



The Escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict: The Significance for Africa¹

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Abstract:

After a short exposition of the Iran-Israel proxy war before 7 October 2023 and between then and April 2024, this article researches their consequences on historically contextualized Iranian-, Israeli- and Palestinian-African relations, exemplifying both African and Israeli ambivalent stances towards the other party. On the whole, it has been found that Israeli partnerships and alliances on the continent have been strained but have mostly held in the considered period despite the proxy war, while the position of hostile African nations has been further entrenched. The difficulties of Israel with international justice have been partly the result of efforts from the latter, enhancing their standing on the international stage rather than the continent's. Reactions have been mild and/or discreet to the proxy war beyond the Palestinian theatre, including Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. That is despite the huge impact of the related Red Sea crisis on the continent, especially in Egypt, Somalia and Sudan. The larger proxy war has however allowed for a series of diplomatic successes on the part of Iran. The consequences of the proxy war on African public opinion and perceptions is the subject of further enquiry.

Keywords: Iran, Israel, Palestine, Red Sea crisis, International justice

¹ DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12700/jceeas.2024.4.3-4.252>

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Introduction

The Iran-Israel proxy war before 7 October 2023

The Iranian revolution of 1978-1979 turned the country from an Israeli ally under the last shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (since 1953) to a hostile regime that withdrew the recognition of Israel's very legitimacy as a state and severed diplomatic and commercial relations. The religious fundamentalism, Shia Islamism, pan-Islamism, nationalism, professed anti-colonialism and hostility to both Zionism and the US, combined with a solidarity for the Palestinian cause and a policy of support for Shia minorities helps explain both early Iranian hostility to Israel – dubbed the "Little Satan" – and support to the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Nevertheless, regional geopolitical imperatives – the so-called "periphery doctrine" or solidarity against the Arab states – and the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) allowed some room for clandestine cooperation (Farhang, 1989).

Later however, and despite an overture for peace and normalization on Iran's side in 2003 (Judis 2013), Iran-Israel relations grew steadily worse, fuelled – beyond those factors already mentioned – by Iranian state terrorism and inflammatory rhetoric including calls for the destruction of Israel and denial of the Shoah, Israeli covert operations in Iran and/or against Iranian interests, Iran's nuclear program (since the early 2000's), Hamas' coup in Gaza (2007), Iran's rapprochement with Iraq (after the US invasion in 2003), rising influence and intervention in this country (since 2014), Iranian and Israeli involvement in the Syrian civil war (since 2011), as well as the parallel Iran-Saudi and Iran-US proxy wars and the normalization process between Israel and key Arab partners since 2019.

Meanwhile, the situation in Palestine, which has remained the main theatre of this proxy war, has also grown steadily worse since the non-implementation of the Oslo Accords (1993-1995), the Cave of the Patriarchs massacre (1994) and the murder of Yitzhak Rabin (1995) by Israeli extremists and the corresponding attacks of Israeli civilians by Hamas. The further radicalization and distaste for compromise on both sides (Klein 2023), combined with a blatant disregard for international law (IL) and international humanitarian law (IHL), the weakening of the Palestinian authority (PA), the Egyptian-Israeli blockade and expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and the worsening of the economic and humanitarian situation in wider Palestine and specifically in the Gaza strip have allowed for several major and ever worsening open conflicts to take place, especially in 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2021.

Hamas, although Sunni, is a key component of the so-called Iranian "Axis of Resistance" (Brandenburg 2010, Soltaninejad, 2019). That fundamentalist movement claims Palestinian nationalism, Islamism, anti-Zionism and anti-colonialism to be its main tenets, while its 1988 charter has been softened in 2017 to avoid accusations of antisemitism. It has been accused of numerous atrocity crimes and human rights violations, is a criminal, fascist and terrorist organization. It has also been backed by Qatar and Turkey (Lindenstrauss & Kivam 2014).

The Axis has been so dubbed since 2002, as a comeback to US president Bush's "axis of evil", then meant to encompass Iran, Iraq and North Korea. It mostly takes aim at Jewish, Israeli and American targets. Other "Axis" proxies include the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah a.k.a. the Houthis in Yemen and the Fatemiyun and Zainabiyun brigades in Syria, as well as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq. This loose Axis, along with Iranian partners and allies, have all been used and supported as proxies against Israel, and in turn taken as targets by Israeli military operations of diverse scales, ensuring, to an extent, both deterrence and plausible deniability (Soltaninejad 2019).

One should refrain to deduce however, that those events since the 1990's that led to ever worsening relations between Iran and Israel on the one side, Israel and Palestine on the other, as well as their consequences, were inevitable. Iranian and Israeli diplomacy have likewise known major shifts for the past 30 years, in the region and beyond, and the Axis itself should not be considered as fully compliant or even aligned with Iran, nor should these groups be considered as being content with one foreign backer. The background of both the Iran-Israel proxy war and of the Israel-Palestine conflict nevertheless inform these dynamics relationships, the partnerships and alliances of both Iran and Israel with infra-state and state actors, as well as international organizations, in the region and worldwide, including in Africa.

In parallel to an ever worsening Iran-Israel and Iran-US proxy war, several geopolitical dynamics have forced the Palestinian cause into progressive irrelevance. Among them are the normalization process between Israel and Arab states, that between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the enlargement of the BRICS as well as the India-Middle East-Europe economic corridor (IMEC) (Ashby et al. 2023, Lynfield 2022, Monroe 2023). Palestine's diplomatic push at the United Nations (UN) and at the International Criminal Court (ICC) had also stalled.

The escalation: The war in Gaza, intensifying Iran-Israel proxy war and limited direct warfare

On 7 October 2023, Hamas has launched an attack of an unprecedented nature and scale on neighbouring Israeli territory, dubbed Operation Flood of Al Aqsa. After regaining its lost territory, Israel invaded the Gaza strip from 27 October to this day. The rise of an Israeli government comprising far-right, fascist, fundamentalist, religious Zionist, ultranationalist, Jewish supremacist elements (2022) and its subsequent Palestine policy has helped the conflict erupt as well as give it justification. Hamas' stated *casus belli* includes the continued Israeli occupation of Palestine, the continued Israeli blockade of the Gaza strip, Israeli operations and settler violence in the West Bank, as well as imminent threats to the Al Aqsa mosque, a Muslim holy site in Jerusalem. Both the 7 October attack and Israeli response have been condemned for disregarding IL and IHL, while atrocity crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocidal attacks have been carried out on both sides. The PIJ participates at a lesser scale (Mehvar 2023). This newest open conflict has been framed by both Iran and Israel as being a

major escalation within their own war by proxy. While 6,417 Palestinians and 321 Israelis had died between 1 January 2008 and 6 October 2023 as a result of the conflict (OCHA n.d.), the latest higher intensity occurrence (from 7 October 2023 to 24 April 2024) has resulted in 34,262 Palestinian fatalities in the Gaza strip (according to the Ministry of Health in Gaza, OCHA 2024c), 1,200 Israeli facilities from the 7 October attack (1,162 of which have been identified) and 255 Israeli soldiers killed as a result of the invasion of the Gaza strip (OCHA 2024a).

Since 7 October 2023, Axis proxies have targeted American bases in Iraq, Jordan and Syria, as well as the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), mainly by drone and missile strikes. In response, the US have targeted Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria since 27 October (Mehvar 2024). These led to the announcement by Iraqi PM Mohammad Shia' Al Sudani that the process of removal of the US-led coalition in the country had begun, on 5 January 2024 (Selignan & Banco 2024).

Since 8 October 2023, Hezbollah has struck Israel and been struck in return, through rocket and artillery strikes on both sides and Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon. Israel has further carried an airstrike on Beirut to kill a high-ranking member of Hamas. The Israel-Hezbollah conflict has not, so far, escalated into direct warfare, although the risk remains high. The latest occurrence was in 2006, with the last low intensity conflict dating from 2015 (Matusiak 2024).

Since 19 October 2023, the Houthis have targeted both Israel and ships of various nationalities in the Red Sea, in solidarity with Palestine (Nevola 2024). The UN Security Council (UNSC) has condemned the strikes in resolution 2722 on 10 January 2024. The defensive EUNAVFOR Aspides launched on 19 February (Gros-Verheyde 2024), while a US-led coalition, Operation Prosperity Guardian, was assembled on 18 December. Some participants to the latter have remained anonymous (Freebairn 2024). Since 12 January, the US and the UK have struck Houthi targets in Yemen – the so-called Operation Poseidon Archer (CNN 2024). Yemen had been engulfed in a civil war opposing the Iran-backed Houthis to the Saudi Arabia- and UAE-backed internationally recognized government since 2015. Hostilities had ceased in 2022.

Since October 2023, Israel has increased the frequency of its strikes in Syria against both Syrian and IRGC targets, killing several commanders of the latter. The proxy war has taken a graver turn on 1 April 2024 when Israel struck the Iranian consulate in Damascus, killing several IRGC commanders, in direct connexion with the war in Gaza (Chehayeb & Aji 2024). The strike, carried out in violation of international law and the UN charter, failed to be condemned at a UNSC meeting requested by Russia (UN 2024c). It has been tantamount to an attack on Iranian soil, and represented the first ever escalation into direct warfare. On 13 April, Iran retaliated with a massive drone and missile attack on Israel itself (Operation True Promise). Other attacks have been carried out by Iranian proxies from Iraq and Yemen. A large number of drones and missiles were intercepted by Israel, France, Jordan, the UK, the US before reaching their target (Motamedi 2024). The Madeira-flagged MSC Aries had been seized by Iranian

commandos on the same day in the Strait of Hormuz, while in international waters, on the ground it "violated maritime laws" and was linked to Israel (Reuters 2024c). The latter launched a limited and symbolic strike on Isfahan on 19 April, an attack downplayed by Iran, that some have commented illustrates the will on both sides to de-escalate, although tensions remain high (Gambrell & Federman 2024). The events have been framed on the Iranian side as a reason to expedite their nuclear program (Dolzikova & Savill 2024).

African reactions to the Gaza war

Africa has been left divided in the wake of the 7 October attack, much more so than on other recent major geopolitical events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022). It is in part because of Israel's long history of an ambivalent relationship with African countries and different African interpretations of Israeli policy or Palestine's significance. Early relatively warm relations have been mostly cut off after the Yom Kippur war (1973), except for Eswatini (then Swaziland), Lesotho and Malawi (Le Gouriellec 2023, Lubotzky 2023).

Relations have been rekindled in the context of the Oslo Accords during the 1990's, with Israel trying to normalize relations with most holdout African countries since 2016 in the frame of the Abraham Accords. The memory, moral, political and emotional capital of Africa-Israel and -Palestine relations is naturally most acute in Arab and/or Muslim countries, but also in countries which histories are marked by either apartheid (South Africa, Zimbabwe) or genocide (Namibia, Rwanda). The volume of bilateral trade, defence relationships (especially with the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan), as well as state vulnerability are also major factors in the positioning of African countries (Gidron 2024).

Over 54 African Union (AU) members, 8 do not recognize Israel (Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Tunisia, Western Sahara), with a further 3 having suspended diplomatic relations (Mali and Niger since 1973, Mauritania since 2010). Conversely, only 2 AU members have failed to recognize the State of Palestine (Cameroon and Eritrea). At the latest vote on the UN membership of the latter, on 18 April 2024, all A3+1 representatives (Algeria, Mozambique, Sierra Leone + Guyana) voted in favour of Palestine (UNSC 2024). Most African countries however have remained largely neutral, calling for a ceasefire, the respect of IL and IHL, and a two-state solution, after the manner of the AU declaration (AU 2023).

Israel's recent diplomatic push allowed for the normalization of relations, not only with Morocco (2021) and an intended normalization with Sudan (negotiations ongoing since 2020 and interrupted by the civil war in 2023), but also with Guinea-Conakry (2016), Senegal (2017) and Chad (2019). Malawi (2020) and Sierra Leone (2023) have also intended to move their embassies to Jerusalem, a show of support for Israel at odds with IL but encouraged by the policy of former US president Donald Trump.

While Sudan has been careful not to antagonize it, Morocco, Senegal and Chad have had to contend with public opinions largely favourable to Palestine (Tijani 2023, France

24 2023a), which was the case in most African Arab and/or Muslim countries. Senegal, the head of the UN Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, has largely remained neutral (France 24 2023a), while Chad has recalled its envoy to Israel in protest on 4 November 2023 (Olivier 2023). Nigeria has merely cancelled a planned visit by Czech PM Petr Fiala over the latter's staunch support to Israel (Gencturk 2024).

Malawi, along with historic allies of Israel such as Cameroon, the DRC, Ghana and South Sudan, as well as Kenya, Rwanda, Togo and Zambia have been among those African countries to firmly condemn the 7 October attack and show support to Israel early on. Only Djibouti seems to have seized the occasion during the same period to show its support to the Palestinian cause and condemn Israeli policy (Le Gouriellec 2023). Workers from Malawi have helped Israel face a labour shortage from 25 November onwards, sending several hundreds of its citizens to work in the country's farms; the first flight came two weeks after the African country benefited from \$60m in Israeli development aid (VOA 2023b). A visa-free accord has further been signed by Israel and the Seychelles, an archipelago heavily dependent on tourism, in a context of growing Israeli demand (SNA 2023, SNA 2024).

To this day, the conflict does not seem to have seriously threatened the Abraham Accords and various normalization agreements, although it certainly has strained them. Nevertheless, informal talks with Libya, Mauritania and Somalia are now completely out of the question, and would be tantamount to political suicide. Libya has expelled foreign diplomats seen as supporting Israel (VOA 2023a), Tunisia had a law voted to criminalize all interactions with the latter (Galtier 2023), while Somalia has publicly condemned some of its actions in the Gaza strip. The latter's PM Hamza Abdi Barre has even pronounced a remarked – albeit to this day without serious consequence – speech in support of Hamas, with frankly anti-Semitic overtones (Horn Observer 2023a).

The Jordan-proposed UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution ES-10/21 entitled "Protection of civilians and upholding legal and humanitarian obligations" and voted upon on 27 October 2023 had 13 African sponsors out of 40 (Botswana, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Namibia, Senegal, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan and Zimbabwe). Only 5 African representatives abstained (Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Zambia), while 8 were absent (Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Eswatini, Liberia, Rwanda, Seychelles, Togo). None voted against it (UN 2023a). The UAE-proposed UNGA resolution ES-10/22 and voted upon on 12 December 2023 saw a similar divide, with only Liberia voting against it. 6 African representatives abstained (Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Malawi, South Sudan, Togo) while 2 were absent (Burkina Faso, Eswatini) (UN 2023c). Malta-introduced UNSC resolution 2712 (15 November) (UN 2023b) and UAE-introduced UNSC resolution 2720 (22 December 2023) (UN 2023d) saw the A3 (then Gabon, Ghana and Mozambique) united in favour of a ceasefire in the Gaza strip. Both resolutions were passed but had seen Russia and the US abstaining.

African activism against Israel and in support to Palestine

Hamas has completed a major strategic objective by heightening the geopolitical relevance of the Palestinian cause and placing itself at the forefront of this fight. Interestingly, it has also sought to frame itself – despite an obvious disregard for the laws of war as well as the taking of hostages – as a defender of IL and IHL, in contrast to Israeli occupation, blockade, settlements, but also of Israeli conduct during the war (Palestine Chronicle 2024). Without necessarily going as far as supporting Hamas – apart from the Somali PM, as previously mentioned – Israel's image on the continent has suffered greatly from its blatant disregard for IHL and dehumanizing language by senior officials regarding Palestinians/Gazans.

This has in turn allowed for some activism on the part of several African countries in support to the Palestinian cause. South Africa especially, at first ambivalent in her response to the war, has been at the forefront of this fight in the arena of international justice, building on her own experience of apartheid and historic support to Palestine. Although she has not followed through on her parliament's recommendation to close the Israeli embassy in Pretoria and cut bilateral ties until there is a ceasefire (Africanews 2023), she did recall her diplomats in Tel Aviv (November 2023) (O'Regan & Fabricius 2023). She then proceeded to submit a referral to the ICC along with Bangladesh, Bolivia, Comoros and Djibouti (same month) (Baboolal 2023). She instituted proceedings at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Israel on the basis of the Genocide Convention (December 2023), obtaining an array of provisional measures (January 2024, and again in March) (ICJ 2023).

No African country has requested to intervene in the case in what is still an early stage in the proceedings (although Colombia and Nicaragua both submitted such a request). The AU has nevertheless saluted the ICJ January decision (VOA 2024), while Uganda has publicly distanced itself from the Ugandan judge at the ICJ, which took a remarked and extremist position, in the sense that its pro-Israeli tendency was more marked than that of the Israeli judge himself (Ndebele 2024).

Namibia is the African state that has reacted most strongly to South Africa's move, or rather to Germany's reaction to the case, the latter having pledged to come to the defence of Israel at the ICJ (Talmon 2024). The former German colony has harshly criticized German support to Israel, conjuring the memory of the Herero and Nama genocide (1904-1908), an issue not fully settled between colonized and colonizer to this day (Kupemba 2024). Namibia has went on to criticize ICJ's provisional order, finding cause for disappointment in the Court not ordering a ceasefire in the Gaza strip (Iyambo 2024).

Algeria has been another African champion of the Palestinian cause. She seized the ICC as early as 7 November 2023 (MEMO 2023), besides which she led the charge at the UNSC, her tenureship having begun on 1 January 2024. She seized the UNSC regarding South Africa v. Israel on 16 January (Leslous 2024) and obtained a meeting on the ICJ's provisional order on 31 January. The latter allowed for other A3 members Mozambique and Sierra Leone to take a stand, saluting the order, calling for Israel's

compliance and criticizing the suspension of funding to UNRWA by several countries (UN 2024a). An Algeria-drafted resolution at the UNSC demanding a ceasefire in the Gaza strip was vetoed by the US on 20 February (UN 2024b). Both Algeria and South Africa have successfully opposed Israel's observer status at the AU (Du Plessis 2024).

African reactions to the intensifying Iran-Israel proxy war and limited direct warfare

By and large, African nations have failed to react to the Iran-Israel proxy war that had been escalating in parallel to the Gaza war, including the Israeli airstrike on Beirut. The latter probably weighed heavily in Lebanon's recent decision to accept the jurisdiction of the ICC (Reuters 2024d). They also remained cautious on the much nearer Red Sea crisis. Only 2 African countries publicly endorsed US-UK strikes on the Houthis: Guinea-Bissau and Kenya (Mutambo & Kitimo 2024); Egypt having only called for "uniting international and regional efforts to reduce instability in the region" (Al Jazeera 2024). Many major UK and US African allies took a neutral stance instead, despite the very direct implications to their own trade and security, by fear of getting entangled in the proxy war.

Several African countries however, including Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Mozambique, Sierra Leone and South Africa have condemned the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus (Al Harathy 2024, AMI 2024, SANews 2024, SIS 2024). At the subsequent UNSC meeting on 2 April, Algeria and Sierra Leone firmly condemned the strike, while Mozambique "emphasized that all parties involved, especially Israel, must strictly adhere to international legal norms and agreements" (UN 2024c). After Operation True Promise, at another UNSC meeting (14 April), the A3 unanimously called "on all parties to exercise utmost restraint" (UN 2024d), echoing the Egyptian position (Samir 2024). The representative of Sierra Leone, talking in the name of the A3+1 (also Algeria, Mozambique and Guyana), found it "imperative to avoid a regional spillover of the Gaza conflict and to de-escalate tensions in the wider region of the Middle East, including in Yemen" at another UNSC meeting (15 April), this time called to discuss the extension of the conflict to Yemen (UN 2024e).

Both Israel and Palestine are Africa's neighbours, as they share land and sea borders with Egypt. The latter has been caught between a rock and a hard place, usually meeting criticism for her role in the conflict and in the blockade of the Gaza strip. She has been reluctant to let Palestinian refugees in the Sinai, for security and financial reasons, but also not to facilitate an ethnic cleansing of Gazans that would pave the way for Israeli colonization; a scenario publicly supported by certain Israeli officials. It further entertains a complicated relationship with both Israel and Hamas (Kayali 2024). Qatar-facilitated peace talks have mainly taken place in Cairo. Meanwhile, Egypt has fortified her border as Israeli operations moved south, creating a 2 miles-wide buffer zone with the Gaza strip. The measure has been framed as "precautionary" (Murphy 2024).

The African coast and the Red Sea crisis

No front of the Iran-Israel proxy war has this far had as much importance for the African continent as Yemen. The most obvious consequence of the Houthi strikes and US-UK counter-strikes has been the disruption of navigation on the Red Sea, with dire consequences for all coastal states (Egypt, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia) as well as Ethiopia and South Sudan. Egypt, a country already facing a severe economic crisis, and that has been only barely bailed out by UAE, IMF and EU agreements (Lewis 2024, Werr 2024, Werr & Strohecker 2024), has reported a 40% fall in revenue from the Suez canal in January (Reuters 2024a).

Eritrea is also in danger of becoming a Houthi target (Sheba Intelligence 2024), as was already the case during the Yemeni civil war in 2016 (Tekle 2016). Port Sudan is threatened by complete paralysis after Sudanese external trade and South Sudanese oil exports have already fallen sharply due to the civil war in Sudan and heavy taxes levied by the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) (Dabanga 2024a, 2024b). The port had also been a vital entry point for humanitarian aid, now diverted (Dabanga 2024c, Harter 2024). South Sudan had already been going through a grave economic crisis due to the war in neighbouring Sudan and damage on an oil pipeline to Port Sudan. It has further blamed the Red Sea crisis for its current woes (Africanews 2024).

Djibouti, which is also the main port for Ethiopian exports, has had to step up efforts to secure shipments, while still facing a declining traffic, delays and rising costs (Taylor 2024). While the small country is home to several foreign military bases, a feature it says participates in its security, Houthi strikes on the US base cannot be excluded outright (Milliken 2024). Djibouti is the primary base of operations for the US Africa Command (AFRICOM). A stray Houthi missile further landed in Taleh, SSC-Khatumo (Somalia) (Horn Observer 2024). Although it is unlikely the crisis was the reason behind Ethiopia's move, the latter has been careful to frame her controversial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Somaliland, signed on 1 January 2024, within the context of Houthi strikes (Maddox 2024).

The MoU, that allows Ethiopia to access the port of Berbera for commercial purposes and to obtain a naval base near Djibouti's border (Awdal), has triggered a grave crisis with Somalia, bringing both Horn nations to the brink of war. The crisis presents other threats, such as the resurgence of piracy in Puntland, apparent since November 2023 (Oyewole 2024). Another very likely consequence is the heightening of the illegal flow of war material and other smuggled goods between Yemen and Somalia (Abu Bakr 2024). The Somaliland Coast Guard has recently arrested 170 Ethiopian human traffickers in Eastern Sanaag, a disputed regions between Somaliland, SSC-Khatumo and Puntland (Garowe Online 2024).

Effect on terrorist groups across Africa

In turn, this has naturally reinforced Al Shabaab (AS). The response from Al Qaeda (AQ), Islamic State (IS) affiliates and other terrorist groups across Africa, which base their legitimacy on a fundamentalist vision of Islam and on armed jihad, has been

unambiguous. Communiques by AQIM, JNIM (AQ affiliates in North and West Africa) and AS have celebrated the 7 October attack (ADF 2023a, Weiss 2023). Conversely, the Iran-Israel and Iran-US proxy war and specifically the revival of the Israel-Palestine conflict are a bonanza for those groups' propaganda and recruitment, a feature the latter have been far from neglecting (Firode 2023).

The fact is exemplified by IS renewed campaign through its affiliates on all African fronts "in support to Palestinian Muslims", including in Cameroon, the DRC, Mali, Mozambique and Nigeria (Karr 2024). Governments have often been at loss to counter this propaganda effort that more often than not builds on a pro-Palestinian sentiment in the general population, a fact particularly salient in Arab and Muslim African countries. This partly explains the pro-Hamas speech of the Somali PM, which has nevertheless backfired into favouring the desertion of around 1,000 troops in favour of clan militias or Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Jaysh al-Islam (Horn Observer 2023b).

The effects of an escalation of the Iran-Israel proxy war into a direct conflict would be less obvious however. Iran has murky links with AQ affiliates, despite official negotiations (Rafizadeh 2023). IS is however a long-standing enemy of both Israel and Iran (and Shia Muslims), as exemplified recently by the attack in Kerman (Smith, Kemal & Webber 2024).

Anti-westernism, anticolonialism and pan-Africanism as vectors of influence

Major geopolitical confrontations have not only happened on the background of an ever-growing terrorist threat, but also of a war for influence between the West (France first and foremost, the US and the EU in a lesser measure) and subversive or revisionist powers, seen as pushing an agenda challenging a world order shaped by and for the West (primarily Russia, China in a lesser measure). The rise of anti-westernism has been helped both by French-Western attitudes and policies and Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns in the wake of the most recent French interventions on the continent (CAR, Mali). It has coincided with Russia's and under her umbrella Wagner's (now Africa Corps') renewed interest for the continent and – mostly successful – attempt at dislodging France and other perceived Western enemies in her own favour. All the while, targeted countries, either in the West or amiable governments in Africa (Burkina Faso and Niger before the coups, now Chad and coastal West Africa in particular), have struggled to face the threat and respond to grievances, whether artificial or legitimate (Carbone & Ragazzi 2023, Gotteland 2023).

Perceived double standards in dealing with the war in Ukraine on the one side, the war in Gaza and the Iran-Israel proxy war on the other, either in the domains of economic sanctions, international justice or responses from international organizations and the UN – where some illegal strikes were unambiguously condemned, but not others, including the Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus – can only heighten the sense there is a new "Cold War" between the West and its allies on the one side and subversive/revisionist powers on the other. This perception can only be more acute on the African continent, where such a narrative has pervaded the information

sphere for several years, and with apparent success. The subversive/revisionist axis has attempted to court the "Global South" with a rhetoric supportive of anticolonialism – and, in Africa specifically, of pan-Africanism (Gardin 2023, Rodkiewicz 2023).

Whereas Iran clearly portrays itself as a one of the subversive/revisionist and by extension anticolonial powers (France 24 2023b), Israel's PM Benjamin Netanyahu has framed the war in Gaza as the defence of "Western civilization" (Times of Israel 2024). This in turn has helped not only the cause of Palestine, but Iran's diplomatic push on the continent since 2023 and has also further pressured Israeli efforts at normalization of relations or deepening of ties with African nations (Soufan Center 2024, Toğa 2024).

Iran's diplomatic offensive in Africa

Vying for influence on the continent, while not new, has met with little success and has not been a major strategic focus for Iran. The normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia (March 2023), combined with the string of coups in the Sahel, had given impetus to Iranian efforts in Africa well before the Gaza war (Cafiero 2023, Soufan Center 2024). President Ebrahim Raisi's East Africa tour in July 2023 had been the first in more than 11 years. It followed the 1st Iran-West Africa Economic Summit held in Tehran in March of the same year. This was followed by Iranian attendance to the BRICS summit in Johannesburg in August – at which Iran, along with others, including Egypt and Ethiopia, were invited to join the forum (ADF 2023b, Financial Tribune 2023).

Historically, Iran's main partners are Algeria, post-apartheid South Africa, Sudan and Zimbabwe (Chigora & Goredema 2011, Collins & Burr 2003, Dazi-Héni 2019, Onderco 2016). Ghana and Guinea-Bissau also cooperate with this country in various domains (Hashiru 2017). Iranian drones had been used by Ethiopia in the war against her Tigray region (2020-2022) (ADF 2023b). Egypt and Morocco are the most inimical to the Iranian regime (Al-Obeidy 2019, Bahgat 2009).

The 2010's had been a low point for Africa-Iran relations, with no less than 6 African countries (Comoros, Gambia, Morocco, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan) severing bilateral ties. International sanctions against Iran over its nuclear program, perceived Shia proselytism in Sunni countries and destabilizing operations (state terrorism, arms and drugs trade, support to the Axis on the African coast of the Red Sea, support to separatist movements in Casamance and Western Sahara, the Iran-Israel, -Saudi and -US proxy wars) have long impeded both political relations and trade (Al Jazeera 2018, BBC News 2010, Hinshaw 2011, Reuters 2016a, 2016b, RFE/RL 2016). Terrorist plots to be carried out by Iranian agents have been prevented in Kenya (2012), Ethiopia (2021), Ghana, Senegal and Tanzania (2022) (Lough & Miriri 2012, ADF 2023b).

The normalization of relations with Djibouti (September 2023) and Sudan (October 2023) are rather the direct result of the Iran-Saudi normalization than that of the brewing conflict between Iran and Israel. It should be added that while Djibouti and Iran share a common view of the Palestinian question, Sudan is not keen on endangering his own normalization process with Israel, as was exemplified by the latter's refusal to allow for an Iranian naval base to be set up on its coast in exchange for a warship

(Barlyo & Faucon 2024, Scollon 2024). Beyond the strengthening of ties in the Sahel and with Algeria (Lucente 2024) or Tanzania, Iran also seems to be in the process of normalizing relations with Somalia (Xinhua 2024).

Perspectives on the significance for Africa of the Iran-Israel conflict and a possible further escalation

The Palestinian question, the Iran-Israel, -Saudi and -US proxy wars have been major stakes of both Iranian and Israeli diplomatic efforts in Africa. That Israel should picture itself as an outpost of "Western civilization" and Iran frame itself as a champion of anti-westernism and anticolonialism have helped the latter's cause thanks to the military coups that shook the Sahel since 2020. The normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and onset of the Gaza war have also favoured Iran in this quest for allies, proxies, as well as business partners and supporters on the international arena.

The longer and the bloodier the current Gaza war is getting, the more difficult it becomes for African partners of Israel to maintain even a neutral stance, while warmer relations with Iran are seen in an ever more favourable light. This is all the more apparent as the continent has come at the front of the fight for international justice and within international organizations and the UN in favour of Palestine and against Israel. Current African nations of an ambiguous standing, such as Chad or Senegal, could well be the next to get closer to Iran, although not necessarily by breaking ties with Israel. Sudan is a case in point in that regard.

On the other hand, the consequences of the Gaza war on African public opinion, especially in Arab or Muslim countries, are a boon for terrorist groups across the continent, whether or not they have any sympathy for Iran or Shiism. A ceasefire in Gaza would therefore not only relieve pressure on Israel on the African diplomatic front, but also temper terrorist propaganda and recruitment. It remains difficult to project how Iran's influence in Africa would be affected by a lapse in open hostilities. In any case, whether Hamas is crushed or Israel withdraws without attaining its war aims in the Gaza strip, Iran is set to benefit by heralding resistance to colonialism and the Western world order, in an always more favourable information environment and political atmosphere. Another major security risk is the opportunity this presents for destabilization in Africa on either side of the proxy war, as there is little doubt Iran would use the opportunity to reinforce the Axis.

On the opposite end, a further escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict into direct hostilities as has been witnessed in April 2024 and remains a high risk likely would pressure both Israeli and Iranian partners, as the US and their allies would be likely to sanction Iran further, or perhaps even join the Israeli war effort. Even if this escalation remains limited to both Iran and Israel, without further external involvement, the economic fallout of such an escalation could be disastrous for the continent, on a scale similar to the consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

In that regard, the Red Sea crisis represents but a taste of what the entire continent would have to suffer. And yet, as things stand, the extension of the Iran-Israel proxy



war to Yemen and the Red Sea have already crippled various African economies and finances by impeding navigation and external trade. For this reason, it remains possible that the war, should it escalate or last much longer at its current intensity, be exported to the African continent itself. The likeliest such event is the strike by the Houthis of targets within Eritrea, Djibouti or Somalia. Covert operations by one or the other against the interests of its adversary remain also a very high risk, as has been demonstrated by foiled Iranian terrorist plots on African soil.

Conflict of Interest

The author hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributors

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