bordering the Atlantic Ocean and Algeria. Iranian-Moroccan relations have declined as Israeli-Moroccan ties have improved. Israel and Morocco are [exploring](#) arms deals, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and even a jointly-operated military base. Iran, in turn, has sought to undermine Morocco's external security through cooperation with Algeria and the Polisario Front and its internal security through ideological infiltration. With the help of its proxy Hezbollah, Iran is attempting to encircle Morocco in pro-Iran sentiment in the hopes that such sentiment will penetrate Morocco itself.

*Historical Background:* The territorial conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front refers to Spain's unilateral withdrawal from Western Sahara in 1975. Morocco won control over the contested area, defeating Algeria's and Mauritania's claims to sovereignty. However, the Polisario Front, which [controlled](#) some of the territory then, declared the sovereign Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). This led to a protracted conflict that continues to be fueled by Algeria's support.

In 1979, Morocco received the deposed Shah, [causing](#) Iranian Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini to sever diplomatic relations with Rabat and to recognize SADR. In 1991, the Polisario Front was [driven back](#) into Algeria's Tindouf area, and Tehran and Rabat [reestablished](#) diplomatic relations. Seven years later, Iran reversed its recognition of SADR. However, these gestures were nominal. Rabat was determined to build close relations with Washington throughout the 1990s, hoping the U.S. would recognize its sovereign claims to Western Sahara. In 2009, Morocco [severed](#) diplomatic relations with Tehran in response to the latter's sectarianism and an Iranian official's statement that [Bahrain](#) was "the fourteenth province" of Iran, a reference to Iran's historical territorial claim to Bahrain that reaches back to the Persian Empire. Moroccan King Mohammed VI [characterized](#) Iran's efforts to convert Sunnis, which comprise 99 percent of Morocco's population, as an attack on the monarchy, known for its moderate approach to Sunni Islam.

Notwithstanding these lingering tensions, in 2012, Morocco hedged on the issue of Iran's nuclear program, [referring](#) to sanctions as a last-resort measure that should not impact the Iranian people. Morocco's acquiescent position warmed relations with Iran. In 2014, Iran promised to respect the Kingdom of Morocco's sovereignty and the role of King Mohammed VI, effectively lobbying for renewed

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diplomatic relations on the grounds that it would not use its diplomatic presence in the country to spread Shiism.

In January 2017, Iran and Morocco [reestablished](#) diplomatic relations. Later that year, though, Morocco [arrested](#) a Hezbollah agent named Kassim Tajideen on an Interpol warrant, leading the group to retaliate against Morocco. After Tajideen's arrest and subsequent extradition to the U.S., Morocco believes that Iran [facilitated](#) Hezbollah's supply of SAM and Strela missiles to the Polisario Front through its embassy in Algeria. As a result, in 2018, Morocco [severed](#) diplomatic relations with Iran, and relations have been on ice since then. In June 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian [voiced his support](#) for better relations with Morocco at a summit in Tehran.

*Political Interests:* The Iranian regime's recent charm offensive extends to Morocco but is unlikely to counteract its isolation. Saudi Arabia and Israel have far more diplomatic influence in Morocco than Iran does. Morocco [joined](#) the Saudi-led international coalition formed in 2015 to restore the internationally-recognized government of President Hadi in Yemen. In 2016, King Mohammed VI [attended](#) a Moroccan-Gulf summit to improve ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In 2018, Morocco's relations with Saudi Arabia, while [tense](#) given Morocco's neutrality on the conflict between Qatar and the other Gulf States, improved after Morocco severed relations with the Islamic Republic. In 2022, the Arab League [endorsed](#) a Saudi-led resolution calling for solidarity with Morocco vis-à-vis Iran.

After Morocco severed relations with the Islamic Republic, Moroccan-U.S. relations also improved. Morocco's distance from Tehran fit into the U.S.'s isolation strategy, which went into full effect after the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018. The Trump administration's ultimate decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara facilitated Morocco's agreement to [normalize ties with Israel](#) under the Abraham Accords in December 2020. In November 2021, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz [signed](#) a defense MOU with his Moroccan counterpart in Rabat. The MOU would [facilitate](#) intelligence sharing, research, and joint military training. Although specific weapons deals were not reported then, Rabat has [expressed interest](#) in buying Israel's Iron Dome air defense systems. Moreover, Israel may be [looking](#) to establish a military base in Morocco.

*Ideological Interests:* In 2008, Morocco [uncovered](#) two Shia clerical networks. In 2018, reports emerged on Hezbollah's infiltration of educational systems in the Ivory Coast through Lebanese investments to [fund schools](#) there. While details on the schools remain scarce, they were reported to be set up as part of a joint effort on behalf of Hezbollah and the Lebanese investors, suggesting that the schools' leadership likely had ties to Hezbollah and that radical Shia Islam, anti-Americanism, and antisemitism influenced their curriculums. Allegedly, the investors concurrently launched a lobbying campaign to undermine Morocco's agenda, which is centered on moderate Sunni religious influence. In response, Morocco established its schools to protect the Moroccan diaspora from Iranian ideological and religious influence. In 2022, Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita [accused Tehran](#) of spreading radical Shiism on the African continent.

*Conclusion:* Tehran views Morocco as an adversary, given the latter's relations with Saudi Arabia and Israel, and Morocco perceives Tehran's support for militant Shiism, the Polisario Front, and Algeria as a threat to its regime. Iran's efforts to destabilize Morocco may accelerate as Tehran tries to [impose costs](#) for Rabat's participation in the Abraham Accords. The U.S. should, therefore, consider maintaining its

recognition of Morocco's claim over Western Sahara as a means of ensuring Rabat's continued adoption of a pro-Western and pro-Israeli foreign policy. This will undermine Iran's diplomatic offensive and Hezbollah's ideological infiltration and promote further security cooperation to deter Iran.

## Niger

*Overview:* Located in West Africa, Niger is one of Africa's poorest countries despite its abundant natural resource wealth. This landlocked nation has large deposits of uranium, coal, and gold, which make up a large share of its economic activity. Since its independence from France in 1960, Niger has [experienced](#) several successful coups and dozens of aborted coup attempts. Its most recent coup in July 2023 pitted the West against a newly installed military regime



*Nigerien Foreign Minister Ibrahim Yacouba and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in Tehran in 2016 (Source: [Iran Front Page](#))*

led by a previously low-profile general, Abdourahmane Tchiani. The military leadership mobilized behind him and recognized the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland as the legitimate government of Niger, with Tchiani as its head, until elections could be held in [three years](#). Iran's position on the military coup—at first marked by silence, then by implicit recognition of the new government—has been calibrated to preserve its interests in West Africa while not foreclosing potential cooperation with the Nigerien junta.

*Historical Background:* When Ahmadinejad visited Niger in April 2013, Western analysts [speculated](#) that he was seeking to procure Nigerien uranium,

given Iran's aggressive extraction of its deposits. The trip occurred weeks after Iran announced the inauguration of two uranium mines and a milling plant. Ahmadinejad [claimed](#) the Iranian mines were sufficient for Iran's uranium needs. Niger's foreign minister said that Niger's sale of uranium was not on the agenda and that any such arrangement would have to be compliant with international laws and regulations. No uranium deals were reported.

Rouhani's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, [went](#) to Niger in October 2017 and May 2019 to bolster bilateral economic ties. Details on the outcomes of these talks were scarce. Still, Iranian media [reported](#) that Zarif also met with President Mahamadou Issoufou to discuss broader regional and international topics and how to boost trade. It was unclear if any significant agreements were reached at this time.

In September 2020, before the UN arms embargo was set to expire against Iran, the U.S. invoked the "snap back" mechanism to restore all UN sanctions against Iran. The other JCPOA signatories (France, the U.K., Germany, China, and Russia) [rejected](#) Washington's initiative. President Rouhani [reached out](#) to Niger, which had assumed the UN Security Council's rotating presidency, to request that it stand against the U.S. initiative, and Niger took the same position as the other JCPOA signatories.



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Mohamed Bazoum's election to the presidency in April 2021 marked Niger's first post-independence peaceful transfer of power. However, the military [overthrew his government](#) in July 2023 and detained him. General Tchiani's seizure of power called into question the continuity of U.S. and French support to the Nigerien government's counterterrorism program.

The Nigerien coup was particularly damaging to France's counterterrorism interests in the region in the context of recent coups in Mali and Burkina Faso—both of which resulted in France's military expulsion. France receives [15 percent](#) of its uranium from Niger, its former colony. Tchiani [called on the foreign powers](#) that had partnered with the previous government, namely the U.S. and France, to recognize his claim to power and continue to support Niger's counterterrorism efforts. He may [not be expected](#) to take the country in a hardline anti-Western direction, as was the case in Mali and Burkina Faso after their coups, but continuing the U.S. and France-backed counterterrorism efforts in Niger depends in part on the U.S. and France's openness towards recognizing the military junta.

After the military takeover, the U.S. declared it a coup, [demanded](#) the restoration of civilian rule, and signaled its readiness to impose costs on the military leadership, as did France. The New York Times [noted](#) that due to the U.S. labeling the event as a coup, it could no longer provide counterterrorism assistance to the Nigerian government. As a result, troops stationed at U.S. Air Base 201 in Niger, a \$100 million base, are idle. The base has been described as the most important U.S. military asset in a region fast-becoming more vulnerable to terrorist activities and groups. Other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) regional powers [released](#) more neutral statements than the U.S. and European countries.

The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a regional political and economic bloc, threatened to intervene militarily if Bazoum was not restored and immediately suspended the bloc's commercial activity with Niger and froze its state assets. Mali and Burkina Faso—former members of ECOWAS that had their memberships suspended because of military coups in their countries—[said](#) that such an intervention by ECOWAS could trigger their military involvement in defense of Tchiani. The U.S. joined Europe and ECOWAS, imposing crippling sanctions and [pausing](#) its economic assistance program, which was valued at \$200 million per year. In October 2023, France began [withdrawing](#) its troops from Niger after weeks of pressure from the junta.

*Political Interests:* Publicly, the Raisi administration has taken a cautious, if not neutral, position on the military coup. In October 2023, President Raisi said his government [was ready to cooperate](#) economically with Tchiani's government. However, if Iran calculates its economic relations in the region are at stake, it will limit its cooperation with the new government. For instance, Iran may not wish to damage relations with Nigeria, an African trading partner with Iran and a member of ECOWAS who would likely respond negatively if Iran pursued relations with Niger's current leadership.

As Niger's relations with the West and ECOWAS deteriorate, Iran will likely try to draw the isolated group of coup leaders in the Sahel into its orbit. Niger's isolation could also disrupt its ability to form relations with Israel, which benefits Tehran. In 2021, Israeli Minister of Intelligence Eli Cohen [said](#) that Israel and Niger engaged in secret talks regarding normalization. However, as with the October 2021 military coup in Sudan, the coup in Niger could make it more difficult to build closer relations. Tchiani's seizure of power from a democratically-elected government makes him unwelcome in Western capitals.

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Saudi Arabia's interests are also at stake. In 2017, Saudi Arabia and Niger [signed three bilateral agreements](#), agreeing to a security arrangement, the Kandadji Dam project, and rural development projects. These projects and Saudi Arabia's construction of local primary schools in Niger were likely conditioned on Niger's cooperation on regional matters involving Iran. Saudi Arabia unequivocally [condemned](#) the military takeover, which seems to suggest that the Saudi deals could be in jeopardy.

*Terrorist Activity:* Tchiani will need external partners to ensure his regime's security and combat Islamic extremist organizations in its territory, leading some analysts to [believe](#) he could reach out to Russia or Iran. The Wagner Group, a Russian private security contractor known for meddling in the political affairs of African countries, has long sought [inroads](#) in the Sahel to counter the West, which the coups in this area have provided. Tchiani's need for a new counterterrorism partner in lieu of Western support could make Tehran appealing, but such an arrangement constitutes a risk for Tchiani, given that the IRGC-Quds Force is itself the special operations wing of a U.S.-designated terrorist organization. If and when the Quds Force deploys to the region, it will import its terrorist enterprise, which would imperil the weak state and further undermine security in the volatile Sahel region.

*Conclusion:* The U.S.'s punitive actions against Tchiani risk pushing him closer to Tehran, but American acceptance of Tchiani will come as a challenge in the context of its human rights priorities. The Tchiani regime will likely impede fundamental political and economic freedoms, which the U.S. prioritizes as a foreign policy matter. Suppose the U.S. decides to sanction the military regime to show its commitment to human rights and curtails or discontinues its counterterrorism support to the junta. In that case, the U.S. must find ways to conduct counterterrorism operations covertly in the country—even without the central government's approval.

## Nigeria

*Overview:* In West Africa, Nigeria is Africa's most populous country, largest economy, and biggest oil producer. In 2022, Nigeria's gross domestic product (GDP) of [\\$477 billion](#) beat out that of Egypt (\$475 billion) and South Africa (\$405 billion). As such, it is Iran's [third-largest trading partner](#) on the continent after South Africa and Kenya. Nigeria is also an [ideological](#) battleground, given its religiously diverse demographic composition. According to the Pew Research Center, Muslims and Christians make up [a near-even split](#) within a population of [216 million](#). However, Muslims make up the majority and are concentrated in the north of the country.

While pursuing formal diplomatic initiatives in Nigeria, Iran also seeks ties with non-state actors that threaten state security, namely the Shia Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), which Nigeria [banned](#) in July 2019. A Nigerian court [granted](#) the government permission to designate the group as a terrorist organization, but the government has not. Iran has continued to cultivate influence among Nigeria's Shia population, with the IRGC leading efforts to empower the IMN financially, ideologically, and materially.

*Historical Background:* Iran and Nigeria maintained diplomatic relations, [established](#) around 1976, following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Revolution did not lead to a rupture but dramatically altered Iran's interests in the country. Under Supreme Leader Khomeini, the Islamic Republic swore to export its system of government and the radical beliefs and traditions upon which it is based, causing fear among

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the leaders of the Sunni Muslim world, including Sunni heads of state. These fears were not only felt across the Middle East but also in Africa.



*Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky with a photo of Supreme Leader Khamenei (Source: [BBC](#))*

Shia Islam took root in Nigeria after the Islamic Republic entered what the CIA [referred](#) to as its “activist phase” on the continent. Following Iran’s attempted counteroffensive into Iraq in the spring of 1982, Iran went on a diplomatic and ideological offensive in Africa. Iran recruited and engaged a previously obscure Nigerian Islamic preacher, Ibrahim Zakzaky. His outspoken hatred of secularism and his advocacy for an Islamic state attracted Iran’s attention. However, it wasn’t until 1996 that he [converted](#) to Shiism, leading many followers to convert with him (other [accounts](#) assert he converted in 1979). After his conversion, he and his followers formed the IMN.

Iranian-Nigerian relations gained traction after Olusegun Obasanjo was [elected](#) to the presidency in 1999, promising to improve the economy, stabilize the political system, and form relations with foreign powers. In 2000, [reports suggested](#) that Nigeria and Iran sided with each other in disputes within OPEC over oil production levels (both have a history of cheating on their quotas to take advantage of high oil prices, pitting them against Venezuela and Saudi Arabia). The following year, President Obasanjo [traveled](#) to Tehran and met President Khatami to discuss their respective oil and agriculture industries. Khatami said the two leaders considered “cooperation and coordination in the field of oil,” seemingly affirming the countries’ shared OPEC agenda. Obasanjo also met [Supreme Leader Khamenei](#) and condemned Israel for its treatment of the Palestinians. In 2005, Khatami [signed](#) several bilateral agreements in Nigeria over power generation and industry.

When Ahmadinejad was elected later in 2005, Iran became more isolated and viewed Nigeria as a higher priority. In 2010, Nigeria [assumed](#) the UN Security Council’s rotating presidency, increasing Tehran’s interest in a diplomatic partnership. Iran sent Ahmadinejad on a state visit, but Nigeria nevertheless voted in support of a UN Security Council resolution against Iran. On his trip, Ahmadinejad advocated for cooperation in power generation, going so far as to [suggest](#) that Iran would help Nigeria develop its nuclear program if it so desired. Nigeria turned the proposal down due to U.S. pressure and domestic opposition.

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During the Rouhani administration in the mid-2010s, tensions between the Nigerian state and the IMN influenced Iranian-Nigerian relations. In 2014, Zakzaky, then leader of the IMN, [accused](#) the Nigerian military of killing three of his sons and 30 of his supporters at an IMN-organized anti-Israel rally. Then, in 2015, Nigerian forces killed over 300 IMN members after they blockaded a convoy led by Nigerian Army Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Tukur Buratai, [allegedly](#) seeking to assassinate him. The army [reportedly](#) opened fire on the protesters after a projectile thrown at the general's vehicle was mistaken for gunfire. Subsequently, the army firebombed the IMN's religious center and sent troops and tanks to Zakzaky's home to arrest him.

This brutality sparked fears that state security forces would inadvertently radicalize the group, as observers [argue](#) Boko Haram was radicalized after the extrajudicial killings of its leader and other suspected members in 2009. Zakzaky was arrested and detained without charge. In 2016, he was charged with conspiracy to kill Buratai. Iran's then-Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, [held](#) the Nigerian government responsible for the deaths of the IMN members but maintained that bilateral relations were stable. Rouhani [called for an investigation](#) into Zakzaky's imprisonment and the army's use of force against the protesters.

According to Iranian state-linked media, in June 2022, Iran's minister of industry, mines, and trade, Reza Fatemi Amin, and Nigeria's minister of state for foreign affairs, Zubairu Dada, [signed](#) nine MOUs in Tehran to boost economic and trade ties. During Dada's trip to Tehran, Abdollahian [invited](#) Nigeria's president to Iran. In August 2022, the two countries' oil ministers [agreed](#) to an MOU on energy in which Nigeria would receive Iranian engineering assistance in its oil fields and refineries. In 2023, however, Nigeria's Central Bank [issued a statement](#) urging banks and financial institutions to increase monitoring of transactions with Tehran, given the high risk of money laundering.

*Political Interests:* Nigeria is [considered](#) a member of the anti-Iran bloc at the African Union (AU). Nevertheless, it has maintained uninterrupted diplomatic relations with Iran since 1976. Successive Iranian administrations have kept a heavy diplomatic presence in Nigeria. At the same time, Iran's overt support for the IMN—a security threat in the eyes of the Nigerian state—strains bilateral relations and diminishes the Iranian embassy's ability to elicit support for its positions. This duality is a sign of discord within Iran's foreign policy bureaucracy, which the IRGC dominates. If security in Nigeria deteriorates because of the IMN's activities, Iranian-Nigerian relations likewise will deteriorate. Under those circumstances, Nigeria would likely take a more active role in the AU in speaking out against Iran.

*Ideological Interests:* Iran's ideological interests in Nigeria date back to the early 1980s, when the CIA identified Nigeria as one of the countries in which Iran sought to recruit students for religious courses in Iran. Though Sunni at the time, Zakzaky was one of the first African Islamic leaders to receive an invite from the Islamic Republic. After returning to Nigeria, he [combined](#) Khomeini's symbolism and rhetoric with the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood's ideology, thereby appearing to stay true to his roots as a leader of the Nigerian Muslim Brotherhood. Zakzaky was a follower of Sayyid Qutb, the Muslim Brotherhood's thought leader. At first, Zakzaky retained his radical Sunni beliefs, which called for Islamic governance, but his inspiration quickly shifted in 1979 to the successful Islamic Revolution and Khomeini's ideological system, known as velayat-e faqih, which also calls for Islamic governance.

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The number of Shiites in Nigeria has grown steadily since the early 1980s as a result of the radical cleric's sectarian and political campaign to establish an Islamic theocracy in Nigeria. A majority of Nigeria's [100 million](#) Muslims are Sunni, but the Shia population totals [four million people](#). Although not all Nigerian Shia belong to the IMN, they are a target demographic for the Iranian regime. Iran [finances](#) the IMN's propaganda, social services, schools, and mosques—not unlike its engagement with Hezbollah—and provides critical ideological support. In October 2023, Zakzaky traveled to Tehran and [met](#) with Supreme Leader Khamenei, indicating the current supreme leader's intention to continue to spread his influence in Nigeria.

*Terrorist Activity:* The IMN's leadership is committed to the Islamic Republic's ideological principles. However, the group seems to differ from other Iran-backed proxies and partners in that it does not openly espouse violence as a means of achieving its political aims. The Combatting Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point published an [analysis](#) in 2013 that claimed the group does not promote violence while acknowledging that IMN members occasionally turn to more radical groups. The American Enterprise Institute [found](#) that converting to Shiism may be a way to distinguish one's identity from mainstream Sunni elites, who tend to favor a pro-Western view of the world; and Nigerian Christians, who are more skeptical than Muslims about Iran's nuclear program. At the same time, Iran expert Matthew Levitt at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy published a [report](#) in 2016 citing a former Iranian foreign ministry advisor who said that Iran had trained the IMN to assemble explosives.

The IRGC and Hezbollah have been caught on several occasions plotting attacks against Western and Israeli interests in Nigeria. In 2010, an IRGC operative and three Nigerians were [charged](#) in a Nigerian court for attempting to transfer mortar rounds and 107 mm Katyusha rockets through Nigeria's Port of Lagos, intended for the Gambia. In 2012, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [tied](#) IRGC-Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani to the intercepted shipment of [240 tons of arms](#), which were loaded into 13 shipping containers at the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. As previously noted, Qaani was deputy commander in the Quds Force in charge of the Africa portfolio at the time of this operation.

Azim Adhajani, the individual accused of conducting the operation, was identified as a Tehran-based businessman and [denied](#) working for the IRGC, presumably to preserve the regime's plausible deniability. However, the UN had already blacklisted him as an IRGC operative.

In 2013, Nigerian security services [arrested](#) Mallam Abdullahi Mustaphah Berende on charges that he headed an Iran-backed terrorist cell tasked with assassinating Nigerian officials, including the president, and plotting attacks against Western and Israeli interests. He confessed to studying Shia teachings in Iran and being recruited to surveil targets in Lagos, where his handlers believed an Israeli intelligence facility was located. In a separate incident later that year, three suspected Hezbollah operatives of Lebanese descent [were arrested](#) in a raid that uncovered anti-tank rounds and landmines, 122 mm artillery rounds, rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), and AK-47 rifles and ammunition.

*Conclusion:* Iran will continue to enflame sectarian tensions in Nigeria (as it does in the Middle East) as long as violence against the Shia minority fuels the Islamic Republic's propaganda. The U.S. should, therefore, consider facilitating inter-faith dialogue in Nigeria to lower the sectarian tension. The U.S. has an interest in convening faith leaders from different sects of Islam and Christianity to promote tolerance and moderation, which would directly counter Tehran's radicalism. However, ties between Hezbollah, the

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IRGC, and the IMN need to be carefully probed. Although the IMN has not always openly espoused violence, the group's terrorist capabilities should be kept in check by working with the Nigerian government to prevent Iranian infiltration and the proliferation of arms.

## Somalia

*Overview:* Strategically located in the Gulf of Aden, Somalia is a critical transit hub for weapons. The East African country has a long history of weak central governance that fails to contain the violence that affects large swathes of its territory. Thus, Somalia is a fertile ground for insurgent groups, terrorist organizations, and foreign meddling. In the mid-2000s, for example, Iran armed and equipped an Islamic insurgency in Somalia that opposed the transitional government. The group, known as the Union of Islamic Courts (UIC), splintered into the al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab, which remains active in the country today and continues to receive Iranian material, financial, and logistical support.

*Historical Background:* Mohamed Siad Barre ruled Somalia from 1969 to 1991. After taking power in a coup, he remade Somalia into a one-party communist state with the Soviet Union's backing. The Barre regime [coopted](#) the communist ideology and called for national unity among the clans to neutralize the clans threat to his rule. Somalia's neighbor, Ethiopia, had already experienced a communist revolution in 1974, which overthrew Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie. The Shah perceived the two communist states as a dual threat to Iran's security interests in the Horn of Africa.

In 1977, the Soviet-backed regime in Somalia invaded a disputed border region with Ethiopia, triggering the year-long Ogaden War. Disapproving of the invasion, the Soviet Union withdrew its support for Barre and rushed support to Ethiopian dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam. The Shah, seeing an opportunity to partner with Barre after the latter's break with the Soviet Union, [backed](#) Somalia's war against Ethiopia to counter further Soviet penetration. That year, the Carter administration likewise offered its first [military assistance](#) to Somalia to supplant Soviet influence. However, Somalia lost the unpopular Ogaden War despite the backing of the U.S., Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Sudan. Then, it allied with the U.S. for the duration of the Cold War.

After the war, Barre turned to the clans to sustain his rule, parting ways with his former communist ideology and instituting a bloody crackdown on all internal political opponents, including those backed by Ethiopia's military junta, the Derg. At the same time, Barre's regime continued receiving U.S. military assistance. Throughout the 1980s, the Derg backed various insurgencies in Somalia instead of the Barre government. However, Barre remained in power until 1991, largely because of his relations with local armed clans, whom he played off against each other. In particular, his government [funded and armed paramilitaries](#) picked from subdivisions within the clans in exchange for their loyalty, which weakened the clans.

In 1985, U.S. military aid to Somalia [approached \\$33 million](#) in order to counter the Soviet Union. Barre's son-in-law, also known as the "butcher," [led Somalia's state forces](#) in the late 1980s in a brutal repression campaign targeting the main opposition group, the Somali National Movement. By the late 1980s, the military began to disintegrate along clan-based lines, leading to Barre's growing reliance on his own clan and eventual demise.

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During this period, Somalia and the Islamic Republic did not maintain the friendly terms that characterized relations under the Shah. The rupture was due to Somalia's Western orientation and the newly established Islamic Republic's inward focus on consolidating its power amid the post-revolutionary tumult. However, Barre's dependence on and favoritism towards his own clan brought about infighting within the military and finally led to the [overthrow of the Barre government](#) by clan-based armed opposition groups in 1991, resulting in a power vacuum and civil war that continues to this day.

Iran's direct involvement in the Somali civil war dates back to 2006, when it began transferring weapons and ammunition to the Islamist UIC—[allegedly](#) in exchange for access to Somali uranium—in violation of a 1992 UN [arms embargo](#) against Somalia. By 2006, the UIC had seized large swathes of the country's south, where uranium mines and the capital, Mogadishu, are located, triggering the Ethiopian National Defense Forces to intervene and stand up a pro-Western government. However, although Ethiopia had U.S. support and quickly [routed](#) the UIC in December of that year, a more resilient and extreme terrorist organization splintered off and continued receiving Iranian arms. In exchange for Iran's support, al-Shabaab [dispatched](#) fighters to aid Hezbollah in its 2006 war against Israel.

An international coalition mobilized behind the Ethiopian-backed Transitional Federal Government (TFG) in Somalia. The UN [approved the deployment](#) of a regional intervention force to arm and train the TFG's security forces. In 2007, it [allowed](#) weapons transfers to the Somali state to enable it to build a security sector and combat terrorist organizations on its soil. In 2009, Ethiopia withdrew its forces, claiming victory over the rebels, and the U.S. began supplying arms to Somalia. In June of that year, the U.S. [provisioned](#) 40 tons of small arms and ammunition. Still, al-Shabaab was able to launch a violent insurgency and subsequently [gain control](#) over the majority of the country.

Later, in 2009, al-Shabaab [claimed responsibility](#) for a suicide bombing that killed three government ministers and 16 others at a ceremony in Mogadishu. After this incident, Iran appeared to withdraw its support for insurgent groups, at least publicly. Iran [recognized](#) the government of Somalia and called for a peaceful diplomatic process to end the conflict. However, Somalia's relations with Tehran never improved, especially given that Somalia had positive relations with the U.S., which backed the Ethiopian military operations that overthrew the former government and installed the TFG. Furthermore, the U.S. had become heavily involved in Somalia's counterterrorism program. Not only has the U.S. provided weapons to Somalia, but it has carried out dozens of air strikes against al-Shabaab and other terrorist targets in Somalia since the late 2000s, with the cooperation and approval of Somalia's government.

U.S.-Somalia relations improved in 2012, when the latter held parliamentary and presidential elections and then adopted a provisional constitution, leading the U.S. to formally [recognize](#) the federal government of Somalia in January 2013. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon then called for an end to the 1992 UN arms embargo because Somalia needed arms to consolidate its gains against terrorist groups—a position that the U.S. at the time also [adopted](#) against critics who argued that the security sector had close links to the warlords and clan-based militias.

Somalia's decision to [close down](#) Iranian religious centers in 2014 gave further indication that Somalia had little to no interest in developing relations with Iran, preferring relations with the U.S. and Western-aligned states. Two years later, Somalia, Sudan, and Djibouti severed diplomatic relations with Iran following an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

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*Terrorist Activity:* Throughout the civil war that followed the fall of the Barre government, Somalia remained a “[failed state](#)” from which al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and ISIS affiliates operated. According to the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), ISIS [has its own branch in Somalia](#) that conducts assassinations and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks in the pursuit of an African Islamic caliphate. The Sunni extremist group represents a security threat to the Islamic Republic. It has been held responsible for and [claimed](#) several terrorist attacks in Iran, including a January 3 suicide bombing attack in Kerman, Iran, that took over 80 lives. However, the same cannot be said about al-Qaeda and its Somali affiliate, al-Shabaab. Iran [provides](#) al-Qaeda with a safe harbor for its leadership and has coopted al-Shabaab, which splintered from the UIC, its former insurgent partner.

External actors have sought to capitalize on the chaos and instability of civil war by taking sides with subversive force. For example, in the mid-2000s, Eritrea supported Islamist militias, [including](#) al-Shabaab, in Somalia against the Ethiopian-backed government. At this time, Iran began supporting the UIC and then al-Shabaab. In 2008, Iran sent IRGC-Quds Force specialists to advise Eritrea on the war in Somalia, as noted in the above report on Eritrea.

After Eritrea [restored relations](#) with Somalia in 2018 as a result of the UAE-brokered accord between Eritrea and Ethiopia, Eritrea pledged to end its support for the militias, but al-Shabaab continued to receive Iranian material, financial, and logistical support in Somalia. In 2017, Somalia’s minister of foreign affairs [alleged](#) that al-Shabaab had seized uranium mines and intended to extract uranium for Iran in exchange for Tehran’s ongoing support. In 2018, the Associated Press reported that embargoed charcoal exports from Somalia were [flowing to Iran](#), earning al-Shabaab millions of dollars in annual revenue.

According to Somali officials, Al-Shabaab’s terrorist capabilities [have grown](#) significantly since 2017 as a result of foreign-supplied arms. In 2019 and 2020, al-Shabaab attacked U.S. military bases in Somalia and Kenya and a European Union military convoy in Mogadishu. The deadly January 5, 2020, [al-Shabaab attack](#) against a U.S. base in Kenya was notable because it occurred two days after the U.S. assassinated IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in Iraq. Iran has [allegedly](#) offered bounties to al-Shabaab to attack U.S. forces in Somalia and the region.

Arms have also flowed out of Somalia towards Yemen and from Yemen towards Somalia. In 2013, the UN Security Council [found](#) that Iran and the Houthis armed Islamist militants in the south of Somalia—accusations which Tehran denied. In 2017, the IRGC shipped weapons to the Houthis [via Somalia](#) to utilize sea lanes that are less closely monitored by Western naval assets. The Houthis [moved](#) Iranian-origin arms, including AK-47 rifles, RPGs, and ammunition, from Yemen to Somalia via the semi-autonomous Puntland in northern Somalia. Somalia is also a gateway to Africa’s lucrative arms market, which has [extended](#) from Somalia into Kenya, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Mozambique, and Tanzania.

*Conclusion:* Iran resorted to subversive activities in Somalia to thwart Western counterterrorism objectives in the Horn of Africa. Adopting the same playbook it uses in the Middle East, Iran believes U.S. interests are vulnerable to attacks on the African continent. Despite religious differences, Tehran has coopted violent Sunni extremist organizations like al-Shabaab based on their shared hatred of the U.S. The U.S. should, therefore, consider building up the naval interdiction capabilities of the Somali Navy and bolstering the Somali government’s counterterrorism operations.



## South Africa

*Overview:* South Africa has the second largest economy in Africa after Nigeria, and is [considered](#) to be Africa's most developed country. Given its infrastructure and political stability, South Africa is one of the most favorable business environments on the continent. However, its economy is not the only factor that appeals to Tehran. South Africa's position on the international stage and the African National Congress' (ANC) loyalty to Tehran also attracts the regime. South Africa has offered rhetorical support for Iran's nuclear endeavors. In 2017, its parliamentary speaker advocated for Iran's accession to the China and Russia-led economic and political bloc, which comprises four original members (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) and later South Africa (also known as "BRICS"). Before it acceded to BRICS in 2023, Iran [sent](#) Foreign Minister Abdollahian to South Africa to solicit its support in the bloc's vote to accept Iran.

*Historical Background:* After the U.K. and the Soviet Union invaded Iran in 1941, forcing Reza Shah to abdicate the throne in favor of his son, Reza Shah went into exile in South Africa. In the 1970s, his son, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, viewed the South African apartheid regime as a partner in the fight against communism. A UN-imposed oil embargo was starving South Africa of oil imports, but Iran came to its rescue as one of the world's few major oil producers willing to sell to South Africa. The Arab oil producers, on the other hand, joined the embargo and threw their support behind the ANC. In return, they gained support for the Palestine Liberation Organization from African governments. This [quid pro quo](#) became more pronounced after the 1973 Yom Kippur War.

Despite being heavily sanctioned by the UN for its apartheid policies, South Africa was anti-communist and, therefore, considered a Western ally during the Cold War. [According](#) to Russian historian Irina Filatov, the Soviet Union trained, armed, and equipped the opposition ANC starting in the 1960s. Because Iran's oil exports to South Africa partly counteracted the international sanctions on the anti-communist government, they served the Shah's strategic interests in addition to obvious profit incentives. The two governments' cooperative relationship extended to the nuclear field, as South Africa had an advanced nuclear weapons program and supplied Iran with [600 tons of uranium oxide](#), also known as yellowcake, in the mid-1970s.

By the late 1970s, on the eve of the Islamic Revolution, South Africa was importing [95 percent](#) of its oil from Iran. After the Islamic Revolution, though, Iran reversed the Shah's policies vis-à-vis South Africa, severing diplomatic relations and ending oil exports. Iran's anti-imperialist propaganda virtually [mirrored](#) that of the ANC, claiming the U.S. and the U.K. were responsible for the oppression of black people in South Africa. However, Iran did not seek to work closely with the Soviet-backed nationalist movement, as Tehran became consumed with the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and was reticent to arm a pro-Soviet group. Indeed, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini viewed the communists as a potential threat. [According](#) to declassified CIA documents from 1986, Khomeini's "abhorrence of atheistic communism has reinforced the Iranians' historical hostility toward Russia and fostered deep-seated suspicions about Soviet intentions toward the Islamic Republic."

As a result of international pressure against the apartheid regime, in 1989, South Africa discontinued its nuclear weapons program. In 1991, it repealed its apartheid laws and released some political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, leading President George H. W. Bush's administration to [lift sanctions](#) against

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South African President Nelson Mandela and Supreme Leader Khamenei in Iran in 1992 (Source: [Iran Project](#))

Pretoria. Three years later, South Africa held its first post-apartheid election, which brought Nelson Mandela, the leader of the ANC, to power. His rise heralded warmer relations with Iran. In 1994, South Africa and Iran established diplomatic relations, and economic cooperation soon followed as the South Africa-Iran Joint Commission of Cooperation was [established](#) in 1995 to convene the countries' deputy foreign ministers annually to improve economic ties. Despite Iran's [pleas to upgrade](#) the commission to the ministerial level, it has remained at the deputy level.

The Mandela administration deepened relations with Iran under President Mohammad Khatami. In 2004, Israeli media [reported](#) that Iran and South Africa's defense ministers—[Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani](#) and Mosiuoa Lekota, respectively—signed a military MOU pursuant to which South Africa would sell uranium to Iran. It was the [first such trip](#) by a South African defense minister to Tehran since the Islamic Revolution.

After Khatami's departure due to term limits, the Ahmadinejad administration's escalatory policy vis-à-vis the West led it to view South Africa as a hub for circumventing Western sanctions. In late 2005, an Iranian delegation led by Hassan Rouhani, Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator and former head of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), [reportedly](#) met with South African President Thabo Mbeki to request technical expertise and technology for its nuclear program. The Iranians also sought to acquire satellite interception, online surveillance, hacking, and missile guidance technologies from South Africa.

During the Ahmadinejad administration, South Africa provided diplomatic support for Iran's nuclear program at the African Union and the UN. South African Foreign Minister Nkosazana Zuma, who chaired the African Union Commission and was considered the "[architect](#)" of South Africa's policy on Iran, called for lifting international sanctions on Tehran as a means to promote dialogue.

As a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2007-2008, South Africa [called for dropping](#) all key sanctions on Iran, including the arms embargo and financial restrictions on the IRGC. In 2008, after South Africa [voted in favor](#) of a unanimous UN Security Council resolution against Iran's nuclear program based on its failure to comply with earlier resolutions, South Africa [argued](#) that the UN Security Council did not take into account the technical findings of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Iran's nuclear file. As a permanent member of the IAEA, South Africa has advocated against the IAEA's elevating the Iran nuclear file to the UN Security Council. In 2009, South Africa [abstained](#) from an IAEA vote censuring Iran.

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By 2012, during the Rouhani administration, South Africa had reduced its dependence on Iranian oil. That year, South Africa received [27 percent](#) of its oil from Iran. (It received [40 percent](#) of its oil from Iran in 2006). U.S. and EU sanctions on Iran's Central Bank forced Pretoria to further [cut its imports of Iranian oil](#). Rouhani was then snubbed in 2016 when South African President Jacob Zuma [canceled a planned trip](#) to Iran after Saudi Arabia's foreign minister visited South Africa in February of that year. Instead, Zuma went to Saudi Arabia and signed several trade and investment deals. The snub showed the ability of Saudi Arabia's incentives to keep countries—even those with longstanding political ties to the Islamic Republic—out of Tehran's reach.

Nevertheless, Iranian-South African relations improved at the same time Iranian-U.S. tensions were ratcheting up. In 2017, Trump's administration [tightened](#) sanctions against Iran's missile program and its terrorist activities. That year, the head of South Africa's parliament [said](#) his country supported Iran's accession to BRICS. Iran and South Africa also held a business forum, where Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif [stated](#) that Iran would provide South Africa priority access to Iran's market and trade routes. Iran sought to establish banking and financial links to counter the fresh U.S. sanctions and prepare for an American withdrawal from the nuclear deal. In December 2017, South Africa and Iran's defense ministers [signed](#) another defense MOU on maritime security.

South Africa continued to advance Iran's agenda on the international stage during the Raisi administration. In February 2023, South Africa worked with Algeria and Iran to [oppose Israel's accreditation](#) at the AU, which resulted in the expulsion of an Israeli diplomat. In August 2023, South Africa joined a unanimous vote in BRICS to [invite](#) Iran to join the bloc. The Raisi administration had [sent](#) Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian to South Africa before the vote to urge it to back Iran's bid. Then, in late 2023, amid the war in Gaza, which followed Hamas' horrific attacks on the state of Israel, South Africa [filed](#) a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

*Political Interests:* South Africa has emerged as a defender of Iran's interests at the UN and AU, advancing Iran's claims on its nuclear program and obstructing Israel's outreach to African countries. More recently, it has shown its anti-Israel sentiment at the ICJ, rooted in the ANC's long history of [working](#) with the Fatah faction of the West Bank and its recent pursuit of improved ties with Hamas. At BRICS, it has supported Iran's candidacy for membership for years. South Africa's ANC continues to take pro-Iran positions, even though an anti-Iran bloc led by Sudan, Nigeria, and Egypt [pressures](#) Pretoria to join it against Tehran. For example, ANC member Mandla Mandela, the grandson of Nelson Mandela, has emerged as a prominent anti-Israel voice in South Africa, leading Iran to [award](#) him the Islamic Human Rights Award in Tehran in August 2022.

*Economic Interests:* Iran and South Africa also maintain extensive economic ties. South African companies Mobile Telephone Network (MTN) and Sasol have made vital investments in the Iranian economy. In 2006, MTN, a telecommunications company, [landed a deal](#) with Iran Cell, beating out Turkcell, a Turkish telecommunications company also pursuing the contract, allegedly through bribery and corruption. Turkcell [alleged](#) that MTN obtained the deal by promising Iran it would deliver South Africa's vote at the IAEA in favor of Iran and that it would help Iran obtain embargoed defense equipment. MTN took a 49 percent stake in a joint venture with Mostazafan Foundation and Iran Electronics Industry (IEI)—both tied to the IRGC. These Iranian entities own a 51 percent stake in the joint venture and [hold](#) decision-making authority.

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In 2007-08, as South Africa called for lifting all international sanctions against Iran, MTN invested [\\$1.5 billion](#) to provide cellular service to over 40 percent of Iran's population. In 2012, Reuters [reported](#) that MTN procured U.S. technology for this cellular network. South Africa's massive energy and chemical company, Sasol, has also made sizable investments in the Iranian economy. In 2012, Sasol held a 50 percent stake in a joint venture with Iran's National Petrochemical Company that was at the time worth [\\$900 million](#). In the 2022-2023 period, Iran exported approximately [\\$304 million worth](#) of goods to South Africa, making South Africa Iran's top destination for exports on the continent.

*Terrorist Activity:* In 2018, South African authorities [arrested two Lebanese citizens](#) after the U.S. accused them of exporting drone components from South Africa to Lebanon, where the U.S. designated terrorist organization Hezbollah is based. In 2021, Politico [reported](#) Iran was mulling coordinating and directing the assassination of U.S. Ambassador to South Africa Lana Marks. The plot was viewed as an attempted retaliation for the U.S. assassination of former IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani. A U.S. government official added that Iran's embassy in Pretoria was involved, which underscores the fact that Tehran uses its diplomatic presence to recruit assets and direct intelligence operations.

*Conclusion:* The Islamic Republic's influence in South Africa reaches back to South Africa's repeal of its apartheid laws in 1991 and the rise of the ANC in 1994. The ANC has advocated for Iran's interests in various international forums, including the UN, AU, and BRICS; facilitated massive capital inflows into the Iranian economy; and allowed Iran to set up intelligence capabilities through diplomatic, economic, and cultural activities. To undermine this decades-old partnership, the U.S. should use multilateral tools to impose costs on South Africa. Specifically, it should coordinate sanctions within the anti-Iran bloc of African nations, against South African individuals and entities that facilitate Iranian trade, including telecommunications companies that have heavily invested in Iranian markets.

## Sudan

*Overview:* Directly across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia, Sudan holds strategic value for Tehran. Its geographical location is significant given its proximity to Egypt, through which weapons have been smuggled to Palestinian terrorist groups; its proximity to Eritrea, where Iran had critical interests throughout the 2000s; its centrality on the Red Sea, a critical shipping lane that Iran has used in the past to position naval assets at Sudan's ports; and its close range to Saudi Arabia. With a civil war unfolding in Sudan between General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, the commander of Sudan's regular armed forces, and his former deputy, General Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo, Iran may seek to manipulate the situation in its favor. Most critically, the strategic picture has shifted in favor of Tehran, as an October 2021 military coup and the ongoing civil war have questioned Sudan's official entry into the Abraham Accords.

*Historical Background:* Throughout the Iran-Iraq War, Sudan was ruled by various Western-oriented presidents who took Iraq's side. In the early stages of the war, Sudan [even supplied troops](#) to defend Iraq against an Iranian counteroffensive in late 1982. However, the [1989 military coup](#) that brought Omar al-Bashir to power reoriented Sudan's foreign policy against the West. The new Islamist government—[believed](#) to have been inspired by Iran's Islamic Revolution—was opposed to the U.S., which immediately cut military aid to the country and levied sanctions. Bashir, in turn, took an anti-Western position during the 1991 Gulf War, supporting Iraq in its invasion of Kuwait. Although Tehran perceived Iraq as a security

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threat, Iran courted Bashir at this time. In 1991, Iran's then-president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, traveled to Sudan, where he [agreed](#) to finance \$300 million worth of arms purchases from China. Sudan became a hotbed of international terrorism, and the U.S. Department of State [designated](#) it as a state sponsor of terrorism in 1993. In the following year, IRGC operatives [deployed](#) to Sudan to train Islamist militants from [across the continent](#), including those who posed a threat to Western-backed governments in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. Sudan's government knew about and permitted weapons [shipments](#) through its territory to Hamas.



*Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Supreme Leader Khamenei in Tehran in 2011 (Source: [Al-Monitor](#))*

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks marked a temporary pivot in Sudan's relations with the U.S. at Tehran's expense. [According](#) to the U.S. embassy in Sudan, Sudan has provided "concrete cooperation against international terrorism" since 9/11. Still, Iran and Sudan remained friendly, and both remained on the U.S.'s state sponsor of terrorism list. Sudan and Iran [signed](#) a military cooperation agreement in 2008, and Supreme Leader Khamenei [gave a sermon](#) in which he slammed the International Criminal Court's (ICC) arrest warrant against Bashir for his commission of war crimes in Darfur. Iran subsequently [assisted](#) Sudan in building up the latter's arms industry and moored its warships in Port Sudan on multiple visits. Iran, Russia, and China were the largest suppliers of arms to the Bashir regime at this time, with Iran providing over [\\$12 million worth](#) of weaponry.

In early 2009, Israel struck weapons convoys en route to Palestinian territories on at least two separate occasions. On one of them, several IRGC operatives were [killed](#) in a drone strike launched from Eritrea, a country with which Iran also had military ties. Khartoum privately accused the U.S. of conducting the strike. Leaked U.S. Department of State cables later [revealed](#) the U.S. had warned Khartoum of facilitating the IRGC's efforts to arm Hamas in the Gaza Strip during Israel's Cast Lead operation, but the cables did not clarify whether the U.S. directed the strikes.

After South Sudan seceded in 2011, causing Sudan to lose [70 percent](#) of its oil revenue, Western sanctions against Sudan devastated its economy. Israeli airstrikes on targets in Sudan intensified, further increasing the costs of supporting terrorist groups at Tehran's behest. In October 2012, Israel [allegedly](#) bombed the Yarmouk factory, an arms factory in Khartoum, and that same month, Iran again [brought](#)

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warships into Port Sudan. In 2014, Israel [bombed](#) a warehouse in Gaili, which housed weapons and ammunition intended for Hamas. Under pressure, Sudan [closed](#) Iranian religious and cultural centers and expelled some diplomats, including the embassy's cultural attaché, in 2014, alleging that they were responsible for spreading radical Shiite ideology. The next year, it [offered](#) mercenaries to fight in Yemen, and Saudi Arabia transferred \$1 billion to Sudan's Central Bank. In 2016, Sudan [severed](#) diplomatic ties with Iran.

Bashir's overthrow in an April 2019 military coup led by General Burhan resulted in the Transitional Military Council (TMC) government. The TMC was soon followed by a sovereign council, which was slated to be governed by a military official for the first 21 months and then transition to a civilian leader. Burhan, then-head of the sovereign council, distanced Khartoum from Tehran and moved closer to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In February 2020, the White House [invited](#) Burhan to Washington, and the next day, Burhan secretly met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Uganda. The two agreed to work toward normalization.

In October 2020, Sudan [declared](#) its intention to join the Abraham Accords. As part of the agreement, the U.S. [removed](#) its designation of Sudan as a state sponsor of terrorism and signed an MOU with Sudan whereby the U.S. would provide a loan to assist its World Bank payments and give it access to \$1 billion in annual funding. In January 2021, the Sudanese government [signed](#) the declarative part of the Abraham Accords. However, it announced that the final decision to join the accords would rest with a transitional parliament, which has not been formed to date. At the time, Burhan authorized Sudanese Justice Minister Nasredeen Abdelbari to sign the agreement in Khartoum alongside U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Stephen Mnuchin. In October 2021, Burhan [dissolved](#) the transitional sovereign council, claiming that infighting in the civilian bloc would create instability in the country. The coup came shortly before the military leadership was supposed to hand over power to civilian elements on the council.

*Political Interests:* Both Iran and Israel have reached out to Sudan to establish diplomatic relations, and both have made progress toward their goal. In July 2023, Iranian Foreign Minister Abdollahian met his counterpart, the acting foreign minister under Burhan's administration, Ali al-Sadiq, on the sidelines of a Non-Aligned Movement meeting in Azerbaijan, and the two [said](#) they were planning on reestablishing diplomatic ties. In October 2023, Sudan and Iran [announced](#) that diplomatic relations would resume.

However, Israel has also made notable diplomatic achievements in Sudan, and some analysts [believe](#) Israel benefited from the October 2021 military coup, given that the military's leadership is more supportive of relations with Israel than the general population. Before the coup, Sudanese security officials reportedly visited Israel. After the coup, Israeli defense and Mossad officials went to Khartoum. Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen visited Sudan in February 2023 and met General Burhan. Cohen may have also met the head of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), Hemedti, with some [reports](#) indicating that he did and others [claiming](#) that he did not. Burhan reportedly did not like that Hemedti, his deputy at the time, had established a direct channel of communication between himself and Israel's Mossad, so it is possible that Hemedti was excluded from the meeting and that fissures between the two military leaders had already begun to develop at this time.

The outbreak of civil war in Sudan dimmed prospects for both a civilian transition and a peace agreement with Israel. In April 2023, a civil war broke out between supporters of Burhan and backers of

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Hemedti. Israel's Foreign Ministry favors relations with Burhan, while the Mossad established relations with Hemedti. Iran does not appear to have a clear favorite; it may cultivate influence with each general to secure its interests regardless of the war's outcome. On the one hand, Hemedti in 2019 [pledged](#) his support to Saudi Arabia. Today, he receives the UAE's support in the civil war, but he could turn to Iran for additional support. On the other hand, Burhan is receiving Saudi backing. In 2015, at the beginning of the war in Yemen, Hemedti's RSF and Sudan's regular armed forces [provided](#) fighters to the Saudi-led coalition at war with the Houthis.

The October 2023 announcement of diplomatic relations between Sudan and Iran was significant because it signals Iran's support of the Burhan administration. Omar al-Bashir's former Islamist allies [increasingly](#) dominate Burhan's constituency, which means that Iran could look to them to undermine the Abraham Accords. Iran has also [called for a ceasefire](#) and transition to civilian rule, which could benefit Tehran given that a [majority](#) of the Sudanese population opposes a deal with Israel.

*Economic Interests:* When Omar al-Bashir was in power, Iran and Sudan nurtured bilateral trade relations to undermine the Western sanctions afflicting both of their regimes. Bashir never strayed from his set of talking points on Iran's uranium enrichment. He worked out several substantial weapons deals with the Islamic Republic. In 2014, AFP [reported](#) that Tehran was Khartoum's second-largest arms supplier after China. However, these ties deteriorated after Sudan severed diplomatic relations with Tehran in 2016. A Reuters report [noted](#) that Sudan terminated relations with Tehran in order to prioritize relations with Saudi Arabia.

*Conclusion:* Iran's diplomatic relations with Sudan do not guarantee its ability to undermine the Abraham Accords, but the U.S.'s [prioritization](#) of a democratic transition in Sudan could make an agreement between Israel and Sudan more difficult. Such a transition will likely not be possible until after the civil war is resolved, so the U.S. should focus its efforts on ending the conflict in which its interests are secured. Khartoum could move closer to Tehran if Sudan's military officials are hit with U.S. sanctions. While pre-2016-level military and economic ties are unlikely to be resurrected given Israeli, Saudi, and Emirati equities in Sudan, the U.S. should be aware of Iranian efforts to penetrate the Horn of Africa, given its geostrategic significance. U.S. policymakers must weigh preferences for a democratic transition in Sudan, which could in fact diminish prospects for Sudanese-Israeli normalization.

## Uganda

*Overview:* Uganda is a resource-rich country in Southeast Africa. Uganda's resources [include](#) gold and untapped oil and gas reserves, which Iran has offered to help extract. Although U.S.-Ugandan relations under President Yoweri Museveni can be characterized as cooperative, especially since Museveni has [partnered](#) with the U.S. on its counterterrorism efforts in the Horn of Africa, East Africa, and Central Africa, the longtime ruler of Uganda has played a double game, remaining open to cooperative arrangements with Tehran.

*Historical Background:* Since 1986, Museveni has governed Uganda, presiding over steady relations with the Islamic Republic that have been calibrated to avoid Western punitive measures. In 2009, he visited Tehran and [invited](#) Iranian engineers to build an oil refinery in Uganda. Given Uganda's position in 2010 as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council, Ahmadinejad's visit later that year was

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unsurprising. Media reports, at the time, speculated that Ahmadinejad sought to obtain Uganda's support for its nuclear program in exchange for technical assistance on its oil refineries, but Uganda's foreign minister shot down these claims, [exclaiming](#) that "many other countries around the world had companies that could build a refinery in Uganda." The Iranian president [returned](#) to Tehran without reaching a deal on the proposed investments in the Ugandan oil field.

The Raisi administration has similarly prioritized relations with Uganda. In July 2023, Raisi took a [trip](#) there. According to Iranian media, Raisi signed [four agreements](#) covering visa waivers, agricultural cooperation, an intergovernmental commission, and a joint political statement. At a joint press conference with Museveni, Raisi played on common anti-Western tropes, [saying](#), "Imperialism and the West prefer countries to export oil and raw materials, allowing them to convert these resources into value-added products. Therefore, our efforts in Iran are focused on preventing raw material exports."

Iran's ambassador to Uganda [announced](#) that 11 MOUs had been signed, including proposals to cooperate in the field of natural resource extraction. Raisi [affirmed](#) that Iran was ready to build the above-mentioned oil refinery, which would boost Uganda's oil output by 60,000 barrels-per-day, but Uganda [reportedly](#) again turned the offer down. He also expressed support for Uganda's harsh anti-LGBTQ laws, [claiming](#) the West promotes homosexuality in order to end the "generation of human beings."

*Conclusion:* Like many African countries, Uganda has agreed, in theory, to expand ties with the Islamic Republic, but Uganda likely has limits to how far it will work with Tehran. The four agreements signed in July 2023 were not ambitious. Details on the 11 MOUs were scarce, but seemed more aspirational than actionable, especially because they were focused on the field of natural resource extraction, where Uganda turned down the offer to cooperate. U.S. policymakers should monitor the progress of these deals and ensure that the threat of sanctions looms over Uganda's decision-making calculus.

## Zimbabwe

*Overview:* Zimbabwe has a long history of dictatorship. The authoritarian system that has predominated in this South African country since Robert Mugabe came to power in 1980 favors relations with other dictatorships, which do not criticize its human rights record, over relations with Western powers. With shared interests in fending off international criticism and pressure to reform politically, Zimbabwe and Iran have fostered relations, with the two countries signing several deals during the Ahmadinejad and Raisi presidencies. Iran has also shown interest in Zimbabwe's uranium deposits, but to date does not appear to have received uranium from Zimbabwe.

*Historical Background:* Known for his virulent anti-Americanism, brutal dictatorial rule, and rife corruption, Mugabe became an important partner to the Ahmadinejad administration. The two rogue regimes worked together to counter Western isolation due to Iran's nuclear program and Mugabe's human rights abuses. In 2006, Ahmadinejad traveled to Zimbabwe to meet Mugabe and [signed six accords](#) on agriculture, the oil industry, education, and humanitarian aid. In November of that year, on a trip to Iran, Mugabe [declared](#) he would defend Iran against foreign meddling in its affairs, echoing concerns he held concerning his own country and Western calls for political reforms.



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In 2010, after weeks of [meetings](#) between the two countries' ministers on coal and hydroelectrical power generation, the two presidents [met again](#) in Zimbabwe to sign trade and investment deals. Details on the agreements were scarce, but the presidents were expected to sign one on tractor assembly. Whether the deals were ever implemented also remains unclear. Mugabe [said](#), "Be also assured... of Zimbabwe's continuous support of Iran's just cause on the nuclear issue." That year, reports emerged Iran was seeking to acquire uranium deposits in Zimbabwe. The Ugandan government denied their veracity. Iran [allegedly](#) offered to supply oil in exchange for uranium. Again, in 2013, Zimbabwean Deputy Mining Minister Gift Chimankire [denied](#) a report that Zimbabwe and Iran had signed an agreement for the sale of Zimbabwean uranium to Iran.

Mugabe held the presidency of Zimbabwe until 2017 when he [resigned](#) in favor of Emmerson Mnangagwa, his former henchman who headed the repressive domestic security apparatus. Mnangagwa pledged to boost Zimbabwe's international profile and attract foreign investment, and two years later, [proclaimed](#) relations with the U.S. had reached a high point. However, his statement belies tensions in the relationship surrounding the country's dismal human rights record, which had led the U.S. to impose sanctions in 2003.

In July 2023, President Raisi traveled to Zimbabwe, met Mnangagwa, and signed [12 cooperative agreements](#) in various non-military fields, ranging from energy to telecommunications to technology. The two presidents [signed](#) a deal for a joint venture between Iranian and Zimbabwean companies to set up a tractor manufacturing company in Zimbabwe, but neither president announced a price tag on the investment plans. It remains to be seen if these projects will be implemented.

*Conclusion:* Many of the U.S.'s human rights concerns have not been addressed under Mnangagwa, and sanctions remain in place. The U.S., therefore, faces a familiar dilemma: either impose economic costs on the Zimbabwean regime to compel political reforms, which risks pushing Harare closer to Tehran, or sacrifice human rights in an effort to steer Zimbabwe away from Iran. From the standpoint of countering Tehran, targeted and incremental sanctions against Zimbabwe's political leadership for its cooperation with Tehran is preferable to broader human rights sanctions. U.S. foreign policy must deter the alignment of authoritarian leaders in the Global South with those in Tehran.

## Conclusion

Iran's relations with Western capitals have significantly deteriorated due to Iran's support for Russia's war against Ukraine, its brutal human rights violations, its rapidly advancing nuclear program, its active threats to foreign nationals on foreign soil—including current and former U.S. officials. Additionally, its ongoing drone and rocket attacks against U.S. forces in the Middle East, and its decades of financing and arming Hamas and other terrorist organizations that destabilize the region, have contributed to Iran's isolation.

Under the supreme leader's direction, Iran's hardline foreign policy establishment has remained intent on subverting U.S., Israeli, and Saudi influence worldwide. Africa is no exception. Even the reportedly more moderate administrations of Khatami and Rouhani, which sought to ease tensions with the West, viewed Africa as an important ideological battlefield. They gave less attention to Iran's political and economic ties with African countries than the Ahmadinejad and Raisi administrations, but continued to

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promote the Islamic Republic's radical version of Shia Islam, which demands loyalty to the supreme leader and injects anti-Western and anti-Israel sentiment. In contrast, the Ahmadinejad and Raisi administrations deprioritized relations with the West and turned to Africa for diplomatic support and sanctions relief. If the past is prologue, the Raisi administration will face an uphill battle on the continent, especially as it vies for influence against its geopolitical and sectarian rivals.