

Iran in the Continent of Africa

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While Israeli attention is currently focused primarily on the assistance Iran provides to its proxies as part of the Swords of Iron war, Tehran continues to expand its activities across the African continent, thereby increasing the threat to Israel’s political, security, and economic interests in this region. In light of this, Israel needs to formulate a strategy to prevent Iran from achieving its goals in Africa.

Since the beginning of the Swords of Iron campaign, and especially [since Iran’s April 14th attack](#) on Israel using drone swarms, cruise missile, and surface-to-surface missiles (SSM), Israel’s attention toward Iran seems to primarily focus on the support Tehran is providing to its proxies throughout the Middle East. This support aims to put pressure on Israel to cease its military campaign in the Gaza Strip and thereby save Hamas, as well as prepare for the potential that the current situation will escalate into a comprehensive war between the countries. By focusing on Iran’s activities in the Middle East, Israel might overlook a significant trend concerning Iran—the increase in Iranian activity in Africa in recent months—which poses a threat to fundamental Israeli interests across the continent.

Africa [has been a “preferred” continent for Iranian activities](#) since the early days of the Islamic Revolution, for a variety of reasons: Iran saw an ideological kinship between itself and many African countries due to their shared desire to fight against the “foreign Western occupier”; Tehran also wanted to protect the large Shiite minority across the continent and sought to exploit the continent’s resources for its own needs. These reasons, along with Africa’s geographical proximity to the Middle East, made Africa particularly attractive to the Iranian leadership.

Even during President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s tenure, Iran significantly increased its political activities across Africa, but it seems that the previous Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, took the idea several steps further. As part of his desire to strengthen relations with the “global south” as an alternative to the West politically and economically, Raisi saw enhancing [ties with Africa as a top political priority](#) during his presidency. He worked to deepen connections with many countries on the continent, organized numerous joint Iran–Africa forums, and visited several countries on the continent.

In recent months, Iran has been increasing its activities in Africa. This is not just about advancing its economic and political interests but also about Iran's desire [to expand its arms sales to many countries](#) on the continent to gain political and economic dividends from these sales. This trend is particularly evident in East Africa, but increased Iranian activity can be seen across the entire continent. For instance, in the Horn of Africa and East Africa, Tehran continues to expand its ties with Sudan, [supplying the Sudanese army with Mohajer-6 drones](#) to strengthen its capabilities in the country's civil war, with the intent of reaping political and security benefits—renewing diplomatic relations between the countries and establishing a port for Tehran's use in the Port Sudan area. This pattern of action is very similar to the assistance Iran provided to Ethiopia's President Abiy Ahmed during the civil war he waged against the Tigray region rebels—assistance that dramatically improved the capabilities of the Ethiopian army.

Apart from deepening ties with Sudan, Tehran renewed its diplomatic relations with Djibouti last year after a seven-year hiatus. Djibouti's strategic location near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait was one of the main reasons Tehran sought to renew these ties. Furthermore, in addition to these efforts, Tehran is working to deepen its diplomatic ties with Cairo through a wide range of channels.

Deepening ties with the Sudanese army, the desire to strengthen diplomatic relations with Egypt, and renewing diplomatic relations with Djibouti will allow Iran to increase its security presence in this strategic region. This move serves several important objectives from an Iranian perspective, including increasing the “economic siege” on Israel, rebuilding channels for transferring weapons to Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and enhancing its ability to project naval power in this region through the Iranian navy.

In North Africa, Iran continues to expand its diplomatic ties with Tunisia. Recently, Tunisia lifted [the visa requirement](#) for Iranian citizens wishing to enter the country, likely to facilitate building economic relations between the countries. This expansion of ties also joins the strategic relations built in recent years between Iran and Algeria and the foothold Iran has in Libya. In doing so, Iran is trying to build a “territorial continuum” in the North African countries, which provides not only access to the Mediterranean and the Strait of Gibraltar, thereby increasing the threat to Europe, but also increases military pressure on Morocco, which is seen by the Iranian leadership as a stronghold of Israeli and American activity on this continent. In addition, Iranian presence allows for increased military support to the Polisario rebels, who are fighting against Morocco's presence in the Western Sahara region. Moreover, Iran is also trying to expand its diplomatic ties with Mauritania to increase the “sense of siege” on Morocco from the west as well.

Alongside this activity in the Horn of Africa and North Africa, Iran is expanding its economic ties with various countries in the eastern part of the continent, including Kenya, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. Additionally, Tehran is trying to exploit the vacuum created by the “withdrawal” of French presence in the Sahel region. Similar to China and Russia, it is also trying to gain an economic and political share in those countries. One example is Niger, where Iran has several interests, such as uranium deposits, which it can buy for use in its nuclear program. Indeed, a recent report mentioned an [agreement signed](#) between the countries on this matter.

These developments should particularly concern Israel, as they increase the military threat to Israel from the Horn of Africa region and threaten Israel’s ability to continue its trend of strengthening diplomatic relations with many countries across the continent. In this context, Iran is working to undermine Israel’s diplomatic efforts, primarily within the African Union, using Algeria and South Africa, which reportedly exact a price from countries on the continent for their support of Israel (such as Morocco). Furthermore, Iran uses its connections with these countries to circumvent sanctions imposed on it by the West and mainly to promote its status as a leading arms exporter in the world, primarily by exporting its drones to anyone interested.

In light of this, it is appropriate for Israel to consider building a strategy aimed at maintaining its influence in Africa while significantly reducing Iran’s influence on the continent. Given that Israel’s diplomatic footprint in this continent is quite limited (Israel has only 10 embassies in Africa), the following steps should be considered:

- Cooperation with the Gulf states, which also view Iranian activism in Africa with great suspicion, as it endangers their fundamental interests on the continent.
- Strengthening coordination with the United States regarding relations with countries that are concerned about Iranian activism, primarily to create profit (or loss) incentives for any country that chooses not to cooperate with Iran.
- Deepening security ties with countries in the Horn of Africa and East Africa to prevent Iran from “taking over” the Red Sea for its purposes while simultaneously strengthening coordination with Egypt to prevent an Iranian foothold in this region.
- Significantly increasing the diplomatic campaign aimed at preventing Iran from exporting its weaponry, thereby improving its economic and security status (by receiving compensation for this assistance).
- Expanding the economic and military aid provided to those countries on the continent that oppose Iranian presence and have chosen to maintain their relations with Israel, despite the “temptation” of deepening cooperation with Tehran.

In conclusion, the expansion of Iranian activism across Africa endangers important Israeli interests on the continent. Without the development of a comprehensive strategy together with other countries aimed at challenging this activism, Iran may use its foothold in Africa to increase the military and economic threat to Israel, deter other countries from cooperating with it, and exact a price from those countries that have chosen to enhance their cooperation with Israel. Despite the various security challenges currently facing Israel, ignoring Iran's activities in Africa will only significantly worsen Israel's position on the continent and may lead to a situation where, in the future, Israel will find it difficult to fundamentally change this trend.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg