

Iran-Africa relations

The troubled bridge of Third World dialogue

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Introduction

Typically overlooked in the academic study of international relations are the relationships that exist between states in the so-called global South, and the ways in which those states jockey for influence and power among each other. In 1998 Neuman asserted, 'the role of the Third World in international politics remains relatively unexplored in the literature'¹—a trend that has largely persisted over the last decade.

This chapter examines the historical and contemporary development of Iranian-African discourse. It discusses the ways in which Iran and African states talk to each other in the public and diplomatic realms, particularly in how their rapport has been steeped in rhetoric around 'Third World' or 'global South' solidarity, religious sentiments and regional security. More specifically, it investigates how alliances between Iran and African states have been cultivated and broken, and how the actions of each have contradicted public discourse.

Third World speech

After decolonization began after the Second World War, states in the global South often engaged with one another through a bridge of 'Third World speech' or 'Third Worldism'—a discourse that presaged the emergence of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Third Worldism was primarily concerned with resistance to both hegemonic powers during the bipolar order of the Cold War, a stance in which states refused to side with either pole.² It was characterized by a discursive focus on a number of ostensibly uniquely Southern issues, including: opposition to Northern hegemony; South-South solidarity; the sovereign equality and independence of nations; non-interference in internal affairs; and recognition of the perceived neo-colonialist underpinnings of global affairs.³ This did not, however, prevent states from instrumentalizing the ideology of Third Worldism while also manipulating Cold War politics.

Since the landmark 1955 Bandung Conference⁴ that set its discursive tone, Third Worldism has gone through a number of changes. Morphing from the early anti-colonial nationalist movements of the 1950s and 1960s into the NAM of the Cold War era, it has more recently been manifest in the new transnational anti-Bretton Woods and anti-neoliberal movements of

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the 1990s and 2000s. Regionally, Third World speech has been incubated in the intellectual paradigms of Négritude, pan-Africanism, African socialism and Afro-Marxism in Africa and the Caribbean, and in pan-Arabism and Maoism in the Middle East and Asia. Bilateral relations have also been based on such rhetoric. The People's Republic of China and Africa have had an understanding of sovereignty based on the equation of self-determination and anti-imperialism, while states in the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa have rooted their solidarity in a pro-black pan-African nationalism. Leftist leaders in Latin America have also evoked pro-South solidarity as the basis of their friendship, with countries across the Middle East, Asia and Africa.⁵

At the same time, and often overlooked, is the fact that these Third World discourses belie the power dynamics that exist between global South states. Although they are frequently lumped into the homogenously 'weak' or 'marginal' categories of 'global South', 'Third World' or 'post-colonial states', the reality is that these states vary radically from each other in their abilities to pursue their goals in the international arena. Nevertheless, states across the developing world tend to frame their relationships in terms of equality. The result has been that power differentials within the global South are glossed over as stronger states seek to consolidate political power and diplomatic capital by playing to Third Worldist proclivities. This tendency is particularly visible in Iran, which today uses the rhetoric of global South speech to advance its geopolitical goals in Africa, and in African states that use similar language in an attempt to secure various kinds of external support.

Historical and contemporary contours of Iran-Africa relations

Though Iran gained independence in 1921 and the majority of sub-Saharan African states gained theirs by the early 1960s, the two regions have deep historical ties. Before European colonialism, Persian-African relations were primarily based on trade. As early as the ninth century migrants from the Persian Gulf were settling in urban areas in East Africa,⁶ and Iranian merchants were visiting East Africa by the 16th century. Many of their descendents can still be found there today.⁷

After the wave of African independence in the late 1950s and early 1960s, African relations with Iran might be characterized as ideological, with a moderate undercurrent of Iranian patronage.⁸ In the aftermath of the global oil boom of 1974, Tehran's treasury was inundated with cash, which Iran declared it would use to help African states develop.⁹ In addition, Cold War politics led Iran to provide support for African insurgent movements fighting regimes it perceived to be supporters of Western imperialism. When Mao Zedong, a supporter of what would become Nelson Mandela's African National Congress, died in 1976, leaders of the South African movement quickly turned to Iran and Libya for assistance.¹⁰

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 signalled a shift in Iranian foreign policy, not least toward Africa. With the Revolution—which saw the overthrow of the US-supported Shah and the installation of the Ayatollah Khomeini—came a rejection of US sympathy, a ramping up of anti-imperial rhetoric, and the desire to export the Revolution's conservative version of Islam. For Africa, the Iranian Revolution signalled both continuity and change. Unchanged was the pro-South, anti-imperial language of solidarity, but a new dimension, which resonated with many African states, was Iran's promotion of Shi'a Islam. The most ardent African supporters of Iran's grafting of anti-imperialism onto conservative Islam were Sudanese insurgents such as Omar al-Bashir, the current president of Sudan, who launched a coup based broadly on the Islamist ideals of the Iranian Revolution.¹¹ However, while Africa borrowed from Iran's ideological playbook throughout the early 1980s, relations did not truly run deep. During the period between 1980 and 1988, Iran's war with Iraq was its overriding concern. Thus, while relations during this era were outwardly friendly, they may be said to have been superficial at best.¹²

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With the end of Iran–Iraq War and the end of the Cold War, Iran’s policy toward Africa between 1988 and 2005 continued to be ideologically based in pro-Third World rhetoric. Iran remained friendly with African states diplomatically through the discourses of Third Worldism and Islamism, quietly dropping the anti-imperial tinge in its unsuccessful attempts to befriend the West. In the end, Africa continued to play a marginal role in Iran’s international calculus.

Western hostility toward Iran was no longer to be tolerated once Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the ultra-conservative former mayor of Tehran, was elected president in 2005. Under Ahmadinejad, Iranian foreign policy has been described as ‘muddled’, ‘badly fragmented’, ‘far from monolithic’¹³ and ‘lacking consensus’, all leading to ‘inadequate implementation’.¹⁴ This inconsistency has been particularly manifest in Iran’s relationships with African states. For instance, in 2005 Iranian envoy Mohammad-Reza Bagheri said in Ghana that Iran had made Africa a ‘top priority’.¹⁵ Yet by 2008 he recanted, saying Iran had ‘no long-term strategy for relations in Africa’.¹⁶ In 2008 Ahmadinejad claimed that there were ‘no limits to the expansion of [Iran’s] ties with African countries’.¹⁷ The next year, at the last minute, he cancelled his visit to an African Union (AU) summit in Libya, with a spokesman claiming: ‘The president called off the trip because he was too busy and the visit was not among his top priorities’.¹⁸ One observer summarized:

At present, over 300 [Iranian] agreements with African states have not been put into effect. There are unconfirmed reports that 22 of the 26 African ambassadors in Tehran have complained that investment pledges have not been delivered on. According to some unconfirmed news, the ambassadors of 22 African countries have threatened to cut off their relationships with Iran because Tehran’s authorities have not kept their promises of investing in projects in these countries.¹⁹

Despite African apprehension, Iran has tried to cement its relationship with Africa via anti-Western rhetoric. In Kenya in 2009, Ahmadinejad warned the continent to remain vigilant and disallow ‘the hooligan countries [of the West] to return and rob its countries’.²⁰ In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Iran asserted that its friendship with the country was founded upon a common opposition to ‘Western countries and a number of big powers [which] strive to plunder the resources of the African nations and colonize them’.²¹ Gambia and Iran have rallied around the notion that they were both being antagonized by ‘bullying’ Western hegemony,²² while Ahmadinejad and Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe ruminated on the ‘need to come up with a coalition for peace in response to the aggression of global bullies’.²³

Like all Iranian foreign policy on Africa prior to 2005, Iran is continuing to talk an anti-imperial and pro-South game to Africa. However, for the first time since becoming a state, Iran is undeniably seeking to exert its hegemony on the continent. Ironically, to do so, it is fashioning itself as an equal partner to African countries.

To this end, Szrom delineates Iran’s four-pronged approach to courting African allies: through diplomacy, economics, culture and defence.²⁴ Iran’s three non-security-related tactics are easily evidenced. Diplomatically, Iran has undertaken two broad sweeps to court African allies during Ahmadinejad’s term, the first coming in 2005 and the second in 2010. Iran signed a slew of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with African states on issues such as education, agriculture, scientific exploration and energy. By 2011, Ahmadinejad’s schedule had taken him to Senegal, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Mali, Nigeria, Djibouti, Comoros, Kenya, Sudan, Algeria and Gambia, in addition to Tehran having dispatched ministerial-level delegations to improve relations with other strategic allies such as Ghana, Angola and South Africa.²⁵

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Culturally, Iran has reaffirmed its alliance with Africa through their mutual histories of colonialism and, in some cases, their religious affinity. Yet it is the economic realm in which Iran has been most active. With the creation of new 'air links, transportation and the founding of joint banks' in some 48 African countries,²⁶ the opening of car manufacturing plants,²⁷ and offers of oil for South Africa and Kenya and oil-refining expertise to Uganda,²⁸ Iran has been cultivating trade relations across the continent. It has made notable inroads in promoting economic development, investing across Africa in energy, transportation infrastructure, information and communications technology, agriculture, rural development and technological training in Comoros, Gabon, Burundi, Central African Republic, Uganda, Ghana, Niger, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Zambia, Mali and Mauritania.

Perhaps most important is the fourth type of Iranian enticement for African states: security co-operation. These military and security relationships are the focus of this chapter.

Iran-Africa security co-operation

One of the ways Iran has sought to garner allies in Africa is through military assistance. While Iran talks to Africa using the language of global South speech in order to rally support, these discursive practices are often contradictory to the actual courses of action undertaken by Iran. This section highlights three specific areas of Iran-Africa security co-operation: nuclear technology, bilateral and anti-government military support, and anti-piracy initiatives.

Iran's nuclear ambitions: a peaceful programme, except when it isn't

In 2003 Iran announced its plans to develop facilities that could produce enriched uranium. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) paid several visits to the country and insisted all details be revealed. Ahmadinejad's refusal to allow inspections by the IAEA led to four sets of international sanctions against Iran in 2006 and 2007.²⁹ These sanctions have led Iran feverishly to seek out international allies: 'Iran is always trying to expand its areas of diplomatic and economic influence to counterbalance against its own isolation.'³⁰

As it has done in various international forums, Iran has a tendency to talk about its nuclear programme with African states in peaceful terms, claiming that its programme poses no real threat to international security. African states are by and large in support of Iran's right to peaceful development of nuclear technology for civilian purposes. Djibouti has come out as an advocate of Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology, going so far as to praise Tehran for its determination in accessing it.³¹ Kenya, which faces its own enormous energy security challenges, has shown support for Iranian nuclear technology in the hopes of receiving assistance in potentially developing its own nuclear power.³² In November 2010, in an attempt to garner support from less enthusiastic countries, Ahmadinejad toured West Africa visiting Burkina Faso, Ghana, Togo and Benin.³³

Yet the docility of Iran's nuclear programme has been called into question and many of its current activities in Africa, such as its attempts to procure uranium on the continent, have raised red flags. Since Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, obtaining uranium from Africa has become an increasingly high priority for Iran. In 2006, the Somali government accused Iran of attempting to provide a range of weapons to the insurgent Union of Islamic Courts in exchange for access to Somali uranium deposits. A UN investigation found that Iran had supplied the group with military assistance³⁴ and also insinuated that Iran 'may have sought help in finding uranium in the hometown of Somali Islamist leader Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys'.³⁵ Tehran denied the allegations.

Under Ahmadinejad's watch in 2006, a UN investigation reported that Tanzania had intercepted a shipment of uranium-238 bound for Iran which originated in the DRC. The Congolese government denied reports that it had shipped any uranium to Iran; some observers assumed nuclear theft or smuggling.³⁶ In 2007, other reports surfaced accusing the head of the DRC's Atomic Agency of smuggling uranium to Iran after the IAEA began investigating Iran's nuclear programme.³⁷ In Harare, Tehran signed an MoU promising to overhaul Zimbabwe's oil refinery and offer long-term fuel supplies in exchange for exclusive mining rights of 'strategic' minerals, including uranium.³⁸ More recently, in 2011, reports revealed that Iran's foreign minister had met with a representative of Zimbabwe's mining agency to 'resume negotiations ... for the benefit of Iran's uranium procurement plan'.³⁹ Iran also had great interest in Niger's uranium deposits, but fled the country after the overthrow of President Amadou Tandja in March 2010.⁴⁰

In light of these activities, many African states have become sceptical about Iran's nuclear intentions. The Kenyan *Daily Nation* noted that Iran's 'push for regional influence through commercial ties is not unrelated to the chilly relations it has with the West ... for refusing to abandon its nuclear programme'.⁴¹ While Nigeria has come out in support of Iran's right to develop a peaceful nuclear programme, it too has voiced doubts about Iran's intentions. At the 9 June 2010 meeting of the UN Security Council, Nigeria asserted that 'Iran ... has clearly violated its obligations to the [Nuclear Non-Proliferation] Treaty', and its non-compliance with the IAEA 'raises genuine doubt on the real direction of its nuclear activities'.⁴² For its part, Nigeria has been working on developing its own nuclear technology, and during the summer of 2012 the Nigerian Nuclear Regulatory Authority assured the world at a press conference that Nigeria could handle nuclear energy in accordance with international law.⁴³

Playing both sides: Iran's bilateral and sub-national militia funding

As one of the largest arms producers world-wide, Iran has ingratiated itself with African leaders through its willingness to sell weapons to African governments. Yet Iran's foreign and security policies suffer from internal contradictions. While on one hand Iran offers assistance to African militaries, it has also been accused of funding and arming non-state African militias, many of which hold the state—and their militaries—as their principal object of dissatisfaction. Iran's indiscriminate weapons sales, described recently as 'hypocritical, two-faced and highly dangerous',⁴⁴ are reflective of discursive tensions in its larger Africa policy.

When it comes to Iran's military co-operation with African states, proclamations are broad, few details are divulged and evidence of follow-through has been scant. In 2009, Iran and Tanzania agreed to establish 'a formal agreement on future military and defense cooperation',⁴⁵ and in Comoros Iran has agreed to 'help train ... police and security forces'.⁴⁶ The South African defence minister visited Iran to 'discuss defense related cooperation between South Africa and Iran',⁴⁷ and other reports assert that Iran has offered Gambia assistance in 'intelligence and security'.⁴⁸ Other countries that have made military agreements with Iran include Djibouti,⁴⁹ Eritrea⁵⁰ and Senegal.⁵¹ Bilateral military engagements also extend into African provision of land for Iranian military bases: in 2010 Zimbabwe agreed to let Iran open a military base on its soil.⁵² Eritrea has also been accused of hosting an Iranian military base, a claim both countries deny.⁵³

At the same time, Iran is accused of funding non-state militias, something it has been doing for nearly two decades. In 1993 Zambia accused Iran of funding the United National Independence Party, which sought to overthrow then-President Frederick Chiluba.⁵⁴ Iran also funded the Eritrean Liberation Front in its attempts to obtain independence from Ethiopia, which it achieved in 1993. This trend continued under Ahmadinejad. In 2006, Iran was accused

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of funding the group that dedicated itself to the overthrow of the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia, the Union of Islamic Courts.⁵⁵ Among the supplies Iran sent them, according to US intelligence, were shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles, anti-aircraft weaponry and anti-tank missiles.⁵⁶

In 2007, Algeria accused Iran of transferring funds to al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to assassinate the president.⁵⁷ In 2009, Morocco broke ties with Iran, claiming that Iran was trying to undermine the national government in an act of 'intolerable interference', by attempting to convert the overwhelmingly Sunni population to Shi'a.⁵⁸ Even more recently, a French exposé surfaced detailing how Iran has been exporting its brand of Shi'a Islam to Sunni-dominated northern Nigeria, where conservative Muslims have long been seeking to institute Islamic law in what would signal a de facto secession from the rest of Nigeria.⁵⁹ While no direct links have yet been shown to exist between Iran and Nigeria's home-grown terrorist group Boko Haram, the ideals of the Islamic Revolution have had an indelible impact on those seeking to instate Shari'a (Islamic law) in northern Nigeria.⁶⁰

While detrimental to Iran's reputation on the continent, these accusations pale in the shadow of the West African arms-trafficking scandal that rocked Nigeria, Gambia and Senegal in October 2010. Despite the fact that Iran had been under UN arms sanctions since 2007, inspectors at a port in Lagos discovered a shipping container labelled as construction materials loaded with machine guns, rocket launchers, rocket-propelled grenades, assault rifles⁶¹ and ammunition, which had originated from Iran.⁶² Nigerian security forces suspected that the shipment was being supplied by Iran to local anti-government militias such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta in the south-east⁶³ or Hisbah militias seeking to institute Islamic law in the north.⁶⁴ More damning, two members of a secret arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guard, the Quds Force, were implicated in the seizure.⁶⁵ Iran demurred, claiming the shipment was intended for 'another West African country'.⁶⁶

That country turned out to be Gambia. Once revealed that Gambia was the intended recipient of the Iranian arms, outrage ensued in neighbouring Senegal, which had long suspected Banjul of funding the Mouvement des forces Démocratiques de Casamance, a movement that has been seeking independence from Dakar since the 1960s. Senegal immediately cut off relations with Iran, with the foreign minister saying that 'his country could not maintain relations with a country that was working to destabilize it'.⁶⁷ He was vindicated in February 2011 when it was revealed that Casamance rebels had killed three Senegalese soldiers using Iranian weapons.⁶⁸ Gambia was enraged at the revelation, and also cut relations with Iran. The sense of apprehension was palpable in the aftermath of the debacle, with one security official surmising: 'This was a sophisticated operation undertaken by Iran's Revolutionary Guards to destabilize a number of governments in West Africa ... It is a major diplomatic embarrassment for Tehran at a time when Iran claims it seeks to improve relations with countries in the region'.⁶⁹

Though Iran has offered bilateral military assistance to gain African allies, it has shown that state militaries are not the only armed groups it is willing to fund. The broader trend of falling on one side or the other is sure to raise eyebrows: if Iran isn't financing my military, is it funding the group that's fighting it?

Subversion, ahoy: fighting piracy and supporting armed movements

Arguably, Iran's most pressing geopolitical interest in Africa is gaining de facto control of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. For Iran, control over the Red Sea ensures it can pull the strings in its involvement with groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qa'ida and other pro-Iranian groups in the Middle East, as well as protect itself in the case of attack on its nuclear facilities.⁷⁰

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Since 2008, Iran has expressed a devotion to anti-piracy activities in the Gulf of Aden and in the Red Sea, where it has been conducting anti-piracy patrols since November of that year. Since then, Iran's navy claims to have escorted nearly 1,000 Iranian vessels through the Gulf of Aden, during which time there have been at least 30 instances of heavy fighting with pirates.⁷¹ In March 2011, Iran proclaimed that its navy was going to take a more aggressive stance in policing these waters, though it assured the world that its ratcheting-up of naval activities should not to be interpreted as adversarial.⁷²

In its effort to combat piracy, Iran is collaborating with a number of African navies. The navies with which Iran has been most actively co-operating are those that exist in its desired sphere of influence in the Horn of Africa: Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti. Iran's stalwart ally Sudan has received substantial assistance in naval affairs, beginning in 1993 when Iran helped it buy 20 Chinese aircraft, presumed to be Nanchang A-5s. Soon after, Sudan granted Iran's navy full access to its facilities.⁷³

In June 2009, Iran signed an MoU with Somalia that granted it the ability to dock ships on its coast for the purposes of fighting piracy and anti-government terrorism,⁷⁴ and Djibouti signed an agreement with Iran in January 2011 on naval co-operation to combat piracy, smuggling and terrorism. Iran also agreed to give the Djiboutian navy training and offered to collaborate on the provision of security for Djiboutian fishermen and commercial vessels.⁷⁵ Egypt allowed Iranian ships access to the Suez Canal for the first time in 30 years in early 2011,⁷⁶ though no formal assistance to the Egyptian navy has been established as yet.

While Iran has come into the Horn largely supportive of anti-piracy efforts and, in the case of Somalia, counterinsurgency, its history in the region has included support to certain Middle Eastern armed factions operating and training in Africa. In 1992, Iran sent some 2,000 members of the Revolutionary Guard to Sudan, in part to help train Hezbollah,⁷⁷ and in 1996 Israel lodged a formal complaint to South Africa accusing it of harbouring Hezbollah training camps alleged to be underwritten by Iran.⁷⁸ Today, some observers speculate that Iran's presence on the Horn is to abet it in channelling weapons and fighters to such groups, most presumed to be anti-Israeli.⁷⁹

Observers have noted that Iran's grand strategy includes the creation of 'Hezbollah franchises' throughout Africa.⁸⁰ While such subsidiaries exist throughout the Horn, a great deal of Iranian effort has been centred in West Africa, where Hezbollah is estimated to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars a year through the lobbying efforts of Lebanese expatriates.⁸¹ Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal are also known to be zones of Hezbollah fundraising in Africa,⁸² though Iran and Hezbollah have penetrated other African states as well. In 2004 a plane on its way to Lebanon from Benin crashed during takeoff,⁸³ and it was later discovered that two of the victims were carrying some US\$2 million in cash donated by West African states to finance Hezbollah.⁸⁴ Reports in 2011 revealed an extensive Hezbollah network operating in Gambia, directed by the country's President Yaya Jammeh. After greater scrutiny of the botched Iranian arms deal, the local newspaper *Freedom* asserted that Jammeh had been importing Iranian arms for resale to local Hezbollah affiliates for years, and had allegedly made \$100 million per year on such trafficking deals.⁸⁵

Iran has also used Africa as a site of contestation to work with al-Qa'ida. In 1993 the Sudanese government mediated discussions between Iran and al-Qa'ida with a view to setting aside their differences and uniting against the common enemies of Israel and the USA.⁸⁶ Algeria has accused Iran of training AQIM militants.⁸⁷ Iran has also been accused of training and channelling money to Houthi factions fighting the government in Yemen, using the city of Ginda, Eritrea, as a base.⁸⁸

More recently, Iran's presence as the pre-eminent Muslim country to forge ties with Africa has been severely hampered by Turkey's newfound interest in the continent. As a new cornerstone of its foreign policy, Ankara has taken on a particularly aggressive new developmental role in Somalia,⁸⁹ where it is working to undercut Tehran's perceived troublesome regional

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meddling there.⁹⁰ Elsewhere, increased discord within the Sudanese government has coincided with disparate student and professional protests around the country. Among the sources of tension in the government is Khartoum's relationship with Tehran, with the Sudanese foreign minister becoming increasingly critical of the country's close ties to Iran.⁹¹

Conclusion

The preceding investigation has shown that while ties between Iran and Africa have occurred in a number of transnational spaces, arguably the least understood is the sphere of security co-operation. One of Iran's tactics to establish a rapport with African states has been the employment of so-called global South speech, which, while evoking motifs of unity, equality and solidarity, camouflages Iran's unequal power advantage.

As African states' relationships with Iran continue to unfold, they would be wise to continue to approach Tehran—a likely continued global pariah—with caution. While Iran appears to be able to offer African states substantial assistance as regards foreign and military aid, the existence of alternative Muslim allies like Turkey, as well as Tehran's unreliable employment of global South speech, should suggest better options are likely to be found.

Notes

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