



Iranian Activity in East Africa: A Growing Threat to Israeli and Western Interests

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Overview¹

- For years Iran has been working to advance diplomatic, economic and military objectives in East Africa as part of a strategy to position itself as a regional power, use the region to expand its geo-strategic influence and turn East Africa into a logistical backyard serving its efforts to build its network of terrorist proxy organizations.
- In recent years Iran renewed its relations with Djibouti and Sudan and tightened its ties with Ethiopia. That enabled Iran to expand its regional presence with the export of advanced weapons to conflict zones in East Africa, especially the civil war in Sudan.
- The ongoing relations between Iran and al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda-affiliated Somali terrorist organization, have made them middlemen in Iran's chain of proxies: The Houthis transfer Iranian weapons to al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, and al-Shabaab allows Tehran to use the ports under its control to smuggle weapons to the Houthis.
- **In ITIC assessment, Iran's expanding presence in East Africa is a growing threat to Israeli interests because of Iran's ability to use the smuggling routes for weapons from Sudan to the Gaza Strip. Iran may also use the weapons it sends to conflict zones in East Africa and its official missions there to promote terrorist plots against Israeli targets in Africa. In addition, the threat to vital American and Western interests is increased by giving Iran the ability to attack shipping lanes in the Red Sea and through its dangerous proximity to the main American base in Djibouti.**

The Iranian Interest in East Africa

- For years Iran has regarded Africa as a target arena for its foreign policy and for advancing its political and economic interests outside the Middle East, especially because its nuclear and ballistic-missile programs and its support for the terrorist proxies of the "axis of resistance"²

¹ Click <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en> to subscribe and receive the ITIC's daily updates as well as its other publications.

² Iran, Hezbollah, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, the Houthis in Yemen and the Shi'ite militias in Iraq.

have made the United States and Western countries try to isolate it with sanctions (Tabnak, December 7, 2025).

► In a letter published by the Iranian foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, for Africa Day in May 2025, he praised the close ties between Iran and the African continent and emphasized Iran willingness to cooperate in all areas, including political, economic, industrial, resource extraction and academic exchange. He also noted that the current government of President Masoud Pezeshkian had placed an emphasis on relations with Africa and declared that Iran "views Africa's prosperity as if it were its own" (Eghtesad Ayandeh (Future Economy), Iran, May 25, 2025).



Iranian President Pezeshkian at the Iran–Africa economic conference (Tasnim, April 27, 2025)

► According to data from the Iranian Trade Promotion Organization, in the first half of the Persian year 1404 (beginning March 2025), there was a 100% increase in exports of non-petroleum products to the African market compared to the same period the previous year. In total, Iranian exports to Africa reached \$675 million, double the previous year. As to sanctions and international developments, the head of the organization's Africa Department, Mohammad Reza Zafari, said that many traders were looking for new markets and Africa was a "suitable alternative" (IRNA, November 15, 2025).

► **Iran is particularly interested in relations with East African states**, where for decades it has been strategically strengthening its foothold. Iran is interested for two main reasons: the inherent gains in political and economic cooperation with states which possess vital natural resources, and its strategic location near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea and near major international shipping and trade routes, a gateway to the rest of the continent.

► Over the years, the scope of Iran's ties with regional states has shifted and fluctuated in accordance with geo-strategic developments and internal developments in the various countries and in Iran itself. The changes required Iran to adjust its policy while considering the specific conditions in each state and exploiting opportunities which made it possible to

advance Tehran's goals. Those goals include overt, public diplomatic and economic gains and covert actions to gain footholds for enlarging Tehran's toolbox of regional terrorism and military capabilities.³

Iran's Diplomatic Activity in East Africa

► In recent years Iran has had a series of political achievements in the region, through which it renewed and strengthened its diplomatic relations with several East African states.

Djibouti

► In September 2023 Iran and Djibouti announced the renewal of diplomatic relations after a break of about seven years, following the Djibouti government's support for Saudi Arabia after protesters attacked the Saudi embassy in Tehran in 2016 (*Tehran Times*, September 24, 2023). The shift in Djibouti's position can be attributed to the agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached in March 2023 through Chinese mediation, which led to the renewal of relations between Shi'ite Iran and the Sunni government of Djibouti (Reuters, March 10, 2023).⁴

Sudan

► In October 2023 Sudan announced the renewal of diplomatic relations with Iran after a break which began in 2016, the consequence of Saudi Arabia's problems with Tehran (Reuters, October 10, 2023) and of Iranian criticism of Sudan's joining the Abraham Accords in 2020 (Reuters, October 24, 2020).

► Several months after the announcement of renewed relations, Sudan's military ruler, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, sent an ambassador to Tehran, while Iran appointed Hassan Shah Hosseini to head the embassy, which had resumed operations in Port Sudan. The Sudanese deputy foreign minister, Hussein al-Amin, described the exchange of ambassadors as the beginning of a new stage in bilateral relations (Al Jazeera, July 21, 2024).

► In addition to the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the civil war in Sudan also influenced the renewal of relations between Iran and Sudan. The war broke out in April 2023 amid power struggles between the country's leader and army commander, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and his deputy and commander of the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), General

³ For further information, see the July 2009 ITIC report, [Iran's activity in East Africa, the gateway to the Middle East and the African continent](#) and the May 2023 report [Iranian Activities in East Africa Nature and Significance](#).

⁴ It was noted that in Djibouti there are several foreign military bases, including a permanent air and naval base of the United States Department of Defense's Africa Command that deals mainly with counterterrorism activity, and bases belonging to China, Saudi Arabia, Britain and France (Politics Today, March 17, 2021; Universidad de Navarra, October 9, 2024).

Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo. Since there had been military cooperation between Iran and Sudan before the severing of relations, al-Burhan used the renewed rapprochement with Tehran to obtain military assistance against his rival, who enjoyed UAE support (BBC, June 13, 2024, AGSI, March 3, 2025).

► During the visit of the Sudanese foreign minister, Ali Youssef Ahmed al-Sharif, to Tehran in February 2025, Iranian foreign minister Abbas Araghchi formally declared his country's support for the government in Khartoum against "the rebels," while the Sudanese minister expressed hope that Iran would play a role in rebuilding his country (Sudan Tribune, February 18, 2025). The Iranian ambassador to Sudan also called for bilateral cooperation and coordination to "foil foreign plots" (Sudan Tribune, November 9, 2025).



Foreign ministers of Iran (right) and Sudan (Iranian Foreign Ministry, February 17, 2025)

Ethiopia

► In May 2025 Iran signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ethiopian government for intelligence cooperation, primarily between police agencies, along with joint training and cooperation against transnational crime. Diplomatic ties have existed between the two states for decades, and Iran provided military assistance to Ethiopia when the Ethiopian army's fought separatist rebels in the Tigray region in the north of the country in 2020–2022 (Military Africa, May 16, 2025).

Iranian Region Military Involvement

► Iran's consolidation of ties with key state and non-state actors in East Africa paves the way for the Islamic Republic to deepen its military and terrorist presence in the strategic space under the guise of ostensibly legitimate activity, activity which might pose a threat to Israel as well as to American and Western interests.

Transfer of Advanced Iranian weapons

- The Sudanese army fighting the civil war has used Iranian Mohajer-6 UAVs for attack, which can carry precision munitions for a range of about two thousand kilometers (almost 1,250 miles), as well as Ababil suicide UAVs, which are also in Hezbollah's possession and were used during the war against Israel⁵ (BBC, June 13, 2024, Bloomberg, December 18, 2024).
- Satellite images showed that Ethiopia also operated Iranian Mohajer-6 UAVs during the fighting against rebels in the Tigray region (Bellingcat, August 17, 2021). In addition, the United States State Department confirmed that Iran provided armed UAVs to Ethiopia in the summer of 2021 in violation of UN Security Council resolutions (Ethiopanorama, October 20, 2022).

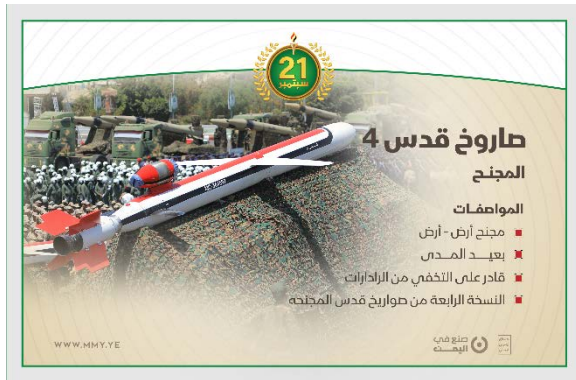


Mohajer-6 (Arabwar, March 9, 2024)

- In May 2024 fragments of an Iranian Paveh/Project 351 cruise missile were located near the town of Karcab in northeastern Somalia. An investigation following the explosion and the discovery of the fragments did not establish the missile's launch point, though the general assessment was that it was a missile in the hands of the Houthis in Yemen, under the name Quds-4, which had been launched during an attack on a vessel in the Red Sea (Dinnah, May 4, 2024). The missile is also in the hands of pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and was used during the war against Israel.⁶

⁵ For further information, see the January 2025 ITIC report, [Weapons Used by Hezbollah Against Israel, October 8, 2023 to November 27, 2024](#).

⁶ For further information, see the November 2024 ITIC report, [The pro-Iranian Militias in Iraq: Characteristics of their Activity since the Beginning of Iron Swords War](#).



Right: Fragments of the cruise missile found in Somalia (Dinnah, May 4, 2024). Left: The Quds-4 cruise missile in Houthi possession (Telegram channel of Houthi combat information, September 22, 2023)

► The 2024 annual report of the UN Panel of Experts on the implementation of Yemen sanctions expressed concern regarding the cooperation between the Houthis and al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda's affiliate in the Horn of Africa. The report noted that smuggling of light weapons had been identified, with indications of a joint military supply or common source (UN website, October 11, 2024). The 2025 report of the Panel of Experts also noted an increase in mutual weapons smuggling and cooperation, and revealed that 70 Somalis connected to al-Shabaab were allegedly involved in smuggling weapons from the Houthis and the Houthis trained al-Shabaab operatives in producing sophisticated explosive devices and operating UAVs (UN website, October 17, 2025).

► The commander of the United States Africa Command, General Michael Langley, noted that Iranian weapons held by the Houthis could directly threaten American and international interests in East Africa. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee, Langley said he was very troubled by signs of cooperation between the Houthis and al-Shabaab. He said the Houthis had the capability to strike the American base in Djibouti,⁷ and if they gained a foothold in East Africa, the threat to international shipping and trade would increase (Africa Command website, April 3, 2025).

Weapons Smuggling

► The renewal of relations with Sudan will allow Iran to reuse the country as a base for smuggling weapons to the Gaza Strip, as occurred during the presidency of Sudan's former leader, Omar al-Bashir. From 2007 to 2013 significant quantities of standard Iranian weapons were smuggled to Gaza through Sudan or from military depots in Libya and Sudan, following the chaos of the Arab Spring. From 2009 to 2012 there were also reports of a series of strikes in

⁷ Camp Lemonnier, a United States Naval Expeditionary Base, situated next to Djibouti-Ambouli International Airport in Djibouti City (Wikipedia).

Sudan attributed to Israel on convoys of professional smugglers who carried huge quantities of standard weapons transferred by sea from Iran to Sudan and from there through the Sinai Peninsula until they were brought into the Gaza Strip through tunnels (al-Arabiya, March 29, 2009, Sudan Tribune, April 7, 2011).⁸ However, the strikes attributed to Israel and the tightening of enforcement along the Egypt–Gaza Strip border since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power in 2013 made it difficult for Hamas and Iran to smuggle significant quantities of weapons from Sinai into the Strip (*al-Youm al-Sabea*, October 30, 2014, Al-Jazeera, September 18, 2015).

► Iran and the Houthis also exploited their ties with East Africa, especially with al-Shabaab in Somalia, to establish a channel for smuggling weapons from Iran to Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen via ports under al-Shabaab control. Crew members of the ship *Al-Sharwa*, seized in June 2025 with more than 750 tons of weapons and other combat equipment suspected to have been sent from Iran and intended for the Houthis, reported that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Houthis operated a maritime smuggling network bypassing the mechanisms monitoring the sanctions. According to the crew, one route departed from the port of Bandar Abbas in Iran and passed through Bosaso in Somalia and from there to the port of Salif under Houthi control in Yemen. Another route passed from Bandar Abbas to Djibouti and from there to Salif. Somali and Djiboutian operatives were also recruited to support the smuggling network's activity, including in their home countries.⁹ The 2025 report of the UN Panel of Experts noted that Somalia was becoming a transit point for weapons intended for the Houthis, and smuggling routes using small boats at Somali coastal sites were investigated (UN website, October 17, 2025).

⁸ For further information, see the March 2021 ITIC report, [In recent months two more Iranian attempts to ship weapons were exposed.](#), the June 2009 report, [The Gaza Strip after Operation Cast Lead: The rebuilding of the civilian and military infrastructure in the Gaza Strip carried out by Hamas. At the same time, Hamas continues entrenching its control of the Gaza Strip.](#), the March 2011 report, [Terrorism from the Gaza Strip since Operation Cast Lead: Data, Type and Trends](#) and the July 2015 report, [The Gaza Strip One Year after Operation Protective Edge: An Overview](#).

⁹ For further information, see the August 2025 ITIC report, [Iranian Backing for the Houthis during the Gaza Strip War: the Seizure of the Al-Sharwa as a Test Case](#).



Smuggling routes from the port of Bandar Abbas in Iran to the Houthi port of Salif in Yemen, based on the crew's interrogation (X account of the military media wing of the legitimate Yemeni government, August 9, 2025)

Diplomatic Missions Used as Bases for Terrorism

- The renewal of Iran's diplomatic relations with states in East Africa also allows Tehran with to establish official diplomatic missions to serve as forward bases for launching terrorist plots against Israeli and Western targets in Africa by Qods Force and Iranian intelligence personnel operating under diplomatic cover. That was already evident in 2021, when Asadollah Asadi, a diplomat serving at the Iranian embassy in Austria, was arrested and imprisoned for his involvement in planning a terrorist attack on an event held by Iranian opposition activists in France (BBC, February 5, 2021).
- In November 2025, according to reports, the Qods Force recruited a Ugandan citizen to gather intelligence on Israeli embassies in Uganda and Senegal and purchase weapons for attacks on the missions. Reportedly, during interrogation, the Ugandan, who worked in construction, said that a Pakistani Qods Force operative had contacted him and instructed him to photograph the embassies and buy pistols and hand grenades for a "possible attack." Interrogated by by a Western intelligence agency, he said that an Iranian Qods Force operative had contacted him and offered to pay him for his cooperation (Iran International, November 26, 2025).
- Iran also uses diplomats posted in East Africa to smuggle funds for Hezbollah in Lebanon, thereby bypassing the ban imposed by the Lebanese government on commercial flights from Iran to Beirut in February 2025, and still in force.¹⁰ The authorities at Beirut International Airport also seized \$8.2 million from the bags of three passengers, two of whom arrived from Kinshasa,

¹⁰ For further information, see the November 2025 ITIC report, [Iran Assists Hezbollah's Post-Ceasefire Reconstruction](#).

the capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They claimed that they routinely transfer funds for "Lebanese businessmen" who worked in Africa (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, July 1, 2025).