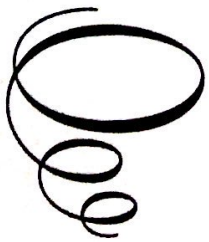
Emerging African Geopolitics:

In the Shadow of Conflicts

Edited by
Huriye Yıldırım Çinar
and Ferdi Güçyetmez

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword viii

Preface xi

Chapter 1 1
Africa's Geopolitical Arena: Unpacking Strategic Rivalries
Dr. Huriye YILDIRIM ÇİNAR & Ferdi GÜÇYETMEZ

Chapter 2 22
Africa, Southeast Asia and Pacific Islands in a New World Order: Theory and Trans-Regional Architectural Synthesis
Dr. Artyom A. GARIN

Chapter 3 36
Can North Africa Become a Possible Saviour of Afro-Eurosian Energy Security
Dr. Sina KISACIK

Chapter 4 56
African Maritime Geopolitics and Ports Amidst Changing Indo-Pacific Dynamics
Simran WALIA

Chapter 5 67
Border Disputes and Terrorism in Africa
Dr. Ahmet Yusuf ÖZDEMIR

Chapter 6 80
Navigating Opportunities and Risks in Africa
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Asena BOZTAŞ

Chapter 7 98
India and Africa: Multidimensional Relations on the Continent
Bharat SINGH

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Chapter 8 120
The United States and Africa: Security or Competition?
Dr. Erdal BAYAR

Chapter 9 132
Russia and Africa: Re-seeking Influence
Dr. Sami YILDIRIM

Chapter 10 147
Türkiye and Africa: Old Friends, New Alliances
Dr. Çağlar ÖZER

Chapter 11 159
Germany as the Pioneer of Europe in Africa
Dr. Gökhan Alptekin

Chapter 12 170
Cooperation Potential Between Asia and Africa: The Case of BRICS
Dr. Aybala Lale KAHRAMAN

Chapter 13 184
Israel and Africa: Tel Aviv's Africa Dilemma
Dr. Tuba TAŞLICALI KOÇ

Chapter 14 198
Iran's Shiite Public Diplomacy Towards Africa and Its Regional Influence
Prof. Dr. Hasan OKTAY & Dr. Keisuke WAKIZAKA

Chapter 15 210
Beyond Borders: Uti Possidetis (Juris) and African Geopolitical Narrative
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Adem ÖZER

Chapter 16 223
Arabian Peninsula and Sub-Saharan Africa States Relations: A Factual and Theoretical Inquiry
Dr. Özdemir AKBAL

Chapter 17 234
France and Africa: From Colonialism to Independence
Dr. Ramzi BENDEBKA

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Chapter 18 250
The United Kingdom's Africa Policy in the Global System
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sibel AKGÜN
& Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dilşad TÜRKMENOĞLU KÖSE

Chapter 19 262
China and Africa: New Partnership and Investments
Göktuğ ÇALIŞKAN

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CHAPTER 14

IRAN'S SHIITE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TOWARDS AFRICA AND ITS REGIONAL INFLUENCE

HASAN OKTAY[1]
KEISUKE WAKIZAKA[2]

Introduction

While the African continent had traditionally been known as "the continent of poverty, starvation and conflicts" in world politics, its importance is increasing in geopolitics and economy due to the existence of rich natural resources, drastic development of economics and rapid population growth. Especially, not only Western states but also new powers such as China, India, Türkiye and Iran began to consolidate their relations with Africa and are undertaking large-scale projects.

However, when the literature on international relations of Africa is taken into consideration, many of them focus on African countries' relations with the Western States, China, Japan and Russia whereas those with Türkiye, India, Brazil, and Iran are less analyzed in the academic world. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in Iran's political structure has resulted in a paucity of information regarding the country's foreign policy towards Africa. In particular, there is a dearth of knowledge about Iran's public-cultural diplomacy and its regional influence on the international public. Additionally, there is a significant discrepancy between the existing literature on African studies and Iran's foreign policy. In light of these considerations, this article seeks to address the aforementioned deficiencies and contribute to the

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scholarship on both Iranian foreign policy and African countries' international relations.

This article will address two key questions: firstly, how Iran has implemented public diplomacy towards Africa since 1979, and secondly, how this has influenced the region. The current study proposes that the ideological foundations of Iran's African policies are Islamism (especially Shiism) and anti-colonialism. However, it also asserts that Iran is behaving in a manner consistent with imperialist practices in Africa. Furthermore, it suggests that Iran is utilising such elements actively with a view to increasing its influence on the local population. Finally, it maintains that Iran's policy towards Africa through the use of taqiyyah (to hide Shiite belief in order to continue activities in a Sunni area, as in this case) has resulted in the dissemination of a negative image of Iran in the region. The article employs a critical methodology and is based on qualitative research methods due to the unavailability of primary resources about Iranian foreign policy. Consequently, the utilisation of secondary resources and internet news agencies will be employed. The data will be employed in both an empirical and a qualitative analysis in order to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning behind the actions in question.

The Ideological Basis of Iran's Foreign Policy Towards Africa

Iran, defining itself as a Shiite-Islamist state after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, adopts a strategy of spreading Shiism all over the world and bringing Shiite groups to power, especially in the Middle East. Moreover, it is obvious that Tehran is trying to position itself as the spiritual center of Shiites in the world (Hafeziniya, 2017, 28-29). The aim of ensuring the sense of belonging of Shiite groups in the world to a center is related to Iran's secret agenda because the mind of the Persian Empire maintains its place in Iran's state mind (Hafeziniya, 2017, 159-160). The idea also deeply affects the state's current foreign policy orientations. Iran's foreign policy approach towards this goal, as stated before, is to spread the Islamic Revolution beyond the Iranian borders; in other words, to export an Iranian-style Islamist regime. When it comes to Iran's policy of exporting Islamist regime, the first geopolitical area that comes to our mind is the Middle East, because the Iranian government regards the region as its immediate surroundings and is trying to create a "Shiite Crescent" by exporting Islamic revolution to the states in the area (Avcı, 2022, 117-119). The intention here is to convey that the Middle East is at the core of Tehran's Shiism-based

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strategy. However, Iran's ambition, shaped by the vision of Persian nationalism, extends beyond the Middle East. Consequently, Iran is attracting attention with its ambitious attitudes in the regional leadership competition in the Middle East and is positioning itself as the natural leader of the region (Hafeziniya, 2017, 240). In addition to aspiring to regional leadership, Iran pursues a foreign policy designed to achieve this goal. This policy is directed at both continental and global levels. Nevertheless, it is evident that Iran's economic capacity is insufficient to achieve these ambitious goals.

Iran considers the Middle East and the African continent as an important geopolitical area for its interests. In this context, it is probable to state that Africa has an important role in Iran's imperialist ideal. Thus, Iran is trying to spread Shiism in Africa on the one hand; it is seeking ways to bring Shia groups to power by supporting them on the other hand (Şeker, 2017: 87). Besides, Iran actively uses also anti-colonialism and anti-Americanism in order to win African states' sympathy (Şeker, 2017, 90-91). The existing regime of Iran defines itself as a protector of oppressed peoples of Islam all around the world. In this context, Iran regards the African continent exploited by the Western states as an important area for its strategy against the Western states, Israel and Saudi Arabia and actively uses the discourses of "the Third World" and "the oppressed-exploited" (Chehabi, 2016, 687-709). Iran's anti-American discourse has led to Tehran being perceived as a powerful actor in the struggle against imperialism among Africans. Consequently, Iran has gradually augmented the number of its embassies in Africa. In this context, Iran is intensifying its cooperation with regional states, particularly Muslim states, through the Non-Aligned Movement. This is also in line with China's discourse of a "Multipolar World Order", which is opposed to the USA, a situation that has become prevalent in the 21st century. Iran is therefore attempting to assume a leading role in opposing the United States in Africa and to develop cooperation with China, whose influence in Africa is increasing. In this manner, Iran employs universal values such as anti-colonialism and Islam as instruments to advance its imperialist objectives in Africa, particularly in opposition to Western states.

Iran's Cultural Diplomacy as a Soft Power in Africa: The Promotion of Shia Culture

Iran has put efforts to effectuate Islamic revolutions in Africa by using soft power and the discourses of Islamic unity and brotherhood. The regional

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demographical and cultural structure has great importance for Iran in determining arguments to use in Africa. Thus, while Iran puts emphasis on ethnic and cultural components in Sub-Saharan Africa in which the Christians constitute a considerable part of the population, it attaches importance to sectarian affiliations and Sufi orders in Northern Africa where Islam is a dominant religion. For instance, Iran is able to perform its activities in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt, where the tribes and dynasties descended from Ahl-ul Bayt have been dominant for a long time, by bringing the Sufi tradition closer to Shiite doctrines (Osman, 2018). To illustrate, Iran regards the Maliki sect in Morocco, Ibadi movement in Tunisia (Moradi, 2019, 287; Jahangiri and Ismaili, 2012, 33-34) and Tijani, Seussi and Qadiri orders in North, West and East Africa (Aydın, 2020, 19-20) as an instrument serving Shiite expansionism.

Furthermore, it is known that Tehran also actively benefits from Hausa language, which is spoken by 48 million people in Central and West Africa. Indeed, Iran initiated the satellite broadcasting service of Hausa TV for Africa in 2017. The Iranian government is actively making use of Persian culture in the region due to the existence of migrants from Iran. Similarly, Shirazi communities in Tanzania and Zanzibar Island and Khoja Shiite Ithna Asheriyah communities in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and the other East African states (Fığlalı, 2019) also have an important role in the conversion of Sunni Muslims to Shiism.

Sufi orders widespread in North Africa is evaluated as an important tool to increase Iranian influence. Morocco, one of the countries where the doctrines of Sufism and Ahl-ul Bayt is the most dominant in Northwest Africa, was the source of the spread of Sufi doctrines to West Sahra, Mauritania and West Africa (Adib, 2013). Therefore, Marrakech, which is the religious center in the region, plays a critical role in Iran's policies of exportation of revolution.

Iran has made an effort to establish close relations also with Ibadi movement compact in North Africa. Because the theological structure of Ibadi Islam is similar to Shiism and the movement has sympathy to Ahl-ul Bayt, it is comparatively easy for Iran to establish close relations with the movement (Lewicki, 2019). In this context, Iran is attempting to carry out its activities in Tunisia from the perspectives of both Ibadi Islam and Shiism. Shiism has recently spread in Gafsa, Sfax and Gabes in Tunisia, whereTunisians claim that Gabes resembles the city of Qom in Iran because of the building that Shia Muslims can worship (Jahangiri&Ismaili, 2012, 36).

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With regard to the situation in West and Sub-Saharan Africa, Iran is developing close relations with the Tijani order, which is dominant in the area. The Tijani Order, a Sunni Sufi order, originated in North Africa and has a significant presence in Senegal, the Gambia, Mauritania, Mali, Guinea, Niger, Chad, Ghana, Nigeria and Sudan (Özköse, 2019). Ghana has been a hotspot of Sufi *marabouts* in West Africa for centuries and various Sufi orders such as Tijani and Qadiri orders were established there (Aydın, 2020, 20).

A review of the demographic profile of Mauritania reveals that the majority of the population adheres to Sunni Sufi culture. Furthermore, the two most dominant orders in the state, the Tijani and Qadiri orders, espouse doctrines that are similar to each other. The states of Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau and Ghana sought to foster closer relations with Iran through discourses of Islamic unity and fraternity, in part due to the influence of Sufi culture, which was observed to be prevalent in West Africa. Iran's policy of exporting revolution to Mauritania has been continuing since the beginning of the 1980s and created an important influence on the youth in the state through Shiite publications, journals and missionary activities. Iran started to strive to convert local people's belief to Shiism at the end of the 1990s, benefitting from the Shiite Lebanese population in Senegal and Mauritania and the sympathy towards Hezbollah among Arabs. In this policy, Iran used the common slogan of "Resistance against Israel" for the local population. A considerable number of clergymen who received madrasah education in Qom with the support of the Iranian embassy and subsequently adopted Shiism continue to engage in activities upon their return to Mauritania. Furthermore, they are registered as members of associations within the state (Al Mezbaah, 2014).

The Iranian government began to spread Shiism after the Islamic Revolution to establish a cultural, economic and political influence in West Africa. Iran has been involved in numerous economic projects in West Africa and Africa's coastal areas, including Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Mali, Sierra Leone, Benin, Nigeria and Ghana which suffer from extreme poverty in spite of the existence of rich natural sources (Al Mezbaah, 2014). Due to the aforementioned circumstances, Tehran has been able to disseminate Shiism with relative ease in areas where 78% of Muslims adhere to Sufi beliefs through economic activities. Iran establishes Shiite educational centers and libraries in these states. Moreover, it continues radio and internet broadcasting services. Its diplomatic representative offices organize activities for introducing Shiite culture. Iranian charity foundations also support the construction of schools and hospitals in the areas and provide

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aid to the destitute. This is indicative of Tehran's efforts to disseminate the Shiite culture and Iranian national-religious ideology through public diplomacy. In Senegal, a number of institutions, including the Iranian Cultural Centre and the Department of Persian Language at Cheikh Anta Diop University (Universite Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, 2019), provide education on Islam, Shiism, the Persian language and Iranian culture. Furthermore, the branch of El-Mustafa University was established in Dakar by Tehran (Iranian American Forum, 2018). Besides, Howzeh al-Rasul-ul Akra provides the education of Shiite doctrines along with normal education and offers opportunities to study in universities in Iran to its graduates (NCBI, 2019). With regard to the situation in Nigeria, it should be noted that Iran supports the madrasahs established by the Islamic Movement of Nigeria, which was founded by Sheikh Sayyid Ibrahim Zakzaky. Furthermore, the branch of Al-Mustafa University plays an important role in introducing Qom-centred Shiite Islamic doctrine (Islamic Movement).

Iran is actively using its soft power also in South Africa. As a consequence of the migration of the people from Shiraz and Baloochistan of Iran to the cities of Zanzibar, Kilva and Bagamoyo of Tanzania, cultural interactions with the local culture were experienced which was also reflected on the local languages. In other words, Iranians who interacted with the societies in the east of Sub-Saharan Africa owing to commerce and were integrated into them later succeeded in forming an influence of Persian culture on Swahili language and the local cultures. To illustrate, more than 200 words of Persian origin exist in the Swahili language. Nevertheless, despite the absence of sizable Iranian communities in the region, the impact of Persian culture and Iran-rooted religious beliefs can be discerned with clarity (Daily News Tanzania, 2019).

The Influence of Iran's Shiite Expansionism on the Region

Iran is attempting to expand its influence through the promotion of Shiite culture and the utilisation of Islamic discourse, including Sufism and anti-imperialism. However, its policy towards Africa is not widely accepted in many African states. Given that the majority of Muslims in Africa adhere to Sunni Islam, and that the history of Shiism in the region, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, is relatively brief, it is unsurprising that the influence of Shiism in Africa is limited. In this context, Shiism is not typically perceived as a legitimate and rightful interpretation of Islamic doctrine. Consequently, Iran is not regarded as a reliable ally or fellow Muslim state. Furthermore,

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tribal, ethnic and religious conflicts represent a significant challenge for numerous African countries, with the political situation in the region remaining highly unstable. This situation also contributes to the dissemination of a negative image of Iran and has a detrimental impact on its relations with Africa to a significant extent.

For instance, Morocco oriented to breaking off its diplomatic relations with Iran against its policy of spreading Shiism, emphasizing that Iran was acting against Morocco and was involved in religious issues (Ghanmi, 2009). Although the diplomatic relations were reestablished between the two states in 2017, the Moroccan government continued to accuse Iran of destroying the state's religious structure. In 2018, tensions between the two parties once again intensified. Morocco once again severed diplomatic relations with Iran, asserting that Iran provided support to the Polisario Front through Hizbullah. Nasser Bourita, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Morocco during that period, asserted that Hizbullah had sent officials to Polisario Front and provided them with weapons, as well as training them in guerilla warfare tactics (Eljechtimi, 2018).

A similar situation is observed also in Mauritania. The Mauritanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the ambassador of Iran in Nouakchott on May 2018 to question the activities of Imam Ali Mosque in the state. Afterwards, they both expressed that the meeting was held for the purpose of bilateral consultations and there were no problems between Iranian-Mauritanian diplomatic relations (Ya Biladi, 2019). However, Ahl-ul Bayt Mosqque was closed by Mauritanian authorities in the same period on the grounds of spreading Shiism and its imam who was alleged to have ties with Iran was deported from Mauritania. According to the Mauritanian government, the mosque was used as a center for Shiite activism in the region and sent Mauritanian youth to Iran and Lebanon for education (North Africa Post, 2019).

Besides, the Mauritanian public and government consider all above as a threat for society and state and a negative image of Iran is widely accepted. Many political elites in Mauritania express that Iran has made efforts to increase its influence in Mauritania to transform the state into a base to strengthen its control over North Africa for a long time (Tower News Agency, 2019). A basic fear in the state is rising due to the spread of Shiism and increasing Iran intervention in Mauritania's domestic issues. In 2015, El-Islah Party called the Mauritanian government to break off diplomatic relations with Iran and to take part in anti-Iranian military joint operation in Yemen. Besides, the party argues that Iran will use its relation with

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Mauritania to infiltrate North Africa and to destroy the regional social order. Muhammad Ahmad Salim, a member of the parliament, expressed similar concerns, insisting that Mauritania should break off all the ties with Iran because of its efforts to convert Mauritania to a Shiite Muslim state and emphasized that Iran is trying to use Mauritania as a crossing point in order to spread Shiite Islam in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. According to him, Iran partially provides financial support for the ruling party and partially shows its impact in Mauritanian media. In fact, about 45-50 thousand Mauritanians have already adopted Shiism due to the influence of Iran's propaganda and Shiite expansionist policy (JCPA, 2019) and the increase in Shiite population and Iran's Shiite expansionist policy

Additionally, in Senegal, while Iran is intensifying its policy of spreading Iranian culture and Shiism, it has been alleged that Iran provided military support for separatist groups in the Casamance region in 2010. Subsequently, Iranian diplomats in Dakar were deported, and diplomatic relations between Iran and Senegal were terminated. Despite the fact that Mahmud Ahmadinejad met with the Senegalese president, Macky Sall, with the intention of resolving the crisis in 2013, Senegal reopened its embassy in Tehran in 2014 (Şeker, 2017, 104). However, following the discovery of a shipment of sophisticated Iranian arms destined for the Casamance region in Nigeria, Iran's image was significantly tarnished, and it was perceived as a threat to the state.

In Nigeria, as a result of Iran's strong support, the organization Sheikh Zakzaky's Islamic Movement of Nigeria increased its influence on the northern part to an important degree and directly began to demand the establishment of *velayat-e faqih* system inside the state. Although the Islamic Movement of Nigeria explicitly rejects the use of violence as a means of achieving political change, it may resort to such tactics when the government demonstrates a repressive attitude (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2023, 68-69). Indeed, the organisation frequently holds Shiite religious and anti-American mass demonstrations, which have occasionally resulted in violent clashes. On July 2014, more than 30 members of the organization were killed in clashes with the Nigerian government forces during a demonstration and Zakzaky himself also lost three sons (United Against Nuclear Iran, 2023: 69). In light of these circumstances, the Nigerian government began to regard the organisation, Iran and Hezbollah as a threat to Nigerian society. Consequently, the Nigerian authorities have arrested numerous members since the 1980s and have increasingly expressed criticism of Hezbollah and Iran. In 2015, Zakzaky was imprisoned by the Nigerian security service, and the government designated the Islamic

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Movement of Nigeria as a terrorist organization in the same category as Boko Haram United Against Nuclear Iran, 2023, 70). In this manner, Iran's Shiite expansionist policy has resulted in a state of regional chaos in Nigeria, while simultaneously reinforcing Iran's image as a threat within the state and society.

Conclusion

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has implemented a foreign policy towards Africa to seek its interests and establish a tropical belt through benefitting from Islamism, especially Shiite doctrine and anti-imperialism against Western states, Saudi Arabia and Israel. In this context, Iran supports China's policy towards "the Multipolar World Order" against the United States via efforts to establish an anti-US front in Africa.

In the implementation of Iran's public diplomacy, while Iran frequently employs anti-colonialist discourse towards Africa, its objective is to disseminate Shiism and Iran's national ideology in order to enhance its influence over the region. This is achieved through the establishment of a multitude of madrasahs, libraries, cultural centres and the branches of El-Mustafa University. Furthermore, Iran employs local Shiite organisations as a means of penetration into the region. Iran utilises the tactic of taqiyyah to establish close ties with local Sunni Sufi orders in an effort to disseminate Shiism throughout North and West Africa.

Nevertheless, Iran's such policy frequently resulted in social and political instability in the region and significant challenges in Iran's diplomatic relations with Africa. Consequently, Iran's reputation is undergoing a process of deterioration, which is perceived as a significant challenge by the majority of African countries.

Consequently, Iran's public diplomacy towards Africa is entirely driven by the pursuit of national interests, with the objective of establishing a presence in the region and increasing its influence. In this context, Iran is attempting to disseminate Shiism and Iranian national ideology through the use of anti-imperialist discourse, the method of taqiyyah, and other similar techniques. Nevertheless, this policy has resulted in the dissemination of a negative image of Iran in the region and has not produced the desired political effects in Africa.

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