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Expanding Horizons: Iran's Strategic Engagements in Sub-Saharan Africa - Insights from South Africa, Nigeria, and Tanzania

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Expanding Horizons: Iran's Strategic Engagements in Sub-Saharan Africa Insights from South Africa, Nigeria, and Tanzania

Dirk Kohnert ¹

Cartoon: *How Iranians, Saudis see each other's engagement in Africa* ²



Source: © Hilalius; [Joanna Paraszczuk & Golnaz Esfandiari](#),
Saudi daily Okaz, 7 January 2016

Abstract: Since the 1960s, both the regime of Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) and, subsequently starting from 1979 the Islamic Republic of Iran, have intervened in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). While the Shah's policies were motivated by a virulent anti-communist stance, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) pursued a 'radical' policy of changing the political status of the Western world, including the Western Arab allies, who were hostile to the survival of the mullah regime. While the Shah focused on geopolitical interests, particularly in the Horn of Africa, the vital sea route to the Red Sea, and in South Africa, and ignored the interests of African Muslims, the IRI exploited increasingly radicalized Islamists to expand Iranian influence on the continent. For example, the IRI has spent billions of dollars in the region to provide Muslim schools and free social services through hospitals and orphanages supported by the Iranian Red Crescent. The IRI's strategy aimed to build grassroots support among Muslim communities rather than focusing exclusively on African governments. Tehran's expansionist policies included arms sales to state and non-state actors and the destabilization of regimes. The goal was to build partnerships that would help evade international sanctions while opening new terrain for its axis of resistance against its global and regional adversaries, particularly its arch-enemy Israel. Tehran's version of political Islam involved building up proxies, most notably Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi rebels, most recently in Yemen, who have wreaked havoc on international shipping lanes in solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Tehran expanded its influence in the Sahel region, taking advantage of self-serving French Africa policy and the policies of other Western powers in West Africa to establish contacts with the anti-Western ASE military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Russia, China and Turkey paved the way for this new alignment. The rivalry between Iran and Israel has intensified in recent decades, with several confrontations between the two countries in the Red Sea and East Africa since the 2010s. Iran has continuously expanded its engagement throughout the region, leading to a 'balance of deterrence' between the two countries.

Keywords: [Iran](#), [Israel](#), [State of Palestine](#), [Sub-Saharan Africa](#), [political Islam](#), [jihadism](#), [Houthi rebels](#), [Hezbollah](#), [Horn of Africa](#), [Yemen](#), [Red Sea](#), [Sahel](#), [South Africa](#), [Nigeria](#), [Tanzania](#), [France](#), [Turkey](#), [Russia](#), [China](#)

JEL-Code: E26, F13, F22, F35, F51, F54, F63, H56, N17, N47, O55, P45, Z12, Z13

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² cartoon in the Saudi daily Okaz shows the restraining hand of Riyadh holding back an Iran bent on wreaking havoc throughout the region. © [Paraszczuk & Esfandiari](#), 2016; Radio-Free-Europe, Radio Liberty.

1. Introduction

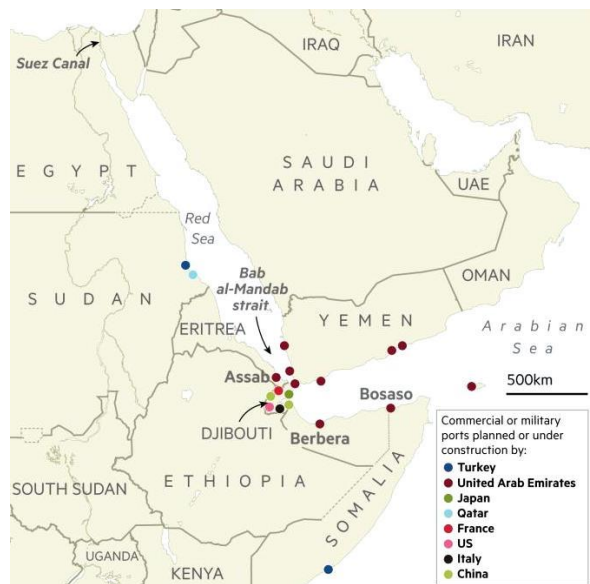
Cartoon 2: *Iran and Israel in search for allies in a hostile world* ³



Source: © David Simonds, *The Economist*, 4 February 2010; Kohnert, 2023

Since [World War II](#), the [Iranian government](#) has engaged in diplomatic and economic activities in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). These activities were initially conducted under the rule of the Shah [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi](#) (1941-1979) and have continued since 1979 under the rule of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) (Lefebvre, 2019). However, whereas the [Shah's](#) policy was driven by an [anti-communist](#) containment stance during the [Cold War](#), the mullah regime has pursued an 'expansionist' policy to alter the political status quo in SSA, which is dominated by Western interests perceived as inimical to the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Graph 1: *'Middle East's Power Struggle Moves to the Horn of Africa'* ⁴
'Race to build commercial and military footholds'



Source: © Brookings; FT research, *Financial Times*, 30 June 2019; maps4news.com, © HERE; Darwich 2020

³ Cartoon: 'A search for allies in a hostile world' -- Source: © David Simonds, *The Economist*, 4 February 2010 - "Iran's proclaimed ambitions in Africa are particularly worrying for Israel, which once had a lot of friends on the continent and wants to keep the few that remain.", The Editor, *The Economist*, 4 February 2010.

⁴ Wilson, Tom, and Andrew England. 2019. 'Middle East's Power Struggle Moves to the Horn of Africa'. [Financial Times](#). 30 June 2019.

Throughout his nearly forty-year tenure, the Shah's principal geopolitical and strategic interests were concentrated in the [Horn of Africa](#), particularly regarding the securing of access to the [Persian Gulf](#) and along the vital [Red Sea](#) maritime route and [Bab al-Mandab](#) bottleneck. However, [Mohammad Reza Pahlavi](#) was not, as has been frequently depicted in Western media during the Cold War, a vassal of Western powers. Nevertheless, [Tehran](#) continued to act as an independent power, charting its own course. Africa played a pivotal role in the Shah's economic and security policy, wherein he sought to forge alliances to counterbalance the rising [nationalism](#) of Egyptian President [Gamal Abdel Nasser](#). This was achieved, for instance, through the provision of Iranian aid, the strategic selection of customers for Iranian oil, and the identification of potential sources of [uranium](#). The withdrawal of [British forces](#) from the Persian Gulf in 1971 and the subsequent oil price hike of 1973 provided Tehran with the opportunity to assume a more prominent role in the [Indian Ocean](#) region, thereby underscoring the centrality of Africa to Iran's global strategy (Steele, 2024).

Although [Iran's](#) relations with [SSA](#) have taken place in several transnational spaces, the sphere of security cooperation is arguably the least understood. One of Iran's tactics for building a relationship with African states has been the use of the so-called [Global South](#) discourse, which, while evoking motifs of unity, equality and solidarity, masks Iran's unequal power advantage. As African states' relations with Iran evolve, they would be wise to continue approaching [Tehran](#), likely to remain a global [pariah state](#), with caution. While Iran appears to have substantial foreign and military aid to offer African states, the existence of alternative Muslim allies such as [Turkey](#), as well as Tehran's unreliable use of the language of the Global South, should suggest that better options are likely to be found (Warner & Gallo, 2013).

Nevertheless, [Iran](#) and [SSA's](#) most important country, [South Africa](#), have a common understanding of many regional and international issues. They lead the way for other SSA countries to expand their cooperation and together improve economic and political regionalism in the framework of the [Indian Ocean Rim Association](#), [South-South cooperation](#) and also the [Non-aligned Movement](#) (Bakhshi, 2014). With the easing of international sanctions against Iran, the African Union (AU) faces new decisions on diplomatic normalisation. [South Africa](#), which wields considerable influence in the AU, will play a key role in this process and is likely to push for closer ties with Iran. However, pushback from Iran's main regional rival, [Saudi Arabia](#), will complicate the foreign policy positions of AU member states. The issue has the potential to cause discord within the AU, with countries such as [Nigeria](#), [Sudan](#) and [Egypt](#) likely to advocate positions friendly to Saudi Arabia at the AU (Fakude, 2016).

Iran's initial engagement with [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) commenced with diplomatic overtures extended to [Ethiopia's](#) Emperor [Haile Selassie](#). Since 1960, when Emperor Haile Selassie's [Solomonic kingdom](#) was confronted with challenges from [African decolonisation](#) movements, the two leaders had remained the closest allies in [SSA](#) until Selassie's downfall in 1974. [Shah Pahlavi](#) was concerned about the proliferation of radical regimes backed by the [Soviet Union](#) in the [Middle East](#) (Steele, 2021). Furthermore, he engaged in economic transactions with [Apartheid South Africa](#) (Scollon, 2024). However, Tehran's relations with certain countries, including the South African apartheid government and those that received military and financial support from Iran, were regarded as ambivalent and prompted scepticism towards Iran among other African countries. This ultimately resulted in the severance of diplomatic ties with Iran under the Shah. However, the victory of the [Iranian Revolution](#) resulted in a novel trajectory in relations with Africa (Khan Ahmadi, 2023). The new regime even enshrined the global exportation of its ideology in

the [Iranian constitution](#) as well as the course of the Muslim people's struggle. This pan-Islamic determination first succeeded in [Lebanon](#). Consequently, the Lebanon-based political and militant Shi'a group [Hezbollah](#) ('Party of God') is regarded by some experts as a principal political partner of Iran, rather than a mere proxy that capitalises on weak governance as well as pre-existing international organised crime groups and smuggling routes (Akerele, 2021). The [Shi'a Islamist](#) party was established in the wake of the [Israeli military's occupation of southern Lebanon in 1982](#). It aspires to establish an Islamic 'state within the state' in Lebanon. The founding manifesto of Hezbollah, published in 1985, explicitly outlines the party's allegiance to Iran's 'Supreme Leader', which serves as a testament to the enduring ties between Hezbollah and Iran. The organisation is a hybrid political-militant movement comprising three elements: social, political, and military. It receives approximately 80 % to 90 % of its income from the Iranian government, which donates approximately US\$200 million annually. There are obvious parallels between the Iranian model of exporting [Shi'a ideology](#) and the rival [Saudi Arabian](#) infrastructure used to disseminate [Wahhabism](#) on a global scale. Key similarities include state-sponsored financing mechanisms, [da'wa](#) (proselytization) infrastructure, investment in education, and a heavy reliance on [pan-Islamism](#) as religious and ideological justification, for example in [Nigeria](#) and [Sierra Leone](#) (Akerele, 2021).

Nevertheless, there still exists a latent [racism](#) in [Iran](#), bearing resemblance to the racial attitudes *vis à vis* black Africans observed in [Israel](#) (Kohnert, 2024). This is evidenced for example by the racial connotations associated with the popular Iranian comic figures [sīyāh bāzī](#) and [hājī fīrūz](#). These figures have crafted pseudo-historical genealogies that link the tradition and figure to pre-Islamic practices and resonances with the history of African enslavement in Iran (Vaziri, 2021).

Subsequently, throughout the subsequent forty-year period of the [IRI's](#) rule, Tehran expanded its interests in [SSA](#). While the Shah largely neglected the fate of millions of African Muslims, with the potential exception of Somalia's conflict with Ethiopia in the late 1970s, the [IRI](#) has sought to leverage these numerous communities at the grassroots level to expand Iranian influence across the continent (Lefebvre, 2019). To illustrate, considerable financial resources were allocated to the provision of free social services through the establishment of hospitals and orphanages, as well as the creation of Islamic schools and seminaries with the objective of extending Iranian influence in [sub-Saharan Africa](#). The Shah's efforts to restrict the spread of communist ideologies in the [Horn of Africa](#) were largely unsuccessful. This was due to the pro-Soviet regime in [Addis Ababa](#) ultimately succumbing to the [Eritrean war of secession](#), which commenced twelve years after the Shah's overthrow. Conversely, the IRI has received approval and commendation in numerous African countries, because of its cultural, religious, scientific and technological activities which involved key institutions, including the [Mostazafan Foundation](#) (*Bonyad-e Mostazafan*), [Jihad of Construction](#) (*Jihad- e-Sazandegi*), [Danesh Bonyan](#), the [Iranian Red Crescent Society](#), providing medical services, the [Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation](#), the [Ahl Al-Bayt World Assembly](#), known for its propaganda and support of Islamist militant groups, and branches of the [Al-Mustafa International University](#), providing Islamic education to international students (including female scholars) (Keynoush, 2021).

Those with opposing views perceived this activity as a mere 'front cover', which would enable the [IRI](#) to advance its long-term strategic interests in the region and extend Iran's influence (Lefebvre, 2019). It is extending its reach in Africa, providing arms, forming alliances, and amassing supporters as it strives to enhance its influence on the continent. This constitutes a significant strategic realignment, which has involved the dispatch of

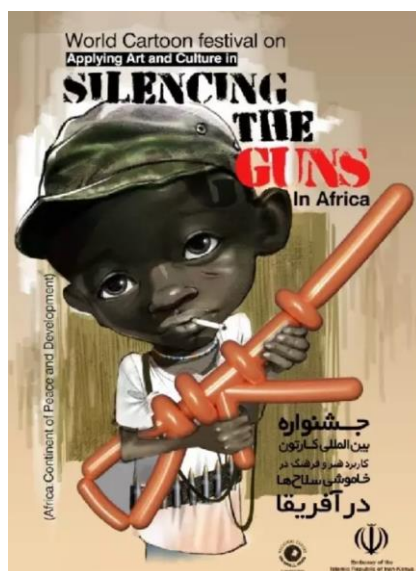
high-level Iranian diplomatic and trade delegations, in addition to the delivery of weapons to Africa (Scollon, 2024).

In return, [Tehran](#) is seeking to establish partnerships that will enable it to circumvent international sanctions while simultaneously consolidating its position within the '[Axis of Resistance](#)' against its global and regional adversaries. Its strategy has been designed with the objective of garnering support at the grassroots level among Muslim communities, rather than focusing exclusively on African governments such as that of [Israel](#) and its Western partners. Consequently, despite the limitations in financial resources, Tehran may still be capable of maintaining and expanding Iranian influence in [SSA](#). Nevertheless, the capacity of SSA to maintain its current level of activities will be contingent upon the impact of [international economic sanctions on Iran's](#) oil industry and the extent to which Tehran can persuade African customers to purchase Iranian oil to offset this loss of revenue (Lefebvre, 2019).

In July 2023, President [Ebrahim Raisi](#) undertook a three-country tour of the [SSA](#), including [Kenya](#), [Uganda](#), and [Zimbabwe](#), thus marking the first visit by an Iranian president to the continent in 11 years. This underscored the significance of the new Africa strategy. Towards the end of April 2024, [Teheran](#) hosted its second Iran-Africa trade summit which took place just over a year after the inaugural event. It was attended by representatives from more than 40 African countries (Scollon, 2024). Yet, Tehran's vision of [political Islam](#), the establishment of proxies, like the [Huthi rebels](#) in [Yemen](#), wreaking havoc on international shipping in solidarity with the [Palestinian cause](#), as well as weapons supplies to both states and non-state actors, caused often instability and anti-Western sentiments, fitting in with Iran's broader aims of creating an anti-Western front.

Cartoon 3: 'Silencing the Guns in Africa' ⁵

Campaign in cooperation with the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in [Kenya](#)



Source: © Regional Center of Small Arms, *Irancartoon*, 17 August 2022

⁵ RECSA joined World Cartoon Competition on Silencing the Guns in Africa. [Regional Center for Small Arms](#) joined World Cartoon Competition on Silencing the Guns in Africa in a constructive interaction with the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in [Kenya](#). [Regional Center on small Arms, Islamic Republic of Iran](#), Nairobi, 6 May 2015.

Extreme poverty in many [SSA](#) countries opened the door to Iranian influence, especially in the [Sahel](#), despite Tehran's limited resources. In addition to direct military and financial aid, development assistance was an important means of gaining a foothold. It was distributed through the [Construction Jihad](#) (*Jahad-e Sazandegi*), an organisation created in the wake of the revolution and later merged with the Ministry of Agriculture. Another means of gaining support was missionary activity. This was often funded through Iranian cultural centres or schools, both in countries with significant [Shia minorities](#), such as [Ghana](#) and [Nigeria](#) and in those with [Sunni](#) majorities, such as [Mali](#) and [Senegal](#). This policy was strongest under [President Ahmadinejad](#) (2005-2013) when [Tehran](#) needed international partners because of the conflict over its nuclear programme. It tried to find them in [Côte d'Ivoire](#), [Lesotho](#), [Mauritania](#), [Namibia](#) and [South Africa](#), a non-permanent member of the [UN Security Council](#) from 2007 to 2008. Also, states with significant [uranium](#) deposits, such as [Malawi](#), [Niger](#), [Sierra Leone](#), [Togo](#) and [Uganda](#), became focal points under Ahmadinejad, as did 'rogue states' such as [Eritrea](#) and [Sudan](#), mainly for reasons of their geostrategic location (Heibach, 2020; Kohnert, 2023b).

Thus the missionary agency of [Islam](#) acts as a tool at the service of [hegemonic](#) ambitions. As for Africans, they may appear as consenting victims of a '[vassalization](#)' of the continent because they are said by some to defend religion more quickly than their vital interests. Western powers, like [France](#) and the [United States](#), are not immune to this reality. They have understood that they cannot do without religious leaders in the current political game in Africa, like the [Mourides](#) in Senegal (Camara, 2021; Kohnert & Marfaing, 2019). It is evident that there is a certain degree of unease within the West about the instrumentalisation of Islam. However, it is equally important to avoid any action that might result in the anger of the Muslim clergy, which has become a significant force in many African states. [China](#) and [Russia](#) are more successful in this regard because they are not constrained by considerations of religion or democracy (Camara, 2021).

Graph 3: *Iran's spheres of influence and failed attempt to create Iranian naval base at [Port Sudan](#)*⁶



Source: © Scollon, Michael (2024)

From [Sudan](#), Iran has carved out a sphere of influence that extends across the [Sahel](#) to the [Atlantic](#), an area the West fears could become a refuge for Islamist militants. This policy

⁶ “An Iranian naval base at [Port Sudan](#) would directly support Iranian out-of-area naval operations and attacks on international shipping, while allowing [Tehran](#) to counter regional rivals.” (Scollon, 2024; Kohnert, 2023b). However, in July 2024, Sudan rejected Iranian offer for Red Sea naval presence in exchange for military support, [Sudan Tribune](#), 16 July 2024.

was most successful in [Nigeria](#), where Tehran has established a proxy group called the ‘[Islamic Movement of Nigeria](#)’ including financial, military, and political support (Scollon, 2024). The latter apparently functions similarly to other Iranian proxies as the Lebanese [Hezbollah](#). Some communities in the [SSA](#), such as those in [Nigeria](#), [Ghana](#) and [Tanzania](#), are not only aligned with Iran's foreign policy objectives but also form an integral part of Iran's national identity. In this context, Iran is seeking to reinforce its influence in the context of geopolitical competition with Western and regional powers, including [Saudi Arabia](#) (Alibabalu & Sarkhanov, 2023).

Iran also seized on the opportunity to reach out to the anti-Western military juntas of the Alliance of Sahel States ([AES](#)) that took power in [Burkina Faso](#), [Mali](#), and [Niger](#) in September 2023 (Kohnert, 2024a). With the declining French influence in [West Africa](#), [Teheran](#) sought to increase its influence through security cooperation and infrastructure development projects. Moreover, it suggested that it could help to fill a role previously played by Western forces in fighting against [Islamic terrorism](#) in Africa (Scollon, 2024).

In recent decades, also the rivalry between [Iran](#) and [Israel](#) for influence in the [Red Sea](#) and [East Africa](#) intensified since the 2010s. Tehran and Israel have adopted strategies to counter each other's influence in different regions. There have been several incidents of confrontation. Israel attacked Iranian targets in [Syria](#) and appeased other Arab countries such as the [United Arab Emirates](#), [Bahrain](#), [Sudan](#) and [Morocco](#) (Kohnert, 2023; Kohnert, 2023b; Kohnert, 2023c). Iran supported armed militias and terrorist organisations and pursued its nuclear weapons programme. While neither state seems interested in full-scale direct military confrontation, miscalculations can never be fully excluded. Iran has continuously expanded its involvement across the region, which has led to a ‘[balance of deterrence](#)’ between the two countries in which Teheran is deterred by Israel's military capability and [Tel Aviv](#) is anxious about Iran's 'strategic depth' (Furlan, 2022; Bazoobandi & Talebian, 2023). A useful indicator of the substantial expansion of Iran’s engagement in [SSA](#) is African nations’ voting pattern in favour of Iran in the [United Nations](#) (UN). Many African countries, including those in [Eastern Africa](#) and the ones with military ties to Iran, have remained either neutral or in favour of Iran in their votes on consecutive UN human rights resolutions (Bazoobandi & Talebian, 2023).

Graph 4: *Iran's defence cooperation agreements with African countries*

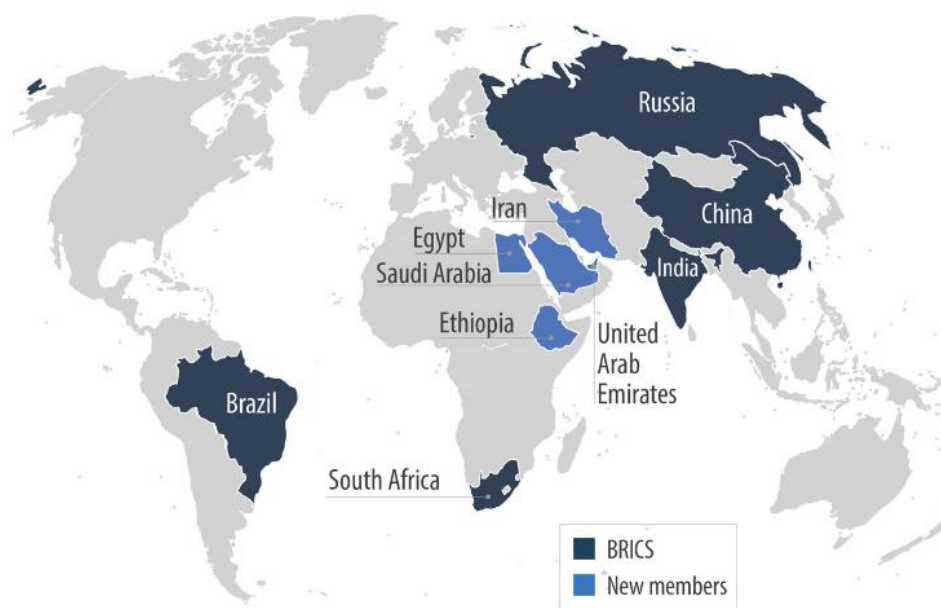
| Country | Year | Content |
|--------------|------|--|
| Algeria | 2002 | Cooperation agreement to exchange military experience between the armies of the two countries |
| Comoros | 2006 | Defense agreement - no further details available |
| Djibouti | 2011 | Naval cooperation agreement including training the Djiboutian forces. Cooperation agreement on counterterrorism, fighting piracy (especially in the Gulf of Aden), repair and maintenance of Djiboutian vessels, safeguarding territorial waters and coasts, and security assistance in fishing |
| Mozambique | 1996 | No detail is known about this deal |
| Senegal | 2008 | Mutual training cooperation, exchange of defense expertise, and holding mutual defense conferences |
| South Africa | 2004 | No detail is known about this deal |
| | 2017 | Cooperation on marine security and exchanging experiences on fighting organised crimes |
| Sudan | 2007 | No detail is known about this deal |
| | 2008 | Sale of weapons by Iran (missiles, RPGs, UAVs, and other equipment), as well as training Sudan's military and security forces |
| Tanzania | 2009 | Defense and military knowledge exchange |
| Zimbabwe | 2012 | No detail is known about this deal |

Source: The Defense Cooperation Agreement Dataset (DCAD)⁴¹, Explaining Middle-Power Engagement in External Regions: A Comparison of Iranian, Saudi, and Turkish Sub-Saharan Africa Policies Dataset⁴².

Source: Bazoobandi & Talebian, 2023

Furthermore, Iran's support for [Russia](#) and [China](#) in the ongoing [conflicts in Ukraine](#) and the [Gaza-Israel conflict](#), coupled with the contrasting approaches to security adopted by the [Wester world](#), including the [EU](#) on the one hand and the [BRICS+](#) members on the other, has heightened Western concerns about potential destabilisation in the [SSA](#). On 1 January 2024, the intergovernmental organisation [BRICS+](#), comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and [South Africa](#), had admitted four new members, including [Iran](#), [Egypt](#), [Ethiopia](#), and the [United Arab Emirates](#) (Think Tank, 2024). The trajectory of the Iran-Africa partnership in this reconfigured and newly framed '[Third Worldism](#)' hinges to a considerable extent on the capacity of both parties to navigate the inherent asymmetries in political power within the relationship (Onditi, 2022).

Graph 5: Map of [BRICS+](#) (2024)



Graphic by EPRS.

© European Parliamentary Research Service ([EPRS](#)); Think Tank, 2024

In addition to the [IRI](#)'s military, diplomatic, ideological, and commercial activities, economic development proved an effective and promising means for Iran to make significant inroads into Africa, complementing and supplementing these other initiatives. This approach also demonstrated the constraints of [Tehran's](#) aspirations for hegemony and geostrategic interests within and beyond the continent. The objective of these developmental activities in the [SSA](#) was threefold: firstly, to repair Iran's image; secondly, to showcase its technical capabilities; and thirdly, to elevate its status as a developmental '[patron state](#)' within the context of a hierarchical global system (Lob, 2022). Indeed, the promotion of development, as opposed to the advancement of arms or ideology, has facilitated Iran's most significant penetration of the continent, largely due to the continent's substantial agrarian economies, pervasive rural poverty, and formidable developmental challenges (Lob, 2016). Rather than representing an extension of a hegemonic and expansionist project, [President Raisi's](#) diplomatic outreach to Africa may be more accurately interpreted as an effort to re-establish relations with a continent that had been subjected to a notable degree of neglect by his predecessor (Lob, 2023). He re-established diplomatic relations with long-standing allies and principal African trading partners that had terminated their ties as a consequence of his predecessor's inattention and [Saudi](#) collaboration and assistance. In addition to the signing of a [new nuclear agreement](#) with the

[United Nations Security Council](#)'s five permanent members (the P5), namely [China](#), [France](#), [Russia](#), the [United Kingdom](#), and the [United States](#), as well as [Germany](#) (P5+1), and the reduction of economic sanctions against the [Islamic Republic of Iran](#), the achievement of this foreign policy objective would necessitate that [Raisi](#) demonstrates to these allies and partners his ability to provide tangible diplomatic and commercial benefits to them, both in discourse and in practice. Such transactional and non-aligned arrangements and approaches have served to illustrate the agency of [Ethiopia](#) and other African countries in terms of their willingness and ability to leverage their relationship with Iran to balance against foreign powers and extract maximum concessions from them. This had already been exercised successfully within the seesaw policy during the [Cold War](#) (Lob, 2023). Also, the fierce competition between [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Iran](#) in the [Horn of Africa](#), impacted Teheran's policy, including bilateral tensions, the policies of regional and international rivals or adversaries, the logistical requirements of the [Yemen conflict](#), the drop in the international oil price, the economic impact of [COVID-19](#) and sanctions (Mason, 2022).

The complex web of global, regional, and domestic factors behind Iran's Africa policy demonstrates the impossibility of separating the dynamics of Iran's reach towards [SSA](#), notably the [Horn of Africa](#), from those of its regional and extra-regional competitors (Corda, 2021). For instance, [Riyadh](#) and [Abu Dhabi](#) perceived the Iran-aligned [Houthi rebels](#) as an obligation to become more interventionist to counter the rise of [political Islam](#), which they regard as an existential threat, under Iran's influence. The 2017 embargo imposed by the Gulf states on [Qatar](#), which they accused of supporting political Islamist groups and of being too close to Iran, served to further intensify the regional power struggle. Saudi and Emirati concerns about the ambitions of [Turkey](#), which is close to Qatar and increasingly active in Africa, have added another layer to the dynamics (Darwich, 2020; Kohnert, 2023a). Apparently, the Saudi-Emirati turn toward the Horn of Africa was driven by fear of Iranian encroachment in [East Africa](#) and the [Red Sea](#) and a broader move by [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [UAE](#) to project power beyond the Middle East (Darwich, 2020).

The historical origins of the Africa-Middle East divide, namely the perception of the [Red Sea](#) and the [Sahara](#) as racial and civilisational boundaries, were established by [European Enlightenment](#) ideology and early colonial expansionism. These origins were subsequently reinforced by postcolonial authoritarian regimes and [Cold War](#) rivalries. Additionally, nationalist movements in Africa and the Middle East, for example in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, came to regard the [Horn of Africa](#) as a vital strategic asset, forming a 'Western security flank'. These states were unified in their objective to impede the ascendance of [Turkey](#), [Iran](#), and [Qatar](#) in this region. These Gulf rivalries constituted the foundation for the expansion of economic collaboration with [SSA](#), as well as the establishment of military assistance and security alliances, particularly in the Horn of Africa. As early as the seventh century AD, [Arabia](#) had relied heavily on the [slave trade](#) and the supply of labour from SSA, founded on the philosophy that it was legitimate to enslave black people because they were no better than animals. During this time, [Black Africa](#) became the largest slave depot in the Islamic world. To this day, there are significant [African migrant](#) and diaspora communities in the Middle East. Their presence has at times attributed to perpetuate long-standing derogatory views and attitudes towards Africa and its peoples. These attitudes, based on an Arab-centric social hierarchy and expressing contempt for [African cultures](#), remain prevalent up to date (Kohnert, 2023c).

The rivalry between [Tehran](#) and [Riyadh](#) in the context of a confrontation between political and religious models evokes memories of the competition in the Sahel between

‘monarchist’ [Saudi Arabia](#) and the ‘socialist’ [Libya](#) of Colonel [Muammar Gaddafi](#) during the 1970s. This is accompanied by proselytising and revolutionary activities on the part of a state with messianic ambitions. Iran seeks to expand its influence on the continent by relying on the support of its [Shiite](#) communities, which it has been known to attempt to convert by offering scholarships and religious training. Historically, the majority of Shiites in [SSA](#) have settled in coastal areas. Those from [West Africa](#) have more frequently originated from [Lebanon](#) or [Syria](#) and have constituted highly active communities in [Nigeria](#), the [Ivory Coast](#), [Liberia](#), [Sierra Leone](#) and even [Senegal](#) (Montclos, 2020).

Cartoon 4: ‘Iran diplomacy’



Source: © Cagle cartoons, Star Tribune, tennessean.com, 3 April 2015

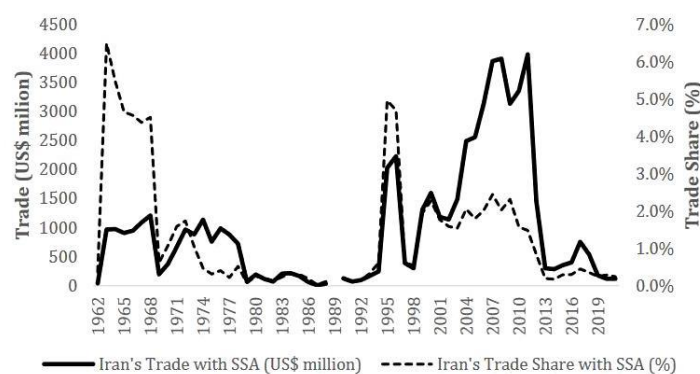
Last, but not least, the conflict-ridden [Middle East](#) is inherently unstable because of the latent threat of a [nuclear confrontation](#) between [Iran](#) and [Israel](#). The extreme ideological position of the [IRI](#) against Israel, as well as the [far-right politics in Israel](#), increase the likelihood that both could try to use coercive diplomacy against one another. This tendency is exacerbated by the lack of socialisation in nuclear matters, primarily on the part of Iran, but to a lesser extent also on the part of Israel. The inherent problems of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance ([ISR](#)) systems in the Middle East context, as well as the difficulties of successfully communicating nuclear tolerance thresholds and, consequently, formulating rational strategic responses, make the situation even more dangerous. Therefore, the possibility of nuclear signals not being understood and mutual misperceptions leading to nuclear escalation cannot be ruled out (Evron, 2008).

A political economy analysis of the bilateral trade relations and patterns of exchange that existed between [Iran](#) and Sub-Saharan Africa ([SSA](#)) before and after the [Iranian Revolution](#) from 1962 to 2021 revealed not only changes but also continuities. The analysis demonstrated a discrepancy between the rhetoric of [South-South solidarity](#) and reciprocity between Iran and SSA, on the one hand, and the relatively low and fluctuating trade volumes on the other. The outcomes were the result of historical and structural factors, including trade complementarities and geopolitical conditions, rather than demographic, cultural, or religious realities. Furthermore, the extent of economic engagement between Iran and Africa was shaped by the common quest for independence and the agency of Iranian and African leaders and officials (Lob & Yilmazkuday, 2024).

Iran's Industry Minister [Abbas Aliabadi](#) emphasised the importance of 'win-win trade' with African countries and drew attention to the value of trading in local currencies, as well as [barter trade](#), as a means of overcoming obstacles to banking transactions between Iran and SSA. However, this also reflected the difficulties caused by [Western sanctions](#) and the unresolved issue with the Financial Action Task Force ([FATF](#)) when there was no viable

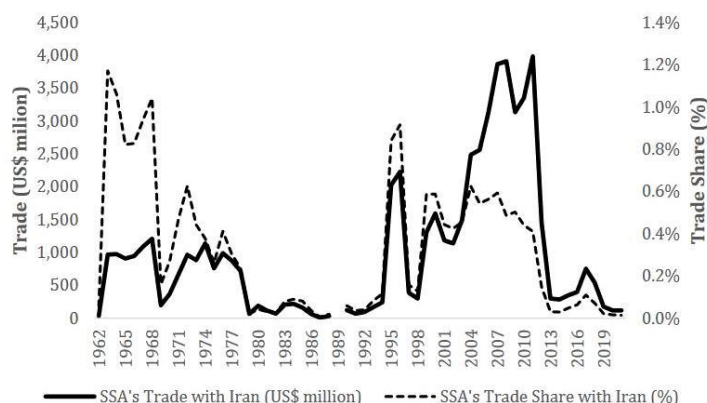
method of transferring funds within the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication ([SWIFT](#)) banking system (Africanews, 2023).

Graph 6: [Iran's](#) Trade and Trade Share with [SSA](#)



Source: Lob & Yilmazkuday, 2024

Graph 7: [SSA's](#) Trade and Trade Share with [Iran](#)



Source: Lob & Yilmazkuday, 2024

[Iran's](#) trade with Africa has demonstrated a remarkable expansion, with a 100 % increase from US\$650 million in 2021 to an annual trade value of US\$1.278 bn. in the first nine months of 2023. In 2023, Iran exported to 49 countries in Africa, with a total value of US\$1.183 bn., and it imported US\$95.316 m from 23 countries in Africa, indicating a 59 % growth (Teheran Times, 2024).

The continuing spiral of escalation in the [conflict between Israel and Iran](#) bodes ill. On 14 April 2024, for the first time in history, Iran struck directly at Israeli territory, marking a change of pace in the Middle East conflict that began with the [7 October attacks by Hamas](#) on Israel in 2023 and the subsequent [Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus](#) on 1 April and the [Israeli strikes against Yemen](#) on July 20, 2024.

On 30 July 2024, the two [Israeli strikes in Beirut](#) and [Tehran](#), which resulted in the killing of senior [Hamas](#) and [Hezbollah](#) leaders, [Ismail Haniyeh](#) and [Fuad Shukur](#), reshuffled the cards of the conflicts in the region. They represented a show of force by the Israeli army and risked changing the situation in the [Middle East](#) in unpredictable ways (Rémy & Sallon, 2024).

2. Case studies

2.1 Iran and South Africa

Cartoon 6: [Iran](#) and [Saudis](#), new [BRICS+](#) members, mediated by [South Africa](#) in 2024
'After you, please! ... No, after you!'



Source: © marian kamensky, [toonpool](#), 24 August 2023

[South Africa](#) has long been a cornerstone of Iran's newly framed '[Third Worldism](#)' strategy, which aims to strengthen ties with African countries. The [South-South cooperation](#) has been strongly promoted by Iranian President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) to enhance Iran's international credibility, security and trade. [Tehran](#) was one of the first countries to resume trade with South Africa after the [end of apartheid](#). Since then, the two countries have enjoyed a strong relationship. Trade has been an integral part of this relationship, with Iranian officials estimating the value of Iranian [foreign direct investment](#) in South Africa at around \$135 billion in 2018. In 1995, the [South Africa-Iran Joint Commission of Cooperation](#) was established, a framework that continues to be used to enhance cooperation. South Africa has also become an important defence partner. Iran and South Africa have also signed basic military cooperation agreements. South Africa is part of Tehran's efforts to offset the costs of [US sanctions](#) and its increasing diplomatic isolation from the West. As a former nuclear power itself, [Pretoria](#) has also advocated Iranian interests at the [UN](#), siding with Tehran on critical issues at the [UN Security Council](#) and the [International Atomic Energy Agency](#) (Fitzpatrick, 2019). South Africa's muted response to Iran's nuclear programme is at odds with its [non-proliferation](#) stance but can be understood by looking at the ideology of the ruling African National Congress ([ANC](#)) (Onderco, 2016). The ANC's solidarity with a fellow developing country trumped concerns about violating international agreements and non-proliferation. Pretoria's response to Iran's nuclear programme was characterised by suspicion of the West's motives, a preference for large forums and a presumption of the credibility of Iran's claims. Moreover, South Africa opposed sanctions, not only because they hurt its own businesses, but more importantly because South African leaders questioned their usefulness (Onderco, 2016).

Strong economic interests appear to have played only a secondary role in the bilateral relationship. [South Africa's](#) interest in a reliable [oil supply](#) has long linked the two countries. For a long time, Iran was the single most important supplier of oil, accounting for about 27 % of South Africa's imports. But in 2012, sanctions imposed by the US and the EU on Iran's central bank forced South Africa to find an alternative source of oil. South Africa turned to [Saudi Arabia](#) for supplies and continued to look for alternative suppliers in Africa. In 2013, it imported 60 % of its oil from Saudi Arabia and Iran and 40 % from African sources (Onderco, 2016).

Apart from oil, there has been significant [South African](#) investment ([FDI](#)) in Iran (Onderco, 2016). For example, in 2011, 31 % of South Africa's credit insurance exposure was in Iran, although this fell to 8 % by 2015. South Africa's [MTN](#), a telecommunications conglomerate, is another major investor in Iran. Under the leadership of current President [Cyril Ramaphosa](#), it successfully won a tender for 49 % of [Irancell](#). In 2016, 24.4 % of MTN Group's total revenues were generated in Iran, with 44.4 million subscribers and high profit margins (42.8%). The Iranian market became the third largest for MTN, which controlled more than 45 % of the market. However, business was proving increasingly difficult. MTN was unable to make a profit in Iran for a long time because of international banking sanctions, which prevented the group from accessing dividends and loan repayments (Onderco, 2016). In August 2023, a cooperation agreement was signed between Iran and South Africa. Iran has agreed with South Africa to develop and equip five refineries in the African country (Xinhua (2023).

As mentioned above, on 1 January 2024, [BRICS](#) welcomed four new members including Iran, at the suggestion of [Pretoria](#). The group's decision to open the door to new members had been taken already at its [Johannesburg](#) summit in August 2023, sparking a debate about its growing international influence. It is estimated that BRICS+, as the organisation has been informally known since its expansion, now accounts for 37.3 % of [global GDP](#), more than half that of the [EU](#) (14.5%). Beyond the purely economic impact, the expansion should be seen in terms of greater influence for the group and for developing countries as a whole in international organisations such as the [United Nations](#), the World Trade Organisation ([WTO](#)) and the [Bretton Woods institutions](#) (IMF and World Bank) (Think Tank, 2024).

Graph 8: *Iran joined [BRICS](#)+ in January 2024 at the suggestion of [South Africa](#)*

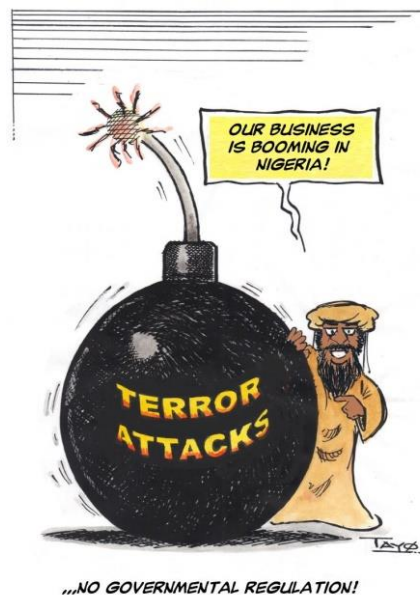


Source: © [Iran–South Africa relations](#). Wikipedia, 2 November 2010

Recently, [Pretoria](#) has become increasingly concerned about a possible escalation of [hostilities between Israel and Iran](#). It stressed that all parties should exercise the utmost restraint and avoid any action that would escalate tensions in a particularly fragile region (DIRCO, 2024). [Raisi](#) expressed his determination to further enhance bilateral relations with [South Africa](#), stressing the need to utilise various mutual capacities to expand bilateral relations in the political, economic, scientific and technological fields. He also praised the South African government for filing a [genocide case against Israel](#) with the International Court of Justice ([ICJ](#)) on 29 December 2023, regarding Israel's alleged violations of its obligations under the [UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#) about [Palestinians in the Gaza Strip](#). [Ramaphosa](#) replied that he was very pleased to see 'influential and peace-loving' countries like Iran supporting the Palestinians and trying to uphold their rights (Xinhua (202).

2.2 Iran and Nigeria

Cartoon 7: *'Our business is booming in Nigeria!' ... no governmental regulation!*
'Terror franchise in Nigeria, terrorists having a field day of terror in Nigeria'



Source: © [TAYO Fatunla](#), cartoonmovement, 6 May 2014

[Nigeria](#) is one of the countries where Iranian influence has been most effective. Thanks to the network of Iranian vectors of influence and Tehran's support for the [Islamic Movement of Nigeria](#) since its inception in 1984, the [Shiite](#) population has grown considerably. Iran has a religious agenda: Nigeria has several million Shiites, although their dogma is not necessarily the same as in Tehran. But [Tehran](#) sees this as a potential for [proselytism](#) in the region, as the example of Nigeria has shown. Before the Iranian revolution in 1979, there were no Shiites in the country. Today, at least 2 to 3 million people have converted.

Currently, conversions to [Shi'ism](#) continue and are supported by the activities of the Organization for Islamic Culture and Relations ([OCRI](#)) and Al-Mustafa University (Bouvier, 2024). Founded in 2007 in the capital [Abuja](#), [Al-Mustafa International University](#) is Iran's leading religious institution. Under the leadership of Supreme Leader [Ali Khamenei](#), the university's mission is to export Tehran's revolutionary ideology with around 100 branches across the [Muslim world](#) and to train foreign clerics, scholars and missionaries. Since 2007, more than 45,000 Islamic clerics and scholars have graduated from Al-Mustafa, many of whom have been hired by the university as teachers or missionaries and sent to countries around the world (Bouvier, 2024).

The two main organisations behind this [soft power](#) campaign are the Islamic Culture and Relations Organisation ([ICRO](#)), which is directly affiliated with Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and [Al-Mustafa International University](#), which trains foreign clerics and missionaries around the world. The ICRO coordinates the activities of various Iranian organisations responsible for religious and cultural activities abroad. From a political point of view, the Iranian authorities are increasing the number and nature of soft power vectors. For example, they follow the model of the pro-Iranian Spanish-language channel ['Hispan TV'](#). Thus, in October 2017 they launched a Hausa-language news channel, ['Hausa TV'](#), aimed at the more than 50 million [Hausa speakers](#) in Africa, mainly

in [Nigeria](#), [Niger](#), [Chad](#), [Cameroon](#), [Benin](#), [Ghana](#), [Togo](#), [Ivory Coast](#) and [Burkina Faso](#). Although it broadcasts in a widely spoken African language, the channel is largely uninterested in African affairs, focusing instead on Iran, the struggle of the '[Axis of Resistance](#)' against [Israel](#) and the place of [Shia Islam](#) in Africa. (Bouvier, 2024).

In 1991, Iranian President [Akbar Rafsanjani](#) stated that his country's foreign relations with [Nigeria](#) were almost similar to those with [Sudan](#) in terms of focusing on the cultural dimension, such as building mosques, religious schools and spreading [Shi'ism](#) in Nigerian society (Bishku, 2021). Nevertheless, Nigeria's political and economic relations with Iran never really became that close. This was partly because officials perceived a security threat from the Shia Islamic Movement in Nigeria ([IMN](#)), albeit not as critical as that posed by the [Sunni](#) terrorist organisation [Boko Haram](#). However, [Abuja](#) finally began to crack down on the activities of the IMN in December 2015, following what the Nigerian government described as an attempt on the life of the Chief of Army Staff, [Gen. Tukur Buratai](#). The failed assassination attempt took place in the northern state of [Kaduna](#). The IMN was subsequently banned in July 2019 (Bishku, 2021).

These developments have raised fears of oil-rich [Nigeria](#) becoming the latest battleground in the conflict between the world's two main Muslim factions, [Shia](#) and [Sunni](#). Formed about four decades ago, [IMN](#) advocates the creation of an Iranian-style Islamic state in Nigeria. It views itself as a government, and its leader, [Sheikh Zakzaky](#), as the only legitimate source of authority in Nigeria. It does not recognise the authority of the Nigerian government and views its leaders - both Muslims and Christians - as corrupt and ungodly. It has a registered Foundation called the 'Fudiyya Foundation' under which there are over 360 primary and secondary schools. Many of its members are known to be well-educated professionals, and some of them hold posts in the army, police and intelligence agencies. [Estimates of their numbers vary wildly](#), ranging from less than 5 % to 17 % of Nigeria's Muslim population of about 100 million. Most Nigerian Muslims are [Sunni](#), like those in [Saudi Arabia](#) or [Egypt](#) (Tangaza, 2019).

Cartoon 8: 'Nigerian President [M. Buhari](#) seems unaware of Islamist terrorists'



Source: © asukwo, *Busnesday*, [Nairaland](#), 14 March 2022

Some experts have even suggested that [Nigeria's](#) growing ties with the Saudi-led Organisation of the Islamic Conference ([OIC](#)) and with [Israel](#) could inflame [Shia Nigerians](#) and spark a [proxy war](#) between [Nigeria](#) and [Iran](#). Despite this, the Nigerian government has allowed the activities of the [Izala Movement](#), a [Sunni Salafi](#) group whose leaders have political links to [Saudi Arabia](#), to support the government's efforts against [Boko Haram](#). In fact, the jihadist [Boko Haram insurgency](#), more than decade-long, had killed around 37,500

people by the end of October 2020. This obviously affected Nigeria's relations with Iran since the establishment of the [D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation](#), given its attempts to balance these with its relations with the [Arab world](#) as well as [Israel](#) and [Turkey](#), about the close links [Iran](#) has had with the [IMN](#) and other Shi'ites in Nigeria. In January 2005, Nigeria signed a Memorandum of Understanding, including one in which its [Export Development Bank](#) agreed to a US\$38 million deal with [Nigeria's Ministry of Power and Steel](#), as Nigeria was suffering from electricity shortages. In 2010, [Iran](#) proposed to promote [nuclear energy](#) as a solution to Nigeria's problems, as [Abuja](#) had previously explored the possibility of seeking Iran's assistance in nuclear cooperation for civilian purposes. However, none of these plans came to fruition due to pressure from the [US](#), Nigeria's largest trading partner at the time. President [Goodluck Jonathan](#) was also sympathetic to [Israel](#), becoming the first and only Nigerian leader to visit the country in 2013 and 2014 (Bishku, 2021).

Meanwhile, [Nigeria's](#) trade with Iran remained minimal and the bilateral relationship tentative. In 2009, it imported \$1.4 million worth of Iranian goods, while Iran bought almost nothing from Nigeria. In June 2010, Nigeria voted in the [UN Security Council](#) in favour of [sanctions against Iran](#). Five months later, Nigeria seized a shipment of weapons, including rocket launchers and grenades, from a ship arriving in [Lagos](#) bound for the Iranian port of [Bandar Abbas](#) in containers labelled 'construction materials', in clear violation of UN sanctions. In 2015, Nigerian security forces cracked down on the [IMN](#), killing 300 of the group's members and capturing and imprisoning its leader, [Ibrahim Al-Zakzaky](#). He has created Africa's largest [Shia movement](#), with an estimated 3 million followers (Bishku, 2021).

The value of [bilateral trade](#) between [Iran](#) and [Nigeria](#) witnessed a 300 % growth in 2022. Teheran apparently targeted the Nigerian market because of its position as the largest market in Africa with a population of over 200 million (Onyekachi, 2022). In 2022, Iran exported US\$17.3M to Nigeria. The main products that Iran exported to Nigeria were non-fillet Fresh Fish (\$164k), non-fillet Frozen Fish (\$78.6k), and plastic products (\$60.3k). Over the past 5 years, the exports of Iran to Nigeria have increased at an annualized rate of 129 %, from \$274k in 2017 to \$17.3M in 2022 (Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), 2022). In 2022, Nigeria exported \$44.6k to Iran. Over the past 5 years, the exports of Nigeria to Iran have increased at an annualized rate of 84.5 %, from \$2.09k in 2017 to \$44.6k in 2022 (OEC, 2022).

However, in February 2023, [Nigeria](#) was added to the [FATF's grey list for money laundering](#), along with [South Africa](#) (Rizzo, 2023). A few months later, the [Central Bank of Nigeria](#) placed [Iran](#) on its high-risk [blacklist for money laundering](#), warning banks and financial institutions against doing business with the regime. The decision followed the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) plenary meeting in late June, which kept Nigeria on its grey list and Iran on its black list due to Tehran's failure to comply with global regulations. Nigeria's action can be seen as a step to improve its standing with the FATF and move away from the grey list (Iran-Int., 2023).

As for the impact of economic sanctions on the Iran-Nigeria bilateral trade, recent studies revealed a positive correlation between GDP and weak sanctions (LIM) with trade. An increase of 1 % in GDP leads to a 7.79 % increase in trade, while a 1 % increase in weak sanctions contributes to a 3.91 % increase in trade. Conversely, strong sanctions and exchange rates hurt trade, with a 1 % increment in strong sanctions resulting in a 1.18 % decrease in trade, and a 1 % increment in exchange rate leading to a 1.96 % decrease in trade (Sehhat & Habibi & Fard & Abdulmumin, 2023).

2.3 Iran and Tanzania

Cartoon 9: *Rumours of the 'ascension of Iranian President [Ebrahim Raisi](#)' in Tanzanian social media*⁷



Source: © FMM, RFI, 24 May 2024

The foreign relations between [Tanzania](#) and Iran are characterised by a friendly disposition, extending even to [social media](#) interactions. On the occasion of the celebration of the 45th anniversary of Iran's revolution in Tanzania's largest city [Dar es Salaam](#) on 11 February 2024, [Zanzibar's](#) Minister for Trade and Industrial Development, Omar Shaaban, reiterated his country's commitment to working closely with Iran to strengthen bilateral relations between the two countries (Sunday News reporter, 2024). He emphasised that the relations between Tanzania and Iran are historical. They can be traced back to the 9th to 12th centuries, during the arrival of [Persian merchants](#), which deepened the interaction between the two countries, including cultural aspects, where there are even some similarities of words in both [Swahili](#) and [Persian languages](#) (Sunday News reporter, 2024). Iran and Tanzania's close cultural and historical affinities date back centuries ago when a group of Iranians from the city of [Shiraz](#) migrated to [Zanzibar](#) and spread the Iranian culture and the Persian language in that part of Africa (IRNA (2024).

In the spirit of promoting bilateral relations, the Tanzanian government in [Dodoma](#), the capital of Tanzania, sought to expedite the process of holding a fifth round of a Joint Permanent Commission (JPC) between Tanzania and Iran. It looked forward to further cooperation in sectors such as agriculture, oil and gas, technology transfer, development projects, health, education, textile and manufacturing and other key areas. Iranian companies that visited Tanzania in early October last year expressed interest in buying beef and live animals from Tanzania. In 2023, the trade volume between the two countries will be US\$60 million, with Iran exporting goods worth \$40 million and importing goods worth \$20 million from Tanzania (Sunday News reporter, 2024).

Based on an agreement signed between [Tanzania](#) and [Iran](#), Tanzania will pay its debts to Iran. The Tanzanian government would pay \$7 million of its debt as the first instalment to start cooperation, and the rest of the debt would be paid to Iran every month according to the agreed schedule. Tanzania, where [Ujamaa Socialism](#) originated, is considered one of the most important countries in [East Africa](#), and Iran is taking new measures to expand

⁷ 'Iran: Misleading images about the death of [President Raisi](#) after a helicopter crash'. Cartoon in [Swahili](#) about the rumour circulating on Tanzanian social media that he survived the helicopter crash on 24 May 2024, allegedly unharmed. © FMM, Source: rfi.

economic ties with this country. In late November 2022, Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), in cooperation with the Iranian Trade Centre in [Dar es Salaam](#), held the first exclusive exhibition of Iranian products and services in Tanzania to showcase the Islamic Republic's trade and export capabilities. In the past years, due to the lack of restoration of economic relations with Africa, the amount of trade with [SSA](#) countries remained at the level of US\$1.2 billion, but according to Mohammed-Sadeq Qanadzadeh, Director General of the Africa Department of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), the trade route with Africa is now being facilitated and it is expected that the trade figure with this continent will reach \$10 billion in the next three years (MA, 2024).

As for [bilateral Iran-Tanzania trade](#), Iran exported US\$27.1M to [Tanzania](#) in 2022. The main products exported from Iran to Tanzania were Pasta (\$2.52M), Cement (\$1.68M), and Sodium or Potassium Peroxides (\$1.07M). During the last 5 years, the exports of Iran to Tanzania have increased at an annualized rate of 104 %, from \$767k in 2017 to \$27.1M in 2022. In 2017, Tanzania exported \$4.43M to Iran. The main products exported from Tanzania to Iran were Pepper (\$354k), Fake Hair (\$62.1k), and Spice Seeds (\$38.8k). During the last 19 years, the exports of Tanzania to Iran have increased at an annualized rate of 65.7 %, from \$355k in 1998 to \$4.43M in 2017 (OEC, 2024).

Graph 10: *Tanzania, Iran's gateway to the Middle East and [SSA](#)*⁸



Source: © [The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center](#), 31. July 2009

Extremists with links to the Islamist terrorist group [Al-Shabaab](#), which is based in [Somalia](#), represent a threat across the [East African](#) region and are believed to be active also in Tanzania. It is possible that attacks by IS-Mozambique, linked to the [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant](#) (ISIL), which is based in the [Cabo Delgado province](#) of Mozambique, may occur in the vicinity of Tanzania's border with this area of Mozambique. Additionally, there is a perception that [Daesh](#) (formerly known as ISIL) has some degree of support. This group has also been reported to be antagonised by the informal Iranian-led political and

⁸ Iran's activity in East Africa, the gateway to the Middle East and the African continent.

military coalition, the '[Axis of Resistance](#)'. The Tanzanian authorities have successfully made several arrests in connection to terrorism.

Cartoon 10: *'Iranian Islamists foment 'Tanzanian wars'*
Tanzanian & Iranian flags with demonstrating masses in the background



Source: © [shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com), No. 2469623071

Nevertheless, a considerable number of incidents in [Tanzania](#) remain of unclear origin, with the possibility that they may be conducted by criminal gangs. In 2020, the village of Kitaya in the [Mtwara region](#), situated near the border with Mozambique, was subjected to an assault. The perpetrators of this attack were Islamic extremists operating from northern Mozambique, who claimed responsibility for the incident. The majority of attacks are directed towards local security forces, although there is a possibility of attacks against Western interests. In [Dar es Salaam](#), tourists have been subjected to what has been described as an '[express kidnapping](#)'. This indicates that the victims have been subjected to physical assault, and robbery, and compelled, under the threat of violence, to withdraw cash from automated teller machines ([ATMs](#)). In some cases, individuals have been compelled to arrange cash transfers of up to £5,000 through [Western Union](#) after being approached by strangers or getting into unlicensed taxis (LeSage, 2014; Gov.UK, 2024). Since 2011, numerous Islamist-associated attacks have occurred in Tanzania. These include three [IED attacks](#) in [Zanzibar](#) in February 2014, targeting two Christian churches and a restaurant popular with tourists, as well as an explosives attack on an Indian restaurant in [Arusha](#) in July 2014, which was popular with tourists and local residents (LeSage, 2014).

3. Conclusion

Cartoon 11: ‘How [China](#), [Russia](#) and [Iran](#) are forging closer ties’



Source: © Alberto Miranda. [The Economist](#), 18 March 2024

[Iran's](#) strategic engagements in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) reflect its broader foreign policy objectives of countering international isolation, enhancing economic partnerships, and expanding geopolitical influence. Iran's foreign policy has increasingly focused on fostering relationships with [non-Western countries](#) to circumvent [international sanctions](#) and isolation. Sub-Saharan Africa, with its rich resources and strategic geopolitical position, has become a significant area of interest.

Iran's interest in [SSA](#) dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, but it significantly intensified after the 1979 [Islamic Revolution](#). The revolution's anti-Western stance prompted Iran to seek alliances beyond its traditional partners. In the post-revolutionary period, Iran sought to build solidarity with African nations based on shared [anti-colonial](#) sentiments and mutual interests in [non-alignment](#). [Teheran's](#) diplomatic engagements in [SSA](#) have expanded significantly since the early 2000s. The country has established embassies and consulates in several African countries, fostering bilateral relations through high-level visits and diplomatic exchanges. Key allies include [Sudan](#), [Kenya](#), [South Africa](#), [Nigeria](#) and [Tanzania](#) where Iran has sought to cultivate strong political ties. These relationships are often bolstered by shared interests in challenging [Western hegemony](#) and promoting a [multipolar world order](#).

[Iran-South Africa](#) relations are underpinned by historical solidarity against [apartheid](#) and mutual economic interests. Post-apartheid, the two countries have strengthened their ties through high-level diplomatic visits and bilateral agreements. South Africa is a significant importer of Iranian oil, and Iran has invested in South Africa's energy sector. Cooperation extends to other areas such as education, technology, and trade. Despite the challenges posed by [international sanctions against Iran](#), the relationship remains robust, driven by both nations' desire for economic diversification and political cooperation.

[Nigeria](#) and [Iran](#) share common interests as major oil-producing countries within [OPEC](#). Their relationship encompasses economic, political, and religious dimensions. Economically, Iran has invested in Nigeria's energy and infrastructure sectors. Politically, the countries have collaborated in international forums such as the [United Nations](#). Religiously, Iran has engaged with Nigeria's significant [Shia Muslim](#) population, fostering cultural and educational exchanges. However, this religious engagement has occasionally sparked tension within Nigeria, given its complex religious landscape.

[Iran's](#) engagement with [Tanzania](#) is characterized by economic cooperation and diplomatic goodwill. Iran has invested in Tanzania's energy sector, infrastructure projects, and trade. The relationship is bolstered by shared interests in [non-alignment](#) and mutual support in international forums. Iran has also provided technical and educational assistance to Tanzania, enhancing bilateral ties. The partnership reflects Iran's broader strategy of establishing footholds in strategic African regions through economic and developmental aid.

[Economic interactions](#) form a cornerstone of Iran's strategy in the region. Iranian investments span various sectors, including energy, agriculture, and infrastructure. Iran has inked numerous agreements to develop oil and gas projects, reflecting its intent to secure energy resources and diversify its economic partners. Additionally, Iranian companies have engaged in agricultural projects aimed at ensuring food security and enhancing trade ties. Yet, Iranian trade with [SSA](#) remains modest compared to other major powers, but it is growing. Initiatives such as the [Iran-Africa Economic Cooperation Conference](#) underscore Tehran's commitment to deepening economic ties. Furthermore, Iran leverages its expertise in areas like pharmaceuticals and engineering to establish a foothold in African markets.

Finally, [cultural diplomacy](#) is a vital component of Iran's strategy. The Iranian Cultural Centers across Sub-Saharan Africa promote Persian language and culture, alongside [Shiite Islamic](#) values. This cultural outreach is intertwined with Iran's ideological objectives, seeking to cultivate a sympathetic base and counterbalance the influence of rival powers, particularly [Saudi Arabia](#), which promotes [Sunni Islam](#). Educational exchanges and scholarships for African students to study in Iran further solidify these cultural and ideological connections. Through these initiatives, Iran aims to build a network of influential allies within the region's socio-political fabric.

Despite its ambitions, Iran faces considerable challenges in its engagement with [Sub-Saharan Africa](#). [Economic sanctions imposed by the United States](#) and its allies have constrained Iran's ability to invest and trade freely. Additionally, competition from other foreign powers, such as [China](#) and [India](#), poses significant obstacles. The complex political landscapes and internal conflicts within many African countries further complicate Iran's efforts to establish a robust presence.

In summary, Iran's strategic engagements in [Sub-Saharan Africa](#) demonstrate a sophisticated approach to expanding its influence in the [Global South](#). Despite the aforementioned achievements in the formation of alliances and economic partnerships, considerable obstacles remain. The outcome of Iran's activities in the region will have significant implications for both regional stability and global geopolitical dynamics. Iran's activities in SSA serve to illustrate the growing importance of this region as a battleground for the exertion of influence by global and regional powers. As Iran persists in its efforts to navigate the complexities of this engagement, its experiences will provide invaluable insights into the broader trends that are shaping international relations in the 21st century.

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Résumé : *[Élargir les horizons : les engagements stratégiques de l'Iran en Afrique subsaharienne - Perspectives d'Afrique du Sud, du Nigéria et de Tanzanie]* – Depuis les années 1960, le régime de Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) et, à partir de 1979, la République islamique d'Iran, sont intervenus en Afrique subsaharienne. Alors que la politique du Shah était motivée par une position anticommuniste virulente, la République islamique d'Iran (RII) a poursuivi une politique « radicale » de changement du statut politique du monde occidental, y compris des alliés arabes occidentaux, hostiles à la survie du régime des mollahs. Alors que le Shah se concentrait sur des intérêts géopolitiques, en particulier dans la Corne de l'Afrique, la voie maritime vitale vers la mer Rouge, et en Afrique du Sud, et ignorait les intérêts des musulmans africains, la RII a exploité des islamistes de plus en plus radicalisés pour étendre l'influence iranienne sur le continent. Par exemple, la RII a dépensé des milliards de dollars dans la région pour fournir des écoles musulmanes et des services sociaux gratuits par le biais d'hôpitaux et d'orphelinats soutenus par le Croissant-Rouge iranien. La stratégie de l'IRI visait à renforcer le soutien populaire au sein des communautés musulmanes plutôt qu'à se concentrer exclusivement sur les gouvernements africains. Les politiques expansionnistes de Téhéran comprenaient la vente d'armes à des acteurs étatiques et non-étatiques et la déstabilisation de régimes. L'objectif était de nouer des partenariats qui permettraient d'échapper aux sanctions internationales tout en ouvrant un nouveau terrain à son axe de résistance contre ses adversaires mondiaux et régionaux, en particulier son ennemi juré Israël. La version de Téhéran de l'islam politique impliquait la constitution de mandataires, notamment le Hezbollah au Liban et les rebelles Houthis, plus récemment au Yémen, qui a semé le chaos sur les voies maritimes internationales en solidarité avec la cause palestinienne. Téhéran a étendu son influence dans la région du Sahel, profitant de la politique africaine égoïste de la France et des politiques d'autres puissances occidentales en Afrique de l'Ouest pour établir des contacts avec les juntas militaires anti-occidentales de l'ASE au Burkina Faso, au Mali et au Niger. La Russie, la Chine et la Turquie ont ouvert la voie à ce nouvel alignement. La rivalité entre l'Iran et Israël s'est intensifiée au cours des dernières décennies, avec plusieurs confrontations entre les deux pays dans la mer Rouge et en Afrique de l'Est depuis les années 2010. L'Iran n'a cessé d'étendre son engagement dans toute la région, conduisant à un « équilibre de dissuasion » entre les deux pays.

Zusammenfassung: *[Erweiterte Horizonte: Irans strategisches Engagement in Afrika südlich der Sahara – Einblicke aus Südafrika, Nigeria und Tansania]* – Seit den 1960er Jahren intervenieren sowohl das Regime von Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) als auch seit 1979 die Islamische Republik Iran in Subsahara-Afrika (SSA). Während die Politik des Schahs von einer virulenten antikommunistischen Haltung motiviert war, verfolgte die Islamische Republik Iran (IRI) eine „radikale“ Politik der Veränderung des politischen Status der westlichen Welt, einschließlich der westlichen arabischen Verbündeten, die dem Überleben des Mullah-Regimes feindlich gegenüberstanden. Während sich der Schah auf geopolitische Interessen konzentrierte, insbesondere am Horn von Afrika, dem lebenswichtigen Seeweg zum Roten Meer, sowie in Südafrika, und die Interessen afrikanischer Muslime ignorierte, nutzte die IRI zunehmend radikalisierte Islamisten, um den iranischen Einfluss auf dem Kontinent auszuweiten. So hat die IRI beispielsweise Milliarden von Dollar in der Region ausgegeben, um muslimische Schulen und kostenlose soziale Dienste durch Krankenhäuser und Waisenhäuser bereitzustellen, die vom iranischen Roten Halbmond unterstützt wurden. Die Strategie des IRI zielte darauf ab, Unterstützung an der Basis unter muslimischen Gemeinschaften aufzubauen, anstatt sich ausschließlich auf afrikanische Regierungen zu konzentrieren. Teherans Expansionspolitik umfasste Waffenverkäufe an staatliche und nichtstaatliche Akteure sowie die Destabilisierung von Regimen. Ziel war es, Partnerschaften aufzubauen, die helfen würden, internationale Sanktionen zu umgehen und gleichzeitig neues Terrain für seine Widerstandsachse gegen seine globalen und regionalen Gegner, insbesondere seinen Erzfeind Israel, zu eröffnen. Teherans Version des politischen Islam beinhaltete den Aufbau von Stellvertretern, vor allem der Hisbollah im Libanon und den Houthi-Rebellen, zuletzt im Jemen, die aus Solidarität mit der palästinensischen Sache verheerende Schäden der internationalen Schifffahrtswege anrichteten. Teheran erweiterte seinen Einfluss in der Sahelzone und nutzte die eigennützige französische Afrikapolitik und die Politik anderer westlicher Mächte in Westafrika aus, um Kontakte zu den antiwestlichen Militärjuntas der ASE in Burkina Faso, Mali und Niger aufzubauen. Russland, China und die Türkei ebneten den Weg für diese neue Ausrichtung. Die Rivalität zwischen dem Iran und Israel hat sich in den letzten Jahrzehnten verschärft. Seit den 2010er Jahren kam es zwischen den beiden Ländern im Roten Meer und in Ostafrika zu mehreren Konfrontationen. Der Iran hat sein Engagement in der gesamten Region kontinuierlich ausgeweitet, was zu einem „Gleichgewicht der Abschreckung“ zwischen den beiden Ländern führte.