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Iran's Scramble for Sub-Saharan Africa

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ABSTRACT *Fueled by the Iranian oil revenues, Tehran, under both the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) and since 1979 the Islamic Republic of Iran, has intervened in the affairs of sub-Saharan Africa. The Shah's policy was motivated by a 'defensive' anti-communist/anti-radicalism containment posture. Conversely, the Islamic Republic of Iran adopted an 'offensive' or disruptive policy to alter a political status quo deemed hostile to the survival of the Islamic Republic of Iran. To understand Iran's scramble to secure its interests in sub-Saharan Africa, four periods will be examined in this analysis: i) the Shah and containment, 1953-1979; ii) the Islamic Republic of Iran's diplomatic 'offensive,' 1980-2001; iii) the Islamic Republic of Iran seeking to 'escape' international isolation, 2002-2010; and iv) the Saudi-Iranian Cold War, 2011-2018.*

Introduction

Tehran's attempt to extend Iranian influence in sub-Saharan Africa dates back more than forty years.[1] Iran's capacity to influence events in the region to pursue Iranian political, strategic, economic, and/or ideological objectives can be attributed in large part to the increase in Iranian oil revenues at the beginning of the 1970s and was bolstered by the dramatic (almost fourfold) increase in the price of oil following the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. In short, Iranian oil revenues have encouraged and allowed Tehran, under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) and since 1979 as the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), to intervene in sub-Saharan African affairs. One striking difference to note: The Shah's activities seemed to be motivated largely by a 'defensive' containment posture to maintain the political status quo in the region versus the more 'offensive' or disruptive goals of the Islamic Republic.

Iranian policy toward sub-Saharan Africa under the Shah focused mainly on South Africa along with Ethiopia and Somalia in the Horn of Africa. With respect to South Africa, Iranian oil sales were justified and motivated –not only

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economically– but strategically as well: to help prop-up and support South Africa's staunchly anti-communist apartheid regime. Containment of radicalism and communism in northeast Africa would also underlie the Shah's support for the pro-Western regime of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie and then Somalia following Mogadishu's break with Moscow in 1977. In the case of the Horn, the Shah's 'defensive' anti-radical/communist containment policy led Iran to supply weapons and provide political support to Mogadishu during the 1977-1978 Ogaden War between the Soviet/Cuban-backed Ethiopian regime and Somalia.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has adopted a more 'offensive' or disruptive foreign policy designed to alter a political status quo deemed hostile to the survival of the IRI. Tehran's focus on expanding its influence in sub-Saharan Africa derives from a desire to break out from its political isolation in the Middle East and internationally. Some political leaders and commentators have warned for years of the IRI's plan to create a 'Shia crescent' running from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon.[2] Others have raised the alarm about what they see as Tehran's greater ambition to create an Islamic crescent extending from Iran into sub-Saharan Africa.[3] Paradoxically, the IRI's 'offensive' foreign policy stems from a sense of insecurity (not unreasonable given Western and Arab support for Baghdad during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq Wars, past and current international sanctions on Iran, and frequent talk of supporting regime change in Tehran) not from a position of power.

Iran's policies in sub-Saharan Africa have been driven through the years by a variety of interests that have varied from the days of the Shah's regime to the current Islamic Republic. But even over the past forty years that the Islamic Republic has existed, the intensity and nature of the IRI's policies in the region have changed and not remained static. Besides the impact of Iranian domestic politics (especially the regime change in 1979 from a monarchy to an Islamic Republic), regional and international conflicts have also shaped Iran's policies. To understand Iran's scramble to secure its interests in sub-Saharan Africa and the role that this region of the world has and will play in Tehran's national security calculation four major periods will be examined in this analysis: i) the Shah and containment, 1953-1979; ii) the Islamic Republic's diplomatic 'offensive,' 1980-2001; iii) the IRI seeking to 'escape' international isolation, 2002-2010; and iv) the Saudi-Iranian Cold War, 2011-2018.

The Shah of Iran and the Containment of Radicalism, 1953-1978

The Shah of Iran developed a political-strategic interest in the Horn of Africa in the latter half of the 1950s owing to the perceived threat posed by Egyptian President Gamal Nasser to the regional order in the Middle East. Nasser's pan-

The Shah's containment policy in the Horn of Africa shifted from containing the spread of Nasserism to containing communism

Arab policy and popularity among the Arab masses grew exponentially in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez crisis and war. The Suez crisis reached its critical stage when in July 1956 Nasser ordered the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Although Egypt was defeated militarily by the combined British, French, and Israeli invasion forces Nasser claimed political victory by not backing down to Israel and the Western imperial powers. Under international pressure, the invading armies were forced to withdraw from Egypt and the Suez Canal was returned to Egyptian control.

In the aftermath of the Suez war Nasser sought to exploit his "hero" status in the Arab world to spread his 'radical' (disruptive) message of pan-Arabism (using a pan-Islam message when convenient) and anti-imperialism, throughout the greater Middle East region, including the Horn of Africa. In February 1958, Egypt formed a political union with Syria establishing the United Arab Republic (UAR). This development sparked the beginning of the so-called Arab Cold War (1958-1967).[4] In effect, the Arab world divided into two competing ideologically-opposed camps. Nasser led a group of radical or progressive Arab states that included the UAR, and subsequently was joined by Iraq after the July 1958 revolution that overthrew the pro-West Hashemite dynasty in Baghdad, and North Yemen following a September 1961 pro-Nasserite military coup deposed the Yemeni monarchy in Sanaa. More alarmingly, Nasser's ideology enjoyed widespread appeal amongst the Arab masses throughout the Middle East. Nasser's progressive camp favored a policy of non-alignment in the East-West Cold War and adamantly challenged the rule of the conservative, pro-Western monarchies in Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Although not an Arab state, Iran became a target of Nasser owing to the Shah's strongly pro-West foreign policy, not to mention the fact that the Shah also governed a hereditary monarchy. Thus, under the Shah, Iran's regional foreign policy interests aligned with the conservative, pro-Western monarchical Arab regimes.

The Nasser 'threat' also extended southward into the Horn of Africa. In the case of the Horn, Nasser used pan-Islam to appeal to the millions of Muslims that lived in Ethiopia and Somalia. Nasser targeted the conservative, openly pro-Western Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie whose government signed an arms-for-bases military agreement with the United States in May 1953.[5] In exchange for millions of dollars' worth of annual U.S. military assistance, Ethiopia granted Washington basing rights for twenty-five years to establish a communications facility (Kagnew Station) located outside of Asmara, Eritrea –then under Ethiopian control as part of a 1952 UN-sponsored ten year federation plan between Eritrea and Ethiopia. Of concern to Nasser, this American

The Shah's containment policy in sub-Saharan Africa ultimately proved counter-productive in so far as expanding Iranian influence throughout the region

communications facility was used to intercept communications and gather intelligence throughout the Middle East.

Nasser sought to keep Selassie on the defensive by using the 'Unity of the Valley of the Nile' concept coupled with pan-Islam to rally the millions of Muslims living in the Horn of Africa to his side. Because of Egypt's dependence on the flow of the waters of the Nile River (approximately 90 percent of the Nile's waters are provided by the Blue Nile whose source is located in the highlands of Ethiopia), Cairo maintained a long-term strategic and economic interest in Ethiopian affairs.[6] Nasser played on Addis Ababa's long-held threat perception of Ethiopia as a 'Christian island surrounded in a hostile Muslim sea' that Egypt might work to isolate Ethiopia regionally, stir up an internal insurrection against the Selassie regime, or promote war.[7] The threat of war emerged as a particularly acute concern for Ethiopia when in July 1960 the British and Italian Somalilands were granted independence and merged into the Republic of Somalia –an overwhelmingly Muslim country with irredentist ethnic-based territorial designs on Ethiopia's Somali-inhabited Ogaden region.

Nasser's rhetoric and regional policies essentially pushed Iran and Ethiopia into an informal regional alliance with Israel and Turkey. In the aftermath of the July 1958 coup in Iraq, many Western officials (wrongly) assumed Nasser had instigated and would control the new radical government that had seized power in Baghdad. Israel now moved to establish formal military and intelligence relationships with non-Arab states in the greater Middle East region. Israel's so-called 'strategy of the periphery' represented a response by regional states –Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Ethiopia— who felt threatened by Nasserism.[8] The Shah would support Ethiopia (against Muslim Somalia) so long as Haile Selassie remained in power and did so even after Gamal Nasser died in September 1970 and a more moderate pro-Western Egyptian government led by President Anwar Sadat assumed power in Cairo.

Tehran's strategic calculation would change, however, following the Ethiopian revolution that overthrew Emperor Selassie in September 1974 and eventually led to the emergence, in February 1977, of a radical, pro-Soviet military regime in Addis Ababa. Iran would eventually embrace the pro-Soviet government in Mogadishu that had been led since 1969 by President Siad Barre. The Shah's containment policy in the Horn of Africa had now shifted from containing the spread of Nasserism to containing communism. Iran's change in alliance

Western Somalia Liberation Front guerillas were trained at a military camp in Somalia as the war between Somalia and Ethiopia for the control of Ogaden (1977-1978) continued.

ALAIN NOGUES / Sygma via Getty Images

partners from Ethiopia to Somalia in the Horn of Africa seemed to be based on two political-strategic calculations: i) the Shah's obsession with containing the spread of communism or radicalism in the greater Middle East region; and ii) to prove Iran's strategic value to the United States –one of Washington's designated 'Twin Pillars' in the Persian Gulf– if granted the continued sale of billions of dollars of American weapons to the Shah's regime could project Iranian power and secure Western interests throughout the Indian Ocean region.[9] Consequently, the Shah supported Somalia when Mogadishu launched a war of aggression against Ethiopia in the summer of 1977.

Iranian along with Saudi, Egyptian, and Sudanese arms supplies to Somalia, however, failed to turn the tide of the 1977-1978 Ogaden War in Mogadishu's favor.[10] Following Siad Barre's decision in mid-November 1977 to terminate the 1974 Somali-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, the Soviets threw their full support behind Ethiopia. By the end of 1977, Moscow had airlifted approximately $1 billion worth of weapons and more than 10,000 Cuban forces to support Ethiopia. Despite political pressure applied on the Carter Administration by the Shah and moderate Arab leaders to supply arms to Somalia, President Jimmy Carter heeded the advice of the Department of State's Africa Bureau and refused to supply arms to Mogadishu. By mid-March 1978, the last Somali military forces had been forced to withdraw from the Ogaden.

Perhaps the Shah's most controversial and politically self-defeating policy in sub-Saharan Africa involved Iranian financial/oil dealings with South Afri-

ca's apartheid regime. The Shah's father, Reza Shah, had lived out his exile in South Africa after being deposed following the British-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 owing to his perceived pro-Nazi sympathy. But under Reza Shah's son, by 1973 Iran had become Pretoria's largest crude oil supplier, accounting for some 30 percent of South African oil imports.[11] By 1978, South Africa was importing 90 percent of its crude oil from Iran as Arab states had curtailed oil sales to Pretoria as part of a political *quid pro quo* in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.[12] Arab states threw their support behind South Africa's Black Nationalist movement –the African National Congress (ANC)– in exchange for African states supporting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The Shah of Iran, however, refused to link these two issues owing to Tehran's political, economic, and intelligence ties with Israel.

The Shah's containment policy in sub-Saharan Africa ultimately proved counter-productive in so far as expanding Iranian influence throughout the region. Tehran's economic and military engagement with South Africa's apartheid regime placed Iran at odds with the political position of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) toward the overall situation of white-dominance in southern Africa. In effect, according to the OAU, Iran had disqualified itself from the African continent.[13] Moreover, the Shah's support for Somalia during the 1977-1978 Ogaden war also placed Tehran at odds with a fundamental principle of the 1963 OAU Charter –respect for the inviolability of Africa's colonial-imposed borders-which Somalia had violated by invading Ethiopia. In late January 1978, while war was still raging in the Ogaden, the OAU released a press statement criticizing Iran for engaging in disturbing overtures (to Somalia), being too obsessed with hypothetical (worst-case) situations, and rather than trying to settle conflicts peacefully was instead seeking to extend its sphere of influence and act as a "mini-power."[14] By early 1978, however, foreign policy issues were becoming secondary to the Shah as the Iranian Revolution began to unfold at home.

The IRI's Diplomatic Offensive in Africa, 1979-2000

During the three years following the overthrow of the Shah of Iran in January 1979 the Islamic Republic, owing to Tehran's mounting domestic political and regional security problems, had little time or resources to expand Iran's presence in sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, to set the stage to 'win hearts and minds' in sub-Saharan Africa and distinguish the IRI from the Shah's policies, the Islamic Republic broke diplomatic relations with Pretoria, ended all Iranian oil sales to South Africa, and proclaimed Tehran's support for the African National Congress (ANC). The Islamic regime, however, remained consumed domestically for more than two years by the internal power struggle between the moderate reformers and the conservative Shia clerics which finally was

resolved in mid-1981 in favor of the clerics.[15] Tehran was also adjusting to life without the Shah's superpower patron and arms supplier –the United States. The seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran in early November 1979, resulting in the hostage crisis that was not resolved until January 1981, led to a complete break in diplomatic relations between Washington and Tehran. Moreover, the IRI's declaration of Tehran's intent to export the Islamic revolution unsettled Iran's regional neighbors in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere in the Middle East.[16] Tehran's rhetoric and disruptive policies in the Persian Gulf led Saddam Hussein to order the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980, resulting in the bloody and destructive Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988).[17] From 1979-1982, therefore, the IRI found itself isolated regionally, internationally, and forced into survival mode.

Most African states, generally tried to downplay their relations with Iran so not to antagonize Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. Tehran sought to counter this resistance by offering favorable oil contracts as well as economic and development assistance at concessional prices

During 1982 the IRI began to go on the military and diplomatic offensive. After halting the initial Iraqi military incursions into Iranian territory, Iran went on the counter-offensive against Iraq in early 1982 when Iranian forces invaded and occupied Iraq's Faw Peninsula. Alarmed by Iran's military success, Arab states in the Persian Gulf, as well as Egypt and Jordan, rallied to Baghdad's side, providing financial and military support to Baghdad. Only Syria openly aligned itself with Iran. Perhaps more importantly, Iran's success on the battlefield against Iraq, coupled with the United States coming under increasing pressure from its Arab allies to help contain Iran, led to a political rapprochement between the United States and Iraq.[18] In November 1984, Washington and Baghdad re-established formal diplomatic ties that had been broken since the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The administration of President Ronald Reagan approved American agricultural loans to Baghdad that Washington had first granted back in 1982 after Iraq was removed from the State Department's 'terrorist list.' Washington now allowed the transfer of "dual-use" military equipment to Iraq and, through Saudi Arabia, shared military intelligence with Iraq. Despite the growing regional and international pressures being brought to bear against Iran at this time, the IRI began to increase its presence and activities in sub-Saharan Africa.

At the end of November 1984, the CIA Directorate of Intelligence issued a report warning of growing Iranian activity in sub-Saharan Africa: "Iran's policies

Tehran and Khartoum saw themselves as "fellow Islamic travelers" trying to survive in a post-Cold War world in which the United States was trying to shape a world order to the detriment of Islamist governments and political movements

toward black Africa have entered an activist phase over the past 30 months [since the spring of 1982]."[19] The CIA identified three main purposes underlying Tehran's recent activism: i) to win support for the IRI's foreign policies, particularly regarding Iran's war with Iraq; ii) to enhance the IRI's international legitimacy by expanding formal diplomatic relationships; and iii) to spread Tehran's revolutionary ideology. The CIA analysis noted that in recent years three centers of power in the Muslim World –Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Iran– had competed for leadership in sub-Saharan Africa. Iran had now replaced Libya as the second major source of external support in the region behind Saudi Arabia. Despite these political gains the IRI had enjoyed only limited success owing to the hostility of some African governments and the indifference by many African Muslims to Tehran's revolutionary ideology. Moreover, a contraction in Iranian policy –trying to turn the local Muslim population against both conservative Muslim leaders and some of the governments from which Tehran seeks diplomatic support– undercut Tehran's political outreach in the region.

Nonetheless, and most troubling according to the CIA analysis, Iran had established ties to radical Muslim student groups on university campuses and had brought several hundred students from Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria and Senegal to Iran for theological training.[20] Moreover, despite the political-economic pushback by Saudi Arabia as well as Iraq by the autumn of 1984, Tehran maintained 18 embassies in sub-Saharan Africa. Iran was seeking to exploit ties with the nearly 100,000 Shia Muslim minority communities that lived in West Africa. Basically, Tehran was now engaged in an effort to rebuild ties with sub-Saharan Africa that had been broken off or suspended after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Over the previous 30 months, Tehran had sent official Iranian delegations to African states such as Senegal, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and the Côte d'Ivoire to gain support for Iran's positions at the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the United Nations. While much of Iran's efforts focused on west Africa, Tehran also maintained embassies or established ties in east Africa with countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti as well as Zimbabwe. Interestingly, Somalia and Kenya (along with Oman) had openly signed on to the Carter Doctrine in 1980 that provided the United States access to military facilities in those countries, in exchange for U.S. military aid, to provide logistical support for U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf.[21]

Most African states generally tried to downplay their relations with Iran so not to antagonize Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. Tehran sought to counter this resistance by offering favorable oil contracts as well as economic and development assistance at concessional prices.[22] At the political level, Tehran played on Iran's image as a successful revolutionary regime escaping and now resisting Western domination.[23] While some sub-Saharan African states accepted Tehran's offers of aid and closer economic and diplomatic relations, other African states greeted the IRI's overtures less enthusiastically.[24]

A significant diplomatic opening for Tehran in sub-Saharan Africa occurred on June 30, 1989, when an Islamist-backed military coup overthrew the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Sadiq al-Mahdi in Sudan. Iranian-Sudanese ties had remained limited before this event even after the overthrow of the pro-Western regime of Sudanese President Jaafar Numeiri in April 1985.[25] Khartoum had agreed to normalize relations with Iran in 1987, though not at the expense of Sudanese-Iraqi relations. But the military regime in Khartoum headed by Colonel Omar al-Bashir that had seized power was backed by Sudan's Islamist political movement –the National Islamic Front (NIF) led by the Sunni cleric, Hassan Turabi.

Following the Sudanese coup, diplomatic relations with the United States deteriorated and Washington terminated U.S. military aid to Sudan. Although Khartoum provided political support for Iran's bitter enemy –Iraq's President Saddam Hussein– during the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis and war, subsequently Khartoum drew closer to Tehran as Iraq came under international sanctions and isolation. In December 1991, Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani led a large delegation of Iranian officials to Sudan and signed a number of economic and commercial deals.[26] Iran also agreed to finance Sudan's purchase of $300 million of Chinese weapons. Tehran and Khartoum saw themselves as "fellow Islamic travelers" trying to survive in a post-Cold War world in which the United States was trying to shape a world order to the detriment of Islamist governments and political movements.[27]

By the spring of 1993, pro-Western, secular governments in the region feared that the IRI planned to use Sudan as a springboard for Tehran to extend Iranian influence into North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. Sudan could help "share the burden" of spreading the Islamist message and take some of the heat off of Tehran.[28] But Sudan would confront considerable pushback from secular, Western-aligned regimes in the region –particularly Ethiopia and Eritrea.[29] In the mid-1990s, owing to Khartoum's alleged involvement in the assassination attempt on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in June 1995, Sudan would be placed on the U.S. State Department's "terrorism list." Moreover, as a result of Khartoum's support for the anti-government Eritrean Islamic Jihad Movement (EIJM) relations between Eritrea and Sudan had deteriorated to the edge

Iranian President Rouhani shakes hands with Ghana's President Mahama before the meeting at the Saadabad Palace, Tehran, on February 14, 2016.

ATTA KENARE / AFP / Getty Images

of war.[30] By the end of the decade, however, Khartoum sought to distance itself from Tehran and to repair relations with the United States and the Arab world.

Sanctions and Escaping Isolation, 2001-2010

Khartoum's decision to distance itself from the IRI and any association with international terrorism, while seeking to improve relations with Washington was influenced by the international sanctions being imposed on Iran during the later half of the 1990s. At the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, trade had increased between the United States and Iran. But as part of the Clinton Administration's "dual containment" (of Iran and Iraq) policy in the Persian Gulf in March 1995, Washington banned trade with Iran's oil industry.[31] Two months later Washington prohibited any trade with Iran. That same year the U.S. Congress passed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) imposing penalties on any company conducting over $20 million worth of business in Iran or Libya. By 2000, U.S. sanctions on Iran had extended to a prohibition on even importing Persian Rugs.

After the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Iranian government (and people) condemned the attacks and openly expressed sympathy for the United States. Over the next several months, Tehran cooperated with Washington after the Bush Administration decided to invade Afghanistan, remove the Taliban government from power, and destroy al-Qaeda.[32] Iran, under the leadership of the

"moderate/reformist" President Mohammad Khatami since 1997, played a key role in negotiating with Washington a political resolution as to who would govern a post-war/Taliban Afghanistan.[33] But in his January 2002 State of the Union Address, President Bush declared that Iran formed part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and North Korea.

As late as May 2006, tensions continued to exist between Eritrea and Iran over the IRI's "regional Islamization" policy that in the past, via Sudan, had targeted Eritrea

The isolation of the IRI continued into the next decade under the George W. Bush Administration. Concern about Iran's nuclear program led to mounting international pressure against the country.[34] In December 2006, in March 2007, and again in March 2008, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted resolutions imposing international sanctions on Iran over Tehran's nuclear program. Unilaterally, in June 2010, the U.S. Congress passed the Comprehensive Iran Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010 that President Barack Obama signed into law at the beginning of July 2010. For any state considering improving relations with Iran meant casing in their lot with an international outcast.

Of course, casting in one's lot with Iran made little difference for a state already deemed or treated as an international outcast such as Eritrea in the Horn of Africa. After successfully waging a 30-year war of secession (1961-1991) from Ethiopia, Eritrea held a national referendum in April 1993, subsequently declared independence, and was admitted to the United Nations at the end of May. Over the next five years, Eritrea formed part of a pro-West/anti-Islamic coalition of states in northeast Africa, which included Ethiopia and Egypt, backed by the United States.[35] Then in May 1998 war broke out between Eritrea and Ethiopia over the disputed border near the town of Badme. When the two sides finally signed a Cessation of Hostilities Agreement more than two years later on June 16, 2000, more than 70,000 people had been killed.[36] Ethiopia's refusal to abide by the April 2002 Eritrea-Ethiopia Border Commission (EEBC) Permanent Court of Arbitration's decision that awarded the disputed border to Eritrea plunged the two sides into a "no peace no war " relationship.[37] Relations between Asmara and Addis Ababa remained tense over the next 16 years until Ethiopia agreed to recognize the EEBC demarcated border with Eritrea and the two sides signed a peace treaty and re-established diplomatic relations in the summer of 2018.

During this 16 year period, however, Eritrea, not Ethiopia, was isolated internationally.[38] Asmara's efforts to win international and especially U.S. political support at the United Nations in the border dispute failed even though Eritrea joined the U.S.-led Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) in 2001, following

Iran's strategic interests led the IRI to focus on African states located in the Indian Ocean/Red Sea region, such as Eritrea, that could provide port access to the Iranian navy

the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Coalition of the Willing leading up to the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. During 2003-2006 U.S.-Eritrea relations grew increasingly frosty over what Asmara perceived as Washington's pro-Ethiopia tilt on the border issue.[39] Eritrea's frustration played out in Somalia. In the spring of 2006, Asmara was accused in a UN report of providing weapons to the Council of Islamic Courts (CIC) that was seeking to defeat the U.S.-backed grouping of Somali warlords –the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism (ARPCT)– that controlled Mogadishu. After the CIC defeated the ARPCT in mid-2006 and took control of Mogadishu, Washington and Ethiopia began discussing plans to remove this 'radical Islamist government' from power.[40] In late December 2006, with the support of the United States, Ethiopia invaded Somalia and drove the CIC out of the Somali capital.

In the aftermath of the Ethiopian invasion of Somalia the most radical faction within the CIC –al-Shabaab– regrouped in the south of Somalia and began to wage war against Somalia's newly-installed and internationally-recognized Transitional Federal Government (TFG). Asmara was accused of allegedly allowing weapons to be funneled through Eritrea to al-Shabaab.[41] In 2007, Eritrea also became the main safe haven for Somali opposition figures including the CIC. Despite continuing to cooperate with the United States on anti-terrorism issues, by the fall of 2007, Washington considered placing Eritrea on the State Department's state-sponsor of terrorism list. Reports issued by the UN from mid-2007 through the end of December 2008 claimed Eritrea continued to play the role of "spoiler" in Somalia by providing arms and logistical support to al-Shabaab.[42] Asmara's alleged continued 'terrorist' links to al-Shabaab led the eight-member east African-based Intergovernmental Authority for Development (IGAD) in May 2009 to vote in favor of imposing sanctions on Eritrea. Then on December 23, 2009, the UN Security Council adopted resolution UNSC 1907 imposing sanctions on Eritrea, including an arms embargo, citing Asmara's border dispute with Djibouti that began in April 2008, and Eritrea's continuing support for armed groups in Somalia.

As late as May 2006, tensions continued to exist between Eritrea and Iran over the IRI's "regional Islamization" policy that in the past, via Sudan, had targeted Eritrea. Since Eritrea's independence in 1993, Asmara had not established diplomatic relations with Tehran. But by December 2006, Asmara's attitude toward Iran had changed dramatically owing in large part to Eritrea's growing international isolation over the situation in Somalia.[43] During 2007-2008, Eritrea

and Iran agreed to appoint non-resident ambassadors. In May 2008, Iran and Eritrea publicly stated that the two countries shared similar views on various regional and global issues. The Eritrean-Iranian relationship began to take on a strategic-military dimension when in January 2009 two Iranian destroyers used Eritrea's port of Assab. About this same time reports began to surface that Iran had built a military base at Assab that could be used as a transit point to send arms to Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Iran's desire to break out of its international isolation by penetrating sub-Saharan Africa extended beyond Tehran's strategic outreach to Eritrea, an African political outcast. In September 2010, Tehran hosted a two-day Iran-Africa Forum attended by 40 African countries.[44] Tehran hoped to use the summit to win African support to oppose future UN-imposed sanctions. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad also underlined Iran's desire to boost cooperation with Africa and host a summit of African Union (AU) heads of state in Tehran, especially in the areas of technical, engineering, and medical expertise.[45] But certain Iranian activities –for example, the discovery by Nigerian security forces in 2010 of Iranian rocket launchers, grenades, and artillery shells in violation of UN sanctions prohibiting Iranian arms transfers– raised alarms in Washington about how friendly African states were becoming with Iran and how Tehran might exploit these ties.[46]

The Arab Spring and the Saudi-Iranian Cold War in Sub-Saharan Africa, 2011-2018

The eruption of the Arab Spring in 2011 presented new problems and opportunities for Iran in the Middle East that would affect Tehran's policies in sub-Saharan Africa. One of the IRI's long-time allies in the Arab world –Syria– got caught up in the Arab uprisings in 2011 when civil war erupted. Initially, Iran provided financial aid and arms shipments. Then in 2012-2013, several hundred officers of the Quds force were sent to serve as military advisers. But with the rise of the ISIS in Syria and Iraq, by mid-2014 several thousand Iranian military forces, including members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), had been deployed to Syria. Iran's initial investment of approximately $6 billion annually to keep Bashar al-Assad in power in the early years of the civil war had increased by 2017-2018 to an estimated $14-15 billion annually.[47] Iran's indirect military/financial support for the Houthi uprising in Yemen further drained the IRI's treasury. Given rising popular discontent in Iran over Tehran's foreign military spending and neglect of the Iranian domestic economy could/would the IRI continue to invest in sub-Saharan Africa to expand Iranian influence?[48] Moreover, Saudi Arabia raised the "bidding" for influence in the region as the Saudi-Iranian Cold War heated up in the middle of the decade.[49]

When the Arab Spring erupted in early 2011, Tehran had made clear the IRI's intention to boost political-economic ties and cooperation with sub-Saharan African states. To emphasize that point Iran had become an observing member of the African Union (AU). Iran's strategic interests led the IRI to focus on African states located in the Indian Ocean/Red Sea region, such as Eritrea, that could provide port access to the Iranian navy. But Tehran also recognized the political importance of nurturing relations with sub-Saharan African states that would support Iran in international organizations such as the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) as Tehran came under mounting international pressure owing to the IRI's nuclear program.[50]

From 2013 onward, Iranian officials repeatedly commented about Tehran's desire to expand various forms of cooperation with the region. Iran and Africa could boost bilateral economic and trade relations, especially given their national technical and engineering potential and capabilities.[51] Iran, IRI officials argued, should be seen as a strategic partner of the African Union along with India, Japan, China, South America, and Turkey.[52] To help African states benefit from Iran's petroleum resources oil refineries could be built in the region, especially in west Africa.[53] Iranian officials continued to state that cooperation with Africa had been assigned a top priority by Tehran. Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, speaking at a ceremony marking the 51st anniversary of the establishment of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in May 2014, reiterated that the current Iranian Administration of President Hassan Rouhani (elected in 2013) was committed to expanding Iranian diplomatic relations with sub-Saharan Africa.[54]

Despite the continuing pronouncements of Iranian officials regarding expanding ties with sub-Saharan African states, the IRI was not operating in a political vacuum in the region. Saudi Arabia had launched an effort, offering financial inducements, to counter Iranian influence in the Red Sea region. At the end of 2015, Eritrea ended Asmara's strategic partnership with Tehran and realigned with Riyadh. Saudi financial inducements coupled with the hope that this action would end Eritrea's international isolation apparently influenced Asmara's decision. Eritrea now allowed the Saudi-led Arab coalition to use Assab port, Eritrean airspace and territorial waters to wage war against the Iran-backed Houthis across the Red Sea in Yemen.[55] In early 2017, reports also surfaced claiming Eritrea had deployed several hundred military forces to Yemen to fight against the Houthis.[56] Moreover, Sudan which in the recent past had sent military officers to train in Iran and had accepted Iranian technical expertise to produce weapons also realigned with Saudi Arabia.[57]

These actions left Tehran feeling bitter about African states. Tehran had held high hopes of sub-Saharan African states becoming Iranian allies, thereby compen-

sating for the deterioration of ties with traditional economic partners in Europe and East Asia.[58] However, Tehran came to view sub-Saharan African states as unreliable partners who would sell their allegiance to the highest bidder.[59] Moreover, Iran's economic problems increased after the imposition of new economic sanctions by Washington, aimed at the Iranian oil sector (with further U.S. sanctions to be imposed at the beginning of November 2018), after the Trump Administration in May 2018 withdrew the United States from the July 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) –Iran nuclear deal. The IRI, thus, will find it increasingly difficult to get into a bidding war with Saudi Arabia for the "hearts and minds" of sub-Saharan African states, especially given Iran's ongoing military-financial commitments in Syria and Yemen.

Looking to the future, the level of activities that the IRI will be able to conduct throughout sub-Saharan Africa will depend to a large extent on the impact of international economic sanctions on Iran's oil industry

Conclusion

Iran's objectives in sub-Saharan Africa have changed dramatically from the days of the Shah to the Islamic Republic. The Shah of Iran's interest in the region largely centered on economic dealings with South Africa and Tehran's geopolitical-strategic interests in the Horn of Africa. During the almost forty-year reign of the IRI, however, Tehran has expanded Iran's focus and interest in sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas, the Shah essentially ignored the millions of Muslims living throughout Africa –with perhaps the exception of Somalia against Ethiopia in the late 1970s– the IRI has sought to use these vast communities to expand Iranian influence in the continent. Thus, the IRI has spent billions of dollars in the region providing free social services through hospitals and orphanages, and establishing and running more than 100 Islamic schools and seminaries in sub-Saharan Africa to expand Iranian influence.[60]

Tehran's record in achieving Iranian political-strategic objectives in sub-Saharan Africa seems mixed at best. The Shah's attempt to contain the spread of communist influence in the Horn of Africa failed as the pro-Soviet regime in Addis Ababa finally collapsed and lost the Eritrean war of secession twelve years after the Shah had been overthrown. The IRI has earned approval and praise in a number of African countries owing to the work of the Iranian Red Crescent for providing medical services. Some analysts see this activity as a "front cover" that will allow the IRI to advance long-term Iranian strategic interests in the region and to expand Iran's "reactionary" ideology.[61] But, Iran's more recent strategic setbacks in the Horn of Africa/Red Sea region suggests

the IRI's "front cover" will face resistance and fail when confronted by the national security calculations/interests of sub-Saharan African states.

Iran's policy toward sub-Saharan Africa turned from maintaining a pro-West status quo under the Shah to the disruption of the regional order under the IRI. For geopolitical-strategic reasons, much of the attention of both the Shah and the IRI focused on the Horn of Africa, not surprisingly, given the Horn's location along the vital Red Sea maritime route and Bab al-Mandab chokepoint. The Shah's anti-communist containment intervention in the region was welcomed by the United States and other Western countries. Conversely, the Islamist-based ideological policies of the IRI are viewed as disruptive to a pro-Western regional order. To counter the expansion of Iranian influence in the region (and in light of the Ethiopian-Eritrean 2018 peace treaty), Washington is reportedly planning to establish a military base in Eritrea, use Eritrea's Red Sea ports and, thereby, end Asmara's diplomatic isolation.[62]

Looking to the future, the level of activities that the IRI will be able to conduct throughout sub-Saharan Africa will depend to a large extent on the impact of international economic sanctions on Iran's oil industry. Will other Western countries feel forced to fall in line with the Trump Administration's aggressive economic sanctions policy against Iran? Will Tehran find other countries, perhaps in sub-Saharan Africa, to buy Iranian oil to compensate for this loss of revenue? The IRI's strategy, however, has been aimed at generating support at a grassroots level among Muslim communities not just focused on African governments. Thus, even with fewer funds available Tehran may still be able to sustain and extend Iranian influence in sub-Saharan Africa.

Endnotes

1. Sub-Saharan Africa excludes the five countries of North Africa: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

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5. See, Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn: U.S. Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991), pp. 55-74

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8. See, Avi Shlaim, "Israel, the Great Powers and the Middle East Crisis of 1958," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May 1999), pp. 177-192; Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), pp. 186-217.

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10. See, Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn*, pp. 175-196.

11. U.S. Department of State, Bureau of African Affairs, "South Africa Petroleum Supply," (November 19, 1973), (Released by Wikileaks: Public Library and U.S. Diplomacy).

12. M. E. Chehari, "South Africa and Iran in the Apartheid Era," *Journal of Southern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2016), pp. 687-709.

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15. See, John L. Esposito, "The Iranian Revolution: A Ten Year Perspective," in John L. Esposito (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990), pp. 26-30.

16. Esposito, "The Iranian Revolution: A Ten Year Perspective," pp. 30-39.

17. See, Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, (New York: Routledge, 1991).

18. See, Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982-1990*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), pp. 31-67.

19. CIA, Directorate of Intelligence, "Sub-Saharan Africa: Growing Iranian Activity," (November 29, 1984), prepared by the Office of African and Latin American Analysis (sanitized copy released January 26, 2011), retrieved from https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85S00317R000300110005-1.pdf.

20. CIA, "Sub-Saharan Africa: Growing Iranian Activity."

21. See, Lefebvre, *Arms for the Horn*, pp. 203-212.

22. CIA, "Sub-Saharan Africa: Growing Iranian Activity."

23. CIA, "Sub-Saharan Africa: Growing Iranian Activity."

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25. See, John O. Voll, "Islamization in Sudan and the Iranian Revolution," in John L. Esposito (ed.), *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, pp. 283-301.

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33. Woodward, *Bush at War*.

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