The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy and Developmental Activities in Sub-Saharan Africa, Islam in Africa

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The Islamic Republic of Iran’s Foreign Policy and Developmental Activities in Sub-Saharan Africa

Eric Lob, PhD
Florida International University
Question

• How has the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) instrumentalized development to further its geopolitical, economic, and ideological interests in Sub-Saharan Africa?
Case Study

• Construction Jihad (CJ) (1979-2001)
  – Rural development organization
  – Helped the IRI consolidate power against domestic and foreign opponents (1979-1983)
    • Improved rural infrastructure and services
    • Spread revolutionary and Islamist values
    • Provided logistical support during Iran-Iraq War
  – Became ministry and began overseas operations in 1984-1985
  – Merged with Ministry of Agriculture to form Ministry of Agricultural Jihad (MAJ) in 2001
Scholarly Contribution

• Temporality: De-Radicalization of IRI’s Foreign Policy in Africa and Beyond (1984-2005)
• Geography: IRI’s Foreign Policy in Non-Muslim and Sunni-Majority Africa vs. Shiite World
• Tactics: Development as Soft Power Mechanism vs. Covert, Military Assistance and Ideological Propagation
Methods

• Interviews with IRI/ CJ Officials and Development Experts in Iran and Africa

• Archival Research at the IRI’s Parliamentary Library and National Library & Archives and the MAJ’s Library and Research Center
Outline

• Theoretical Framework: Complex Realism
• De-Radicalization (1984-2005)
• CJ in Africa (1985-1991)
• Re-Radicalization (2005-2013)
• MAJ in Africa (2007-2009)
• Conclusion
Theory: Complex Realism

• Ehteshami & Hinnebusch
• Dependent Variable: Foreign Policymaking & Outcomes
• Three Independent, Structural Variables:
  – Anarchic and Dynamic, Regional & Int’l System
  – Realist or Material and Constructivist or Ideological Objectives
Radicalization (1980-1984)

- International: Bipolar World/ Cold War
- Regional: Iranian Revolution, American Hostage Crisis, Iran-Iraq War & Radical Regimes in Africa
- Domestic: Radical Government in Iran
  - Material: Financial and Military Support to National Liberation Movements in Africa
  - Ideological: Revolution & Anti-Imperialism
De-Radicalization - Conservatism (1984-1988)

- **International**: Bipolar World/ Cold War
- **Regional**: Iran-Iraq War, International Sanctions & Radical Regimes in Africa
- **Domestic**: Conservative Government in Iran
  - Material: Mitigate Isolation and Establish Diplomatic & Commercial Relations with Africa
  - Ideological: Shiite Islam & Guardianship of the Jurist (*velayat-e faqih*)
De-Radicalization - Pragmatism (1989-2005)

• International: Unipolar World/ Post-Cold War
• Regional: Gulf Wars in Middle East & Fragile Democratization in Africa
• Domestic: Moderate & Reformist Governments in Iran
  – Material: Strengthen Diplomatic & Commercial Relations with Africa
  – Ideological: Minimize Ideological Propagation & Religious Proselytization

• Formalized, Routinized & Professionalized
• Tanzania (1987) & Ghana (1989)
  – Expanded Mechanized Agriculture, Improved Farming, and Increased Production of Strategic Crops, Livestock, and Fish
  – Distributed Medication, Administered Vaccinations, and Provided Vocational Training
  – Offered Loans, Supplied Irrigation and Drinking Water, Supported Rural Industry, and Constructed Roads, Dams, Hospitals, and Health Clinics

• Sudan & Sierra Leone (1991)
  – Agricultural Mechanization and Extension
  – Road Construction
  – Medication and Hygiene
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Re-Radicalization (2005-2013)

• International: Unipolar World/ Post-Cold War
• Regional: Iran Nuclear Crisis & Int’l Sanctions
• Domestic: Hardliner Government
  – Material: Intensify Diplomatic & Commercial Relations with Africa
  – Ideological: Radical Anti-Imperialism & Conservative Religious-Political Doctrine
MAJ in Africa (2007-2009)

• Formalized, Routinized & Professionalized
• Expanded Presence in Africa
• Economics
  – Assistance w/ Agriculture & Fisheries
  – Vocational Training
  – Bilateral Investment & Trade Agreements
  – Business Contracts & Export Markets
MAJ in Africa (2007-2009)

- Geopolitics
  - Uranium Deposits
  - Access to Strategic Routes along Red Sea
  - Conflict Mediation
  - Multilateral Organizations
  - UN/IAEA Votes

- Limitations
  - Geostrategic Priorities
  - Resource Allocations
Conclusion: Mixed Results

• Opportunities
  – Radical Regimes (1960s-1990s)
  – Sizeable Agrarian Economies
  – Widespread Rural Poverty
  – Formidabler Developmental Challenges
Conclusion: Mixed Results

• Material & Ideological Gains:
  – Diplomatic Recognition & Regional Clout
    • Conflict Mediation & Multilateral Organizations
  – Business Contracts & Export Markets
  – Strategic Routes along Red Sea (Force Projection)
  – UN Votes for Human Rights Record
Conclusion: Mixed Results

• Constraints:
  – Inauspicious Demographics
  – Foreign Competition
Conclusion: Mixed Results

• Material & Ideological Setbacks:
  – Temporary Cessation of Diplomatic Ties
    • Covert, Military Assistance & Ideological Propagation
  – UN/IAEA Votes against Nuclear Program
  – Minimal Conversions