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The Late-comer Friend: Iranian Interests on the Horn of Africa

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ABSTRACT

In the competition among the great powers as well as Middle Eastern regional actors the Horn, especially with its background of the Red Sea, has become the scene of two regional overlapping rivalries, namely between Saudi Arabia/the United Arab Emirates/Egypt and Qatar/Turkey on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Iran, on the other. While Iran seems to be far from the Horn of Africa, its participation in the war in Yemen as well as its strategic position both along the land route and the maritime route of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative make it an unavoidable party. Iran is operating on the Horn of Africa to extend its strategic depth, resist the pressure of rival powers and counterbalance their activities, and increase its political and economic gains. Compared to other Gulf states, Tehran started its campaign relatively late, and Iran's economic potential is more limited as well. The lack of significant Shi'a presence in East Africa is also an obstacle for expansion. Therefore, Iran is still a secondary actor on the Horn of Africa.

KEYWORDS

Horn of Africa; Iran; strategic depth; resistance

1. Concept and methodology

The Horn of Africa – in spite of its ancient relations and trade route connection to the Arab Peninsula and through it to the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean – has been a relatively new territory of potential competition and conflict in the focus of international attention. While time and again its local wars and conflicts – the Somali and Ethiopian civil wars, the break-away of Somaliland from Somalia and of Eritrea from Ethiopia, the split of South Sudan from Sudan and the Darfur crisis – demanded international attention, in the past few years on the global level it was the rise of Jihadi insurgencies, piracy, the development of the maritime route of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (launched in 2013), while on the regional level Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen brought the Horn into a new limelight.

The perception of the world in regional terms has come to influence international relations following the Cold War, although several regional organisations – some more

effective, while others nominal only – had been established before. Geographical regions have been present all through human history, but their definition and delineation received a new importance and relevance with the imposition of the territorial state-system.

The Horn of Africa is no exception. While its definition can be different on the basis of different issues, its understanding may spread from the narrowest (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia) to a broader space, including the direct neighbours (Sudan, South Sudan and Kenya), but can even be spread to include other neighbouring countries as Uganda and Tanzania. In this paper the Horn of Africa is meant to include Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia. In this definition the authors followed the regional security complex (RSC) theory of Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver who claim that countries belong to one RSC if their security threats, challenges and perception are common.¹ In the Horn of Africa, regional conflicts, great power rivalry, Jihadi insurgences, the refugee and IDP crisis, and piracy have been the most important and internationally ‘visible’ threats and challenges that defined the borders of the RSC, thus stretching from Sudan to Kenya – and perhaps even further.

In this paper, we will examine the role of Iran in the competition for the Horn. Our main research questions are (1) What are the reasons behind the increasing Iranian interest in the Horn of Africa? (2) How has Iranian foreign policy tried to strengthen its position in the region? (3) And what are the limits and obstacles to a greater Iranian influence?

Our main hypothesis is that although Iranian presence has a long tradition in the Horn, in the new regional competition Tehran as a late-comer has much bigger ambitions than its real capabilities and instruments, and the efforts of Iran have reached only partial successes. In addition, it is also evident that the Horn of Africa is important for Tehran mainly not because of its individual value, but because of the matrix of interest and competition in which the Islamic Republic can weaken its rivals’ positions.

In our study we are relying on both primary (media articles, interviews) and secondary (analysis, books) sources. Seven semi-structured interviews were made on the topic in Ethiopia, Iran, Kenya and Washington D.C. between January 2020 and May 2023, even if not all of them are quoted in this paper.

2. The Horn of Africa and the Gulf

Culturally, historically and politically the Horn of Africa is split between Africa and the Arab world, as out of the above mentioned seven states three – Sudan, Somalia and Djibouti – are members of the League of Arab States, thus officially acknowledging their Arab identity. And while the Horn of Africa is usually not regarded as a sub-region belonging to the Middle East and North Africa, as Marsai and Szalai argue, the recent political competition on the Horn has increased the notion that the region is strongly connected to the Middle East and North Africa, is its borderland.² To the competition

¹B. Buzan and O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 4.

²V. Marsai and M. Szalai, ‘The ‘Borderlandization’ of the Horn of Africa in Relation to the Gulf Region, and the Effects on Somalia’, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38, (2021), pp. 1–20.

among the Gulf states – between Saudi Arabia/the United Arab Emirates/Egypt and Qatar/Turkey on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia and Iran on the other – the Horn has increasingly become a proxy battlefield.

Nevertheless, the importance of the Horn of Africa poses not only security implications to the different Persian Gulf states, including Iran. Besides local stability, security threats – the rise of piracy, the emergence of violent extremist organisations and local conflicts – threaten important trade routes and economic investments. This is further aggravated by the challenge posed by the increasing presence of external states and companies, both regional and global, who, encouraged by the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (among others), have started to compete for the control of strategic infrastructure in the region, e.g. the UAE and DP World in the Berbera Port and Bossaso, or the Turkish companies in the Mogadishu sea- and airport projects. The competing states on the basis of their own political interests tried to influence local actors to follow their approaches over different international and domestic issues – as in the diplomatic offensive against Iran in 2015-16, or during the Qatar crisis in 2017 – adding to the notion of the Horn becoming a proxy battlefield.³

3. The General Framework of Iran's Africa Policy

Iran's policy towards/on the Horn of Africa cannot be separated from its general foreign policy and, from its foreign policy towards the African continent in general, as in many cases the same causes prevail.

Apart from its general maxims – the export of the revolution as announced by Ayatollah Khomeini, the absolute need to maintain the revolutionary model of the *velayat-e faqih* and the Iranian responsibility for the Muslim community, the poor and the oppressed – Iranian foreign policy in the last decades has been defined by the two closely interrelated terms of *strategic depth* and *resistance*. These two define how Tehran turns towards the external world and shapes its relation with it.

In 2018 Major General Hossein Salami, of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard (IRGC), stated that Iran had successfully launched war against its enemies far from its geographic borders, and countries like Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as contested areas in Yemen, have become Iran's first line of defence. According to him, the IRGC managed to tie down its enemies on many, varied fronts.⁴ Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi, then head of the Iranian judiciary, now the President of the Islamic Republic, explained in 2019 that 'during the Iran-Iraq war, the south and west of Iran were the borders of the state (within which the war was waged), but today the Iranian border is what the Islamic Republic defines as its 'strategic depth'– Yemen and Africa are (our) strategic borders'.⁵ In this context, the Horn of Africa has become another region where the

³V. Marsai and M. Szalai, 'The 'Borderlandization' of the Horn of Africa in Relation to the Gulf Region, and the Effects on Somalia', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 38, (2021), pp. 5–10.

⁴M. Segall, 'Iran's Strategic Depth Expands from Yemen and Africa to the Mediterranean Coast', Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, (8 July 2019), available at: <https://jcpa.org/article/irans-strategic-depthexpands-from-yemen-and-africa-to-the-mediterranean-coast/>.

⁵Ibid.

‘strategic depth’ of Tehran’s foreign policy could be expanded. As an Iranian expert expressed, ‘the Horn of Africa is a perfect region where we can balance the influence of our strategic rivals.’⁶ A similar approach is put forward in the publication of Banafsheh Keynoush, who states that ‘Iran exported its revolution to Africa—mostly its Muslim and underserved communities—through soft power influence. Simultaneously, Iran worked with African leaders fighting to end Western colonialism across the continent.’⁷

The term *resistance* has been the basis of Iranian foreign policy in its looking for ways out from the international isolation and as such in its regional and wider global alignments, most notably the *Front of Resistance* including, besides Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Hamas. Yet, the term has gained a wider set of uses, when on the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Khamenei launched the second phase of the revolution, and such slogans came to be introduced as the *geography of resistance*, or *resistance economy*.

While *resistance* is usually understood to denote Iran’s stance towards the Western powers, and in that it strongly reminds of the classical Cold War rhetoric, all rivals of Iran, including many of the Arab Gulf states are included. This is the reason why the intervention of Arab Gulf states in the affairs of the Horn of Africa generated an increasing interest from Tehran.⁸ In 2019 Ayatollah Khamenei in a meeting with the leaders of the IRGC underlined the need to increase Iran’s presence in Africa and launched the *geography of resistance*,⁹ another new use of the term. While this was understood as a response to the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in 2018, the initiation of the second stage of the Islamic revolution could have also been an element.

4. The Latecomer Old Friend – Iran-Africa Relations After the Revolution

While Iran had had some limited relations to Africa through history, the Islamic Republic is a relatively late-comer to Africa and the Horn. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 introduced a new phase in Iran’s relations to the continent, when under the main foreign policy doctrine *neither east, nor west* after the revolution, fitting the Cold War environment, the African states and the framework of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) offered a way to getting out of the isolation put on the Islamic Republic after the Islamic Revolution. The Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) gave a new impetus as Tehran made Herculean efforts to build a united diplomatic front with the African states to condemn and isolate Iraq in regional and international fora such as the NAM, the

⁶Interview with an Iranian expert, Tehran, November 2022.

⁷B. Keynoush, ‘Revolutionary Iran’s Africa Policy’, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies Special Report, (June 2021), p. 9, available at: <https://kfcris.com/pdf/dd448fcd67b35ab48903bd18c6fcfd160d99d2290923.pdf>.

⁸J. Leonardo and M. Maria, ‘Iran and the Horn of Africa: the stakes and hurdles of building a strategic foothold’, Gulfif.org, (16 February 2023), available at: <https://gulfif.org/iran-and-the-horn-of-africa-thestakes-and-hurdles-of-building-a-strategic-foothold/>.

⁹K. Shahriar, ‘Iran’s terrorist network in Africa and its implications’, NCR Report, (2 December 2021), available at: <https://www.ncriran.org/en/special-reports/report-irans-terrorist-network-in-africaand-its-implications>.

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference until 2011) and the African Union (until 1999 the Organisation of African Unity).¹⁰

In the early 2000s by the *uni-polar moment of the United States* turning into a multi-polar international order, the African continent seemed to offer the same way out of the international isolation in the 2000s over Iran's nuclear program and the sanctions regime.

Yet, the Iranian engagement in Africa has not been either continuous or consequential, and has been shifting from presidency to presidency. Furthermore, in spite of some limited presence on the continent, this presence has shifted from country to country defined by the realities on the ground (in the given country) and by regional and external actors' presence there. This was most remarkable in the Horn of Africa.

When speaking about the differences among Iranian presidents' attention to Africa, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad definitely stands out, whose policies to Africa (and Latin America) were framed in his *third worldist* program, as demonstrated by his first foreign trip to Gambia to attend the summit of the African Union (AU) in 2009. During Ahmadinejad's presidencies, Tehran 'increasingly copied from the soft-power playbook of Western countries, using development assistance to build influence'.¹¹ In the wake of the president's meetings with African leaders, both the Iranian Red Crescent Society and the Imam Khomeini Relief Aid launched projects in Africa. Meanwhile, Al-Mustafa International University, a religious institution opened branches in a number of African countries (Table 1).¹²

Apart from the fluctuating Iranian attention to Africa, Iran has serious limits when trying to attract people in Africa. Iran lacks the necessary finances, and can invest much more limited resources than its competitors, thus, the Gulf Arab states can easily 'outbid' any Iranian offer. But Iran also has serious weaknesses in its soft power capabilities as in Africa neither its Iranianness, nor its Shia Islam has much attraction. While there are some – limited – Shia communities in Africa, there are practically no Iranian communities to rely on.¹³ (And *vice versa*, there are no Africans living and working in Iran, except for the descendants of some people of an African origin, mostly of slaves.)¹⁴

Its revolutionary message, however, did resonate in several places in Africa, mostly due to the different layers/elements it includes and could be referred to. When Ayatollah Khomeini launched the *export of the revolution*, he did not limit the Islamic

¹⁰B. Keynoush, 'Revolutionary Iran's Africa Policy, King Faisal Center for research and Islamic Studies', Special Report, (June 2021), p. 11, available at: <https://kfcris.com/pdf/dd448fcd67b35ab48903bd18c6f-cffd160d99d2290923.pdf>.

¹¹M. Segall, 'Iran's Strategic depth expands from Yemen and Africa to the Mediterranean Coast', Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, (8 July 2019), available at: <https://jcpa.org/article/irans-strategic-depthexpands-from-yemen-and-africa-to-the-mediterranean-coast/>.

¹²F. Montaruli, 'Al-Mustafa University: exporting the Islamic revolution, one scholarship at a time', Iranwire, (6 November 2021), available at: <https://iranwire.com/en/features/70715/>.

¹³There is practically no data available except for the AMAR of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran on the Iranians living outside the country, available at: <https://iranian.mfa.ir/files/mfairanian/Amar.pdf>. Their figures, however, are indicating that in most African countries the number of Iranians is not more than dozens at the most, except for South Africa, but even there it is not more than a couple of thousands.

¹⁴Slavery 'wasn't integrated into the history of Iran' and was present through two dynasties (only): the Qajar dynasty (1795-1925) and the early years of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979). They consider themselves Iranians. J. Kestler-D'Amours, 'We are Iranians': Rediscovering the history of African slavery in Iran', available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/we-are-iraniansrediscovering-history-african-slavery-iran>.

Table 1. Iranian Presidents and presidential visits to Africa.

Presidency	Africa policy	presidential visits
Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997)	modest economic opportunities	1991, 1996
Mohamed Khatami (1997–2005)		Sudan, Kenya , Uganda, South Africa, Tanzania 2004 – Sudan 2005 – Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Mali, Benin, Zimbabwe, Uganda
Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013)	prioritize relations with Africa at every organisational level	Gambia 2007 – Algeria 2009 – Comoros Islands, Djibouti , Kenya, Zimbabwe, Senegal 2021 – Zimbabwe, Uganda 2011 – Sudan
Hassan Rouhani (2013–2021)	'neglect'	No presidential visit –2015–2019–5 trips:
Mohamed Jawad Zarif		Tunisia, Uganda, Algeria, Rwanda, Botswana, Congo, Cameroon, Ethiopia , Zimbabwe, Mauritania Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Namibia
Ebrahim Raisi (2021–)	re-prioritizing Africa	Visit to South Africa announced for Nov 2022 and other African countries, also presidents of African countries invited to Tehran

revolution's message to the Shiite communities only, but by calling it an Islamic revolution he addressed the Muslim communities at large.

It is often overlooked that this term may have three different interpretations and thus may attract different audiences: (1) the Shiite character (as the underlying principle of the *velayat-e faqih* and the *hokumat-e eslami* put forward by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini), (2) revolutionary activism (in Shi'a Islam symbolised by Imam Hossein, as compared to the other traditional direction in Shi'a Islam, quietism, symbolised by his brother, Imam Hassan – but also activism in general without any religious connotation), and (3) third worldism (as deeply rooted in the post-colonial African continent and the Non-Aligned Movement, NAM). Under the pragmatism characterising any activity of the Islamic Republic, Iran could rely on and use the different elements to different scales to draw the attention and the sympathy of state and/or non-state actors in Africa (and elsewhere). In the coming paragraphs, these three elements will be analysed.

The presence of Shia Islam in Africa has been rather limited, and mostly farther away from direct Iranian reach. On the side of Iran, connection to Shiite communities has never been an exclusive aim: Iran was looking for partners among any state, sub-state or non-state actor which could help it in achieving its aims. While Shiite communities obviously were high on the agenda, especially in sub-Saharan Africa – due to the small numbers of Shia communities, the lack of historical experience with them, the strong presence of Christianity, and the different Sufi and animist practices – the definition of who is a real Shiite may be difficult. Yet, apart from the Arab-population in the northern part of the continent,¹⁵ two regions in Africa can still be pointed to where Shiite communities live: East Africa and West Africa. (There has

¹⁵Even among the North-African Arab states only historical Egypt can be referred to as having had a Shiite statehood, the Fatimids.

Table 2. Ratio of Shia Muslims within the Muslim population.

	Sunni (%)	Shia (%)	'just a Muslim'
Djibouti	77	2	8
Ethiopia	68	2	23
Kenya	73	8	8

'Tolerance and Tension: Islam and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa', The basis of the data PEW, (15 April 2010).

also been a third specific Shiite community, on which Iran has tried to rely on with limited success: the Lebanese expatriates living in Africa. Their number, however, is also limited and they also have an Arab identity).

The biggest communities have been present in East Africa (but outside the Horn), since the sixteenth century. Not only are they separated from direct Iranian reach by geographic distance, but they follow different Shiite doctrines, the Ismaili or Sevener (mostly under the influence of the Nizari Ismaili Agha Khans), the Ahmadiyya and some the Twelver Shia. These communities have been more the result of Shia migration – first from the Sultanate of Oman, later from India – than of Iran's efforts at converting the local population.

The other relatively sizeable Shiite Muslim communities on the continent live in West Africa, in and around Nigeria, however, their presence is mostly the result of the Islamic Revolution in Iran.¹⁶ Their number is put at tens of thousands in Nigeria and some more in neighbouring Ghana and Senegal. Yet, their Shiite belief may be rather related to the Shiite religious commemorations and practices than any deep knowledge of Shiite teachings. Furthermore, Shiite communities may face the – shifting – challenge by the lack of a historic legacy of co-existence, thus, the local Sunni population look upon the Shiites with suspicion and even may consider 'their rituals insulting'. Since they are usually constituting a small fraction of the Muslim community, the emergence of the Boko Haram has become a real threat (Table 2).

The revolutionary character of the Islamic Revolution attracted sympathy in post-colonial Africa, especially when the Islamic Republic joined the Non-Aligned Movement in 1979, thus its policy of rejecting great power influence, its *neither east nor west* political doctrine, and the most recent *resistance* slogan has been an important commitment. Having undergone a decolonisation process, with the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement, trying to stay out of the Cold War rivalry of the two super power led blocs, the message of the revolution in Iran was accepted well. Yet, it was President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who stepped up with the program of expanding relations with third world countries, especially in Africa and Latin America.¹⁷ And when Ahmadinejad demanded equality with global powers, e.g. by writing letters to the world leaders, he attracted African attention. Especially when he added that 'extensive and profound cooperation between Iran and Africa will go a long way to modify international relations and regional balance'.

¹⁶The first pro-Iranian groups and, at a later date, Shiite groups emerged in Nigeria and in other parts of West Africa in the 1980s as a result of such contacts with Iran', quoted by F. Müller, 'Shiites in Nigeria', (12 March 2015), available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/nigerian-shiites-brave-terror-threat/a-18890991>.

¹⁷For a more detailed analysis see F. Pirsalami, 'Third Worldism and Ahmadinejad's foreign policy', available at: https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/irfa/v4i2/f_0029608_23961.pdf.

Though in the present phase of the development of international relations and the narratives of a new world order the terminology of the *non-aligned* has come to be replaced by *the global South*, it has already been mentioned that a Non-Aligned Movement 2.0 can be expected, in which Iran will definitely see a possibility for itself.¹⁸

The efforts of Tehran seemed to bear fruit as in 2023 there are 42 Iranian embassies and consulates in Africa,¹⁹ and 17 African embassies and consulates in Iran.²⁰ However, there is a striking discrepancy: while the Islamic Republic has embassies and consulates in the non-Arab states of the Horn of Africa, presently it has none in the Arab states, except for Libya and Morocco. Yet, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania and Tunisia still maintain a diplomatic presence in the Islamic Republic. From the Horn, only Kenya is represented by a mission in Iran. (It has to be noted, however, that the presence and number of Iranian embassies have also shifted not only in Africa, but also within the Arab world.)

While state-to-state relations between the Islamic Republic and the different states of Africa have been shifting according to the domestic political changes both in Iran and in the African states, as well as by the regional powers' and the global actors' interests in the region, non-state institutions, especially those providing healthcare or education, could have more success in raising support for the Islamic Republic. The Iranian Red Crescent Society, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, the Bonyad-e Mostazafan, the Jihad-e Sazandegi or the al-Mustafa University are key institutions reaching out to the public, yet, even their success seems to be limited by their being Iranian. As mentioned earlier, the Iranian Red Crescent Society constructed a series of medical clinics in Africa, starting with the one in Niamey, Niger in 1997, then in the border area with Nigeria, where there is a relatively large concentration of Shiites. But clinics and medical centres have been established in Mali, Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, and some others, too, for other - non-Shia, or even non-Muslim - populations.²¹

5. The Horn of Africa in Iranian foreign policy thinking

Iran's relations and activities on the Horn of Africa fit well into the above analysed relations to the continent at large. Most noteworthy is the interplay of local, regional

¹⁸J. Traub, 'Cold War 2.0 is ushering in nonalignment 2.0', (9 July 2022), available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/09/nonalignment-us-china-cold-war-ukraine-india-global-south/>.

¹⁹Angola, Benin, Burundi, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Central Africa, Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, **Eritrea**, **Ethiopia**, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Conakry, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, **Kenya**, Lesotho, Liberia, **Libya**, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, **Morocco**, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe. (The states of the Horn of Africa are presented in **bold** letters, while the Arab states in **bold italics**.) Source: Embassies and consulates, 'Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs', available at: <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/viewpage/14765>.

²⁰**Algeria**, Benin, Burundi, **Egypt**, Guinea, Ivory Coast, **Kenya**, **Libya**, Mali, **Mauritania**, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, **Tunisia**, Uganda, Zimbabwe. (The states of the Horn of Africa are presented in **bold** letters, while the Arab states in **bold italics**.) Source: 'Embassies and consulates in the Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Foreign Affairs', available at: <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/catalogsearch/78>.

²¹N. Rodman, 'Iran in all the wrong places: the Islamic Republic's shadowy presence in west Africa', (11 March 2021), available at: <https://www.hoover.org/research/iran-all-wrong-places-islamicrepublics-shadowy-presence-west-africa>.

and external actors' interests and activities, both on the state and non-state levels. There has been a meaningful change in the external actors playing a role on the Horn: during the Cold War they included the neighbouring states – Ethiopia and Kenya, which in this paper we have included among the Horn states themselves –, the former colonisers (Britain and France) and the superpowers (the US and the Soviet Union). The relationship between the Gulf States and the Horn started to develop in the early 1960s, following similar fast changing dynamics: increasing Pan-Arabism by Gamal Abdel Nasser and the spread of communism represented by certain Arab states emerged as a threat both for Iranian Shah Reza Pahlavi and Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie, who made countermeasures to contain the spread of both ideologies. Some years later, Iran joined Saudi Arabia and others in supplying arms to the authoritarian Somali President, Siad Barre in the 1977–1978 Ogaden War against the communist Ethiopian regime.²²

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iraq-Iran war, Tehran was looking for support and a way to break out of the isolation, a determinant element in Iranian foreign policy to this day. Following the end of the Cold War, the unipolar moment of the US prevented Iran from increasing its influence on the Horn. Nevertheless, in the new millennium, Tehran – as it was demonstrated in the previous chapter – launched a new diplomatic campaign in Africa. This coincided with the increase of the importance of connectivity and maritime routes all around the world. The Horn of Africa and the Red Sea have gained a special momentum, further strengthened by the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, in which Iran has a specific place.

Thus, Iran has been a latecomer in the great power competition on the Horn of Africa. Nevertheless, in the last decade it made significant efforts to build up its footprint in the region. Yet, its options have been shifting. The most important bridgehead for the Iranian expansion was Sudan. When Omar al-Bashir came to power in 1989, both Sudan and Iran developed a strategic partnership through economic and military agreements. Hassan al-Turabi, then supporter and the ideological 'founding father' of the regime, had been highly influenced by the concepts of the Islamic Revolution. Two years later Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani visited Khartoum and agreed to support Sudan with free oil and arms. In the early 1990s, the members of the IRGC participated in the training of Islamist militants from Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and the Gulf. By 2007 Tehran became the main supplier of weapons to Sudan, while Sudan was accused of channelling weapons to Iran's regional allies, namely the Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.²³

The other partner of Iran was Eritrea. Because of Asmara's proxy war against Ethiopia – including the support to the al-Shabaab Jihadist group in Somalia – it experienced an international isolation similar to that of the Islamic Republic. In 2008, Eritrea tried

²²M. Segall, 'Iran's strategic depth expands from Yemen and Africa to the Mediterranean coast', Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, (8 July 2019), available at: <https://jcpa.org/article/irans-strategic-depthexpands-from-yemen-and-africa-to-the-mediterranean-coast/>.

²³M. Darwitch, 'Saudi-Iranian rivalry from the Gulf to the Horn of Africa: changing geographies and infrastructures', Project on Middle East Political Science, (2019), available at: <https://pomeps.org/saudi-iranian-rivalry-from-the-gulf-to-the-horn-of-africa-changinggeographies-and-infrastructures-1>.

to forge a strategic relationship with Washington's and its allies' regional rivals, and Iran seemed a perfect choice. 'Iran found in Eritrea's isolation an opportunity to establish a strategic foothold in the Horn of Africa with direct access to the Red Sea as well. (...) Eritrea also provided a maritime link between Iran and Syria by allowing Iranian naval forces moving from the Indian Ocean through the Red Sea and Suez Canal to the Mediterranean'.²⁴ The East African country also provided a logistic background to Iran's anti-piracy operation. Since 2008, Iranian warships - protecting Iranian commercial shipping - conducted anti-piracy operations off the coast of Somalia by using Eritrea's port of Assab.²⁵

With other partners, Iran was less successful. In Djibouti, Iran expressed its interest to establish a military base, but it has never materialised. In Somalia, Iran maintained good relations with the Somali government without any concrete results.

6. Iran-Horn Relations After 2015

In the past decade, the room of manoeuvre for Iran on the Horn has been defined by two sets of rivalries: on the one hand, between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and on the other - to a lesser extent from the Iranian point of view - between Saudi Arabia/the United Arab Emirates/Egypt and Qatar/Turkey. In this context, 2015 represented a turning point in the Iran-Horn relations. The war in Yemen increased regional competition and quickly shifted into a proxy war between the Saudi-led coalition and the Iran-backed Houthi groups.

The escalation of war in Yemen provided an opportunity for Tehran by diverting Saudi attention and capabilities from other fields of proxy war (Iraq, Syria). While direct Iranian military presence in Yemen is questionable, several ships have been spotted delivering weapons to the Houthis in Yemen through Horn ports. And *vice versa*, as the Houthis have progressed from sufficiency to export, they are/may smuggle Iranian arms sent to them to Somalia, or elsewhere.²⁶

On the other hand, the conflict limited the space of manoeuvre for Iran. The war encouraged and made it possible for Riyadh - and, to a lesser extent, for Abu Dhabi - to launch an aggressive diplomatic campaign against Tehran. To ignite anti-Iranian sentiments, Saudi Arabia exploited the breaking into his embassy in Tehran by the mob in reaction to the execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr in Saudi Arabia. The Arab countries played it safe: Riyadh and Abu Dhabi provided financial aid and investment to their partners in the Horn of Africa to encourage them stopping their collaboration with Iran. For instance, Saudi Arabia offered US\$50 million to Somalia in January 2016, when it cut its diplomatic relations with Tehran.²⁷ The move of Sudan was more painful for Iran. The first signs of challenges appeared in 2014, when Khartoum expelled Iranian diplomats and shut down its cultural centres arguing that they were

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶N. Al-Tamimi, 'Iran supplying weapons to Horn of Africa via Yemen', Al-Mashareq, (3 September 2020), available at: https://almashareq.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_am/features/2020/09/03/feature-01.

²⁷'Somalia received Saudi aid the day it cut ties with Iran: document', Reuters, (16 January 2016).

used to spread Shiite ideology. Two years later, it also cut its diplomatic relations with Tehran.²⁸

The Iran-Eritrea ‘honeymoon’²⁹ also proved short-lived. In 2015, Asmara joined the Saudi-led coalition. In the meantime, the UAE started to construct a military base in Assab in 2015 as a logistic background for its operations in Yemen.³⁰ In addition, the East African state received further military aid from the UAE. Last, but not least, Saudi Arabia signed a military and defence agreement with Djibouti in April 2017 aiming to build a military base there. Abu Dhabi followed a similar strategy in the Berbera port, Somaliland and Bossaso, Puntland, investing hundreds of millions of USD in the infrastructure and, in Somaliland, in a military base.³¹

The limits of Tehran’s capabilities to react to these challenges are obvious. Amid the international controversy over the Iranian nuclear program, especially after the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Iran lacks adequate financial, economic, cultural and diplomatic resources. And in the shadow of international sanctions even potential partners are wary of maintaining relations with Iran. Thus, its rivals destroyed most of the past achievements of Iran within months, as Tehran did not have capabilities to compete with the oil-rich Arab Gulf states, which could thus easily jeopardise Iran’s position in the region.

7. Iran as a Troublemaker?

Probably the most noteworthy and successful element under the Iranian strategic culture of resistance has been the build-up of a network of armed militias, typically groups which were labelled as terrorist organisations by other powers. Besides the state-actor based Front of Resistance, this network organised and maintained by the IRGC Quds Force and especially attributed to General Qassem Soleymani, is usually considered to operate in the Middle East as an outstretched arm of Iranian defence and regional policy. The exact extent of the Iranian influence over one or the other militia within the network may differ from time to time and case to case, just as the Iranian provision of financial and military assistance. Nevertheless, the network has an important role in Iran’s deterrence and forward defence policy, and provides a certain strategic depth to the Islamic Republic.

Therefore, it is not accidental that Iran has been accused with the support of terrorist organisations in the Horn of Africa.

First, in 2006, the UN Somalia-Eritrea Monitoring Group reported that Iran provided weapons to the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in Mogadishu, which consisted of armed militias, including al-Shabaab. According to the document, ‘there were two Iranians in Dhusamareeb engaged in matters linked to uranium in exchange for

²⁸‘Sudan cuts diplomatic ties with Iran’, Reuters, (4 January 2016).

²⁹J. Mazzucco, ‘Iran and the Horn of Africa: the stakes and hurdles of building a strategic foothold’, Gulfif.org, (16 February 2023).

³⁰M. Darwitch, ‘Saudi-Iranian Rivalry from the Gulf to the Horn of Africa: Changing Geographies and Infrastructures’, Project on Middle East Political Science, (2019).

³¹Ibid.

arms for ICU.³² In addition, the report stated that in July 2006, the ICU sent approximately 720 fighters to Lebanon to fight alongside Hezbollah against the Israeli military. 'The Somali force was personally selected by ICU Hizbul Shabaab (Youth Movement) leader Aden Hashi Farah 'Eyrow'. One of the criteria of the selection process was the individuals' combat experience, which might include experience in Afghanistan. Only about 80 members of the initial force returned to Mogadishu after the fighting'.³³ Iran rejected the accusation. The credibility of the report raised debates even among scholars. Whether it was true or not, after more than two decades, there is no sign of meaningful collaboration between the Somali extremists and the Hezbollah.

The same is true for the Iran-al-Shabaab collaboration. Many argue that Tehran support the Somali jihadists,³⁴ yet, there are many speculations and only a limited number of factual evidence available. While Iranian-supplied weapons are reaching Somalia and are used in the civil war, it is almost impossible to establish if their original destination was Somalia, or they were sold by Yemeni groups and smuggled to Somalia, or their original destination would have been Yemen through Somalia, but they got stuck in East Africa.³⁵ Interviewees also rejected the idea that Iran can play a significant role in supporting al-Shabaab.³⁶ As one of them emphasised, 'Iran is playing tricky games, but in the Somali [clan-based] society, it would be hard to conduct such operations without notice. And there is not any news about it'.³⁷ The authors do not state that there *is a zero possibility* that Iran provides weapons or other assistance to al-Shabaab, it cannot be proved by the available information. In addition, considering the efforts of Tehran to demonstrate itself as an alternative and reliable partner for countries in the Horn of Africa, providing support to the common enemy of all East African states seems to be an act with a limited potential but a huge risk and costs.

Another element of international sensitivity regarding Iran has been the nuclear issue. There has been pieces of news time and again regarding Iranian plans to get uranium (and cobalt) from Africa, e.g. the long closed down uranium mine in Congo, but these have not been substantiated and there was no follow-up detected.³⁸ Thus, the news of the smuggling of uranium from Somalia to Iran raised concern. It appeared in the report of the SEMG in 2006, and in a letter of the Federal Government of Somalia to the US in 2017. Nevertheless, there is no hard evidence to prove that it

³²Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia pursuant to Security Council resolution 1676' Un.org, (22 November 2006), p. 22.

³³Ibid., p. 23.

³⁴For instance, M. Fraser-Rahim, 'In Somalia, Iran is replicating Russia's Afghan strategy', Foreign Policy, (17 July 2022).

³⁵N. Al-Tamimi, 'Iran supplying weapons to Horn of Africa via Yemen', Al-Mashareq, (3 September 2020).

³⁶Interview with a Somali scholar Nairobi, (January 2020); Interview with a Western expert Nairobi, (January 2022); interview with a Somali journalist, Washington D.C., (May 2023).

³⁷Interview with a Somali journalist, Washington D.C., (May 2023).

³⁸'Iran's plot to mine uranium in Africa', NCR Iran Nuclear News, (6 August 2006).

actually happened, and it seems to be no more than speculation which can be used to increase US attention and presence in the Horn of Africa.³⁹

8. Perspectives

With the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the recent months have brought significant changes in the Persian Gulf. It is yet to be seen how far the Iranian-Saudi deal is going and what influence it will have on Iran's options on the Horn, and on its relations with other Arab states in particular. The Saudi-Qatar reconciliation can also contribute to the stability in the Horn of Africa, since it is evident that 'the export of the rivalry led to more instability in the region ... [and] while Horn states internalised Gulf rivalries ... the Gulf states did not show such tendencies ...'⁴⁰

At the moment Iran can count on and maintain relations with the non-Arab states of the Horn, especially Ethiopia, which at the moment is also relatively isolated on the Horn and has to face Egypt in the Nile water controversy, where Egypt is trying to garner not only Arab, but also non-Arab African support. Ethiopia's differences with its other neighbours, first of all with Sudan and Somalia, make Ethiopia a central part of a larger theatre for Iranian power projection beyond its border.⁴¹ The outbreak of the civil war in Tigray in November 2020 provided an excellent opportunity for Iran to strengthen its Ethiopian relations. Tehran took advantage of the fact that Western powers made huge, sometimes biased pressure on the government of Abiy Ahmed to cease hostility. In the mid-2021, according to a photo from Semera airport and satellite images Iran likely provided Mohajer-6 drones to Addis Ababa for the fight against the Tigray rebels.⁴² The Iranian deployment could have signalled another element of international failure to stand by the Ethiopian government, namely that Israel 'reportedly turned down requests by Addis Ababa to supply Kamikaze drones ... but the IRGC-affiliated *Tasnim News Agency* says the Mohajer-6 spotted in the African country resembles drones Iran delivered to the *Hashd-al-Shaabi* or Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq and to Venezuela.'⁴³

The increasing cooperation of the littoral states of the Red Sea and the establishment of the Red Sea Council has provided a further incentive to Iranian-Ethiopian cooperation: Egypt is trying to keep Ethiopia out of the Red Sea Council with the claim that Ethiopia is not a littoral state. Iran, in spite of its increasingly ambitious plans on the high seas, still has primary interests within the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman and the Indian Ocean, and the maritime route through the Bab el-Mandeb

³⁹'Somalia asks for US help to stop militant selling uranium to Iran', Iraninfo, (2 September 2017).

⁴⁰V. Marsai and M. Szalai, 'The 'borderlandization' of the Horn of Africa in relation to the Gulf region, and the effects on Somalia', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, (2021), p. 6.

⁴¹B. Keynoush, 'Iran to remain a key ally to Ethiopia', MEI, (26 January 2022), available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-remain-key-partner-ethiopia-tigray-conflict?fbclid=IwAR3LdLJ2Cv2JfDvETJtUlEI-bRSV6nygai79Ge80N2Ql4YouYpu2iDeuDuo>.

⁴²J. Binnie, 'Ethiopia may have Iranian UAVs', *Janes*, (18 August 2021), available at: <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/newsdetail/ethiopia-may-have-iranian-uavs>.

⁴³Ibid.

and the Red Sea to the Eastern Mediterranean may still be a function of Egyptian-Iranian relations. (It should not be forgotten that the other end of the Red Sea, the exit to the Mediterranean is the Suez Canal, under the authority of Egypt.) The newly launched Iranian program aiming at presenting Iranian power to the world and the domestic audience, is still a more symbolic than real power projection.⁴⁴ The establishment of the Saudi-led Red Sea and Gulf of Aden coalition has further narrowed the possibilities of Tehran.⁴⁵

For the Horn of Africa it is increasingly true that Iranian soft power is very limited:⁴⁶ there are no Shi'a communities to mention and there are no Iranian expatriate communities either.

From a religious point of view it is noteworthy that the Sunni and the Sufi practices of Islam are prevailing making any Shia 'intrusion' into the religious landscape practically impossible. This, in a way adds to 'Iran's insufficient understanding of Africa'.⁴⁷ While there are practically no Iranian expat communities living in the Horn of Africa, there are great numbers of Arabs, and some of the Horn countries (Somalia, Djibouti, Sudan) identify themselves as Arabs (and not Africans)⁴⁸ and are members in the Arab League. This, and the financial means of the Gulf Arab states give them a practically unsurpassable advantage over Iran (Table 3).

Table 3. The number of Iranians living on the Horn of Africa⁴⁹.

Country	Ethiopia	Eritrea	Somalia	Djibouti	Kenya	Sudan	South Sudan
Number of Iranians	12	0	0	0	70	225	0

⁴⁴The fact that two Iranian warships, the IRIS Dena and the IRINS Makran have been sailing the high seas and have docked e. g. in Rio de Janeiro in the beginning of 2023, are supporting this. C. Atlamazoglu, 'For the 2nd year in a row, Iran is sailing its biggest warship around the world to show off its growing navy', (27 January 2023), available at: <https://www.businessinsider.com/irans-biggestwarship-makran-is-on-mission-around-the-world-2023-1>.

⁴⁵'Saudi Arabia and 7 countries form council to secure Red Sea and Gulf of Aden', Arab News (6 January 2020), available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1609121/saudi-arabia>.

⁴⁶'When it comes to the Horn of Africa ... there isn't much fertile ideological ground for Iranian maneuvering and influence-building ...'. Calferio, Giorgio - Čok, Corrado; 'Understanding the Iranian influence in the Horn of Africa', Inside Arabia, (5 August 2020).

⁴⁷B. Keynough, 'Iran to remain a key ally to Ethiopia', MEI, (26 January 2022), available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-remain-key-partner-ethiopia-tigray-conflict?fbclid=IwAR3LdLJ2Cv2jfDvETJtuIEI-bRSV6ny6ai79Ge80N2Ql4YouYpu2iDeuDu0>.

⁴⁸'Somalis do not consider themselves as Africans, but Arabs, and this crystallizes in the so-called 'national pride' and the feeling of superiority - and sometimes contempt - toward neighbouring people, mainly those of Bantu origin'. V. Marsai and M. Szalai, 'The 'borderlandization' of the Horn of Africa in relation to the Gulf region, and the effects on Somalia', Journal of Borderlands Studies, (2021).

⁴⁹Based on the data of AMAR of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran on the Iranians living outside the country.

9. Conclusion

Although Iran has long-time relations with Africa, Tehran is still a latecomer playing a secondary role there only. Nevertheless, the Horn of Africa (together with the African continent as a whole) provides a strategic depth to Iran in its efforts to balance and at times to break out of the international isolation. While its involvement – if not the concrete presence – in Yemen cannot be denied, Iran's presence on the Horn of Africa is securitised, and 'frequently overstated and exaggerated'.⁵⁰ Tehran simply does not have the economic capacities it rivals have, and the lack of Shia and Iranian communities strip it of the possibility of important soft power tools. Iran's shifting and relatively limited engagement – especially its still harsh anti-imperialist rhetoric and the non-implementation of many MoUs (i.e. empty promises) – has not been able to dramatically shift the power relations between Tehran and its competitors in the Horn.

Disclosure statement

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⁵⁰G. Calfiero and C. Čok, 'Understanding the Iranian influence in the Horn of Africa', *Inside Arabia*, (5 August 2020).