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Source: West Asia News Agency, the then Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is welcomed by Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa, 2023.

Iran's Quest for Influence in Africa

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The Islamic Republic of Iran, following a tradition dating back to 1984, is expanding its footprint in Africa, capitalizing on the efforts of many African states to distance themselves from Western powers like the United States and France. This trend is further strengthened by the increasing support for Iran's stance on the Middle East crisis and the policies of the US and the West from Africa and elsewhere in the Global South. In return, Iran aims to establish partnerships to bypass international sanctions and find new markets for its exports, including sophisticated weapons.

President Ebrahim Raisi's tour of Kenya, Uganda and Zimbabwe in July 2023, the first by an Iranian president to the continent in over a decade, underscores the importance of Africa in Iran's recent foreign strategy. Similarly, Iran has held two editions of the Iran-Africa Trade Summit, the most recent of which took place in April 2024, with representatives from over 40 African countries visiting the Tehran.

Iran's renewed outreach to the Black Continent coincides with rising instability and anti-Western sentiments in the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. The current crisis in the Middle East has intersected with the seizure of power by military leaders in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, a failed coup in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as an ongoing civil war in Sudan. Post-coup authorities in these countries have distanced themselves from France and the United States, echoing Tehran's view that Western powers exploit the Global South for their own interests. The rise of African leaders supportive of Iran and its Axis of Resistance, including Russia, has given Tehran momentum to oppose Washington's efforts to isolate the Islamic Republic and weaken it through comprehensive economic sanctions.

Seeking to fill the vacuum left by the western countries, Iran has expressed diplomatic support for the military juntas ruling countries in the Sahel. In September 2023, the now defunct President Raisi praised the "resistance" of these African countries against "hegemonic European policies and colonialism". Similarly, during the 2024 Iran-Africa Trade Summit, he referenced the Israel-Hamas war as a unifying issue, criticizing the United States, Western governments, and the "Zionist regime" (as Tehran polemically brands Israel) as "the main source of terror and terrorist groups".

However, ideological support and diplomatic engagement may only be minor elements among the strategic advantages Iran is contemplating in this crucial geopolitical arena. With the military withdrawals and declining French and US influence in West Africa, Iran has sought to increase its influence through security cooperation, military exports and infrastructure development projects. In this sense, both Mali and Burkina Faso provided Iran with an opportunity, just like its strategic partner Russia, to expand its influence. Following the departure of French military forces between 2022 and 2023, Iranian officials visited both Bamako and Ouagadougou to stress the Sahelian countries' new significant status in Tehran's foreign policy and open a new chapter in bilateral relations.

In Tehran's rhetoric, international security cooperation represents a necessary element in the fight against terrorism in Africa, suggesting that Iran could help fill the role previously played by Western forces. In May 2023, Iranian Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani sought to convince Malian officials to view the Islamic Republic as a reliable partner in this struggle against Sunni jihadist groups, also offering to share Iranian equipment, experiences and capabilities in training Mali's defence forces against terrorist threats.

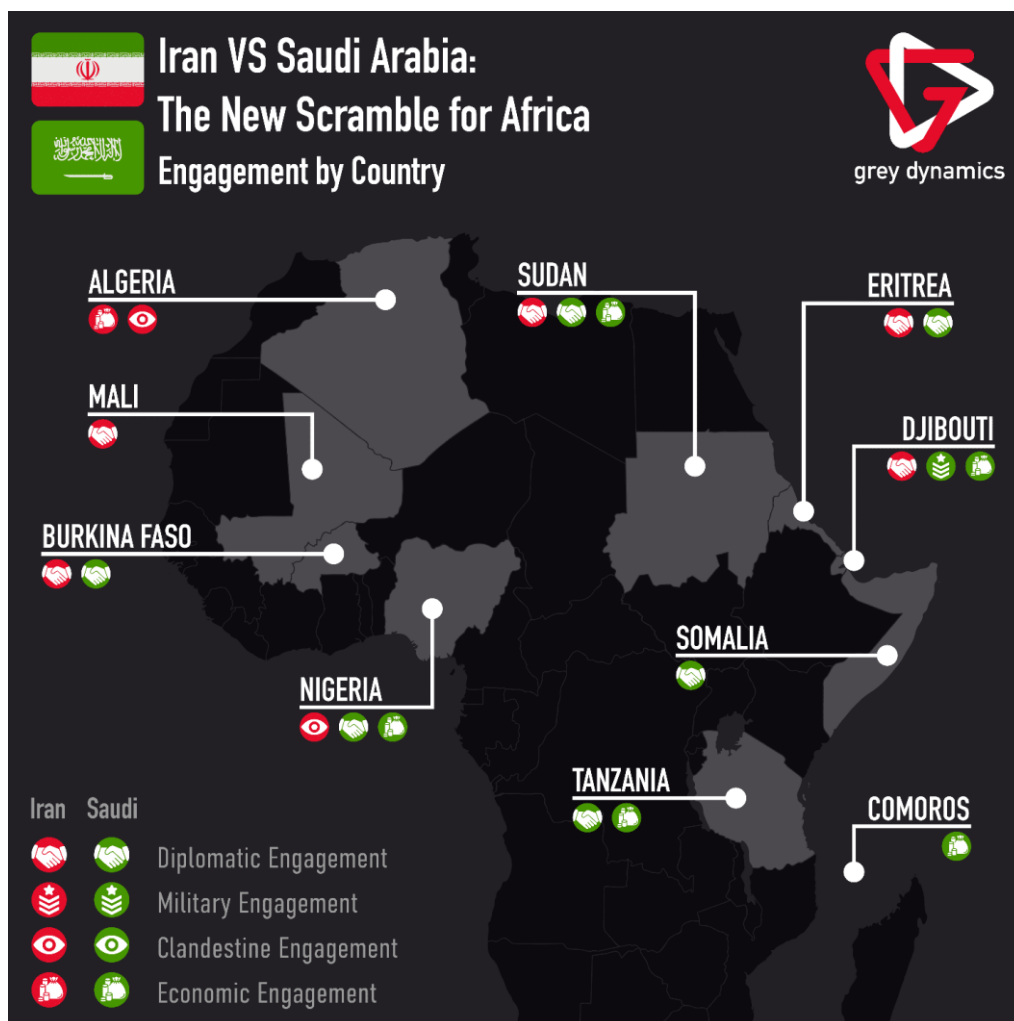
Iran has a clear ambition to become a significant arms supplier to the Global South. Many countries in this broad region are barred from receiving sophisticated Western weaponry due to human rights violations and coup-related power seizures. Iran has provided arms to guerrilla groups across the Middle East for decades, and the use of Tehran's loitering munitions in Ukraine has increased regional interest in Iranian systems. This trend is already evident in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa. Since 2021, the Islamic Republic has provided UAVs to the Ethiopian government to combat opposition armed groups, and it seeks new openings in Niger and Sudan.

In Niger, Paris and Washington have faced setbacks similar to those in Burkina Faso and Mali, benefiting Iran. Following a coup in July 2023 that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, French troops were soon forced to depart. Similarly, Niamey revoked its 14-year-old counterterrorism agreement with the United States, forcing Washington to evacuate 1,000 soldiers combating Jamaa't Nusra't al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) affiliates. Almost simultaneously, allegations emerged that Niger had been secretly negotiating with Iran since late 2023 to exchange uranium supplies for Iranian armed drones and surface-to-air missiles. Although the junta rejected these accusations (also having in mind past unfounded accusation of supplying uranium to Saddam Hussein), a Nigerien delegation notably travelled to Tehran in January 2024 to sign agreements with Iranian officials – including Defense Minister Ashtiani, who manages the Iranian arms procurement and sales. Seeking to capitalize on its newfound influence in Niamey, Tehran offered its expertise to help Niger overcome international sanctions.

Iran is also leveraging defence exports to expand its influence in Sudan, where a yearlong civil conflict between contending military factions, the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), has allowed Iran to rebuild diplomatic relations with Khartoum for the first time since 2016. A decade ago, Iran used Sudan as a conduit to move arms to Hamas and PIJ in Gaza but lost this access after an attack on the Saudi Embassy in Tehran led to diplomatic turmoil. Sudan's military leaders turned to Gulf states like the UAE and Qatar while also engaging with Washington to be removed from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism. They also agreed to normalize ties with Israel under the US-brokered "Abraham Accords."

In February 2024, reports surfaced that Tehran supplied the SAF with sophisticated armed drones – such as the Mohajer-6 and the Ababil-3, helping Sudan’s military to reverse losses and regain territory from the RSF. This influx of Iranian military hardware was linked to Iran’s request for strategic access to Port Sudan under the SAF control. Tehran allegedly sought to establish a permanent naval base (most probably near Port Sudan) in return for a helicopter-carrying warship. Although the request seems to have been refused, it exposed Tehran’s efforts to extend its presence along the western banks of the Red Sea. Controlling Sudanese ports would give Iran and its allies a foothold in a crucial commercial corridor near Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. This would allow Iran to increase support to the Houthi movement in Yemen to pressure Israel and the United States by impeding maritime commercial traffic.

That said, Iranian quest for influence, despite activities and some successes, risks to be overshadowed by the Saudi rivals and their Gulf Cooperation Council allies as clearly shown in this map.



Source: Grey Dynamics

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