

IRAN'S DRIVING DETERMINANTS OF ENLARGEMENT TOWARDS AFRICA: CASE STUDY OF NIGERIA, SENEGAL AND GHANA

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Introduction

The concept of the “Third World”, coined by Alfred Sauvy during the ‘Cold War’, initially defined ideological neutrality and a non-systemic stance, but over time it became synonymous with economic backwardness. The African continent, as one of the geographies where this transformation is most clearly reflected, became a focal point for foreign powers’ efforts to gain influence via religious, cultural, and economic means. In line with the foreign policy understanding shaped after the Islamic Revolution, Iran has deepened its relations with this continent by using religious values as a foreign policy instrument in Africa. In this context, Iran uses Shiism as both a cultural and ideological tool and tries to build an ‘anti-imperialist solidarity’ through its religious identity.

Iran’s presence in Africa is not purely cultural or humanitarian; on the contrary, it has been shaped as part of an ideologically based foreign policy strategy. This strategy instrumentalizes Shiism through sectarian expansionism and aims to create anti-Western blocs and balance the influence of actors such as the US, Israel, and Saudi Arabia in the region. This country’s policy of expansion through religion and culture, in interaction with different socio-religious structures in Africa, has the potential to create a significant

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break in the geopolitical balances of the continent. In this perspective, the main hypothesis of the article is that Iran pursues a soft power strategy in Africa through religious discourse and sectarian identity, and that it constructs this strategy to legitimize its anti-Western discourse at the global level and avoid Western sanctions on one hand, and to gain long-term political influence in the African continent on the other.

Additionally, the case study method was preferred in this study, whereby Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana were taken as case examples, and the analysis process was structured in accordance with this methodological framework. The choice of these three African countries was based on the predominantly Shiite population residing in these countries. Because while Nigeria is an African country with the highest number of Shiite Muslims, the Shiite density in Senegal is medium and the lowest in Ghana. For this reason, the scope and limitations of the study were determined by the sociocultural instruments of Iran's expansion policy, especially religion and education, and the application area was determined with three African countries.

The academic literature on Iran's Africa policy has shown a remarkable increase in recent years in terms of both quality and quantity. This literature analyses Iran's strategic engagements, religious and economic instruments, regional rivalries and soft power strategies on the continent from a multidimensional perspective. Countries such as South Africa, Nigeria and Tanzania have featured prominently in the analyses of Iran's strategic enlargement in Sub-Saharan Africa (Kohnert 2024; Lefebvre 2019; Lob 2016). The engagements conducted through these countries are considered as part of Iran's quest for legitimacy at the global level, beyond its efforts to establish bilateral relations. Iran-Africa trade relations are mostly analysed within the framework of South-South cooperation and economic dependency theories (Lob and Yilmazkuday 2025). These studies show that Iran positions Africa as a strategic alternative, especially in an economic environment shaped by sanctions. Similarly, Iranian researchers also emphasize the need to develop economic relations with Africa and the importance of energy, infrastructure and trade in this context (Asgar Khani and Arghavani Pirsalami 2011). From a security perspective, Iran's engagement in Africa is not confined to the economy; it is also a reflection of regional rivalry. The ramifications of the Iran-Israel rivalry in the Red Sea and East Africa are evaluated within this framework (Bazoobandi and Talebian 2024). The basis of Iran's soft power strategies in Africa is religious diplomacy and sectarian identity (Karaoğlu 2022; Rigiderakhshan 2022). Moreover, Iran's attempts to rebuild its image in the African public opinion are also evaluated within the framework of cultural diplomacy and 'smart security' concepts (Karami 2024). Historically, the

Ahmadinejad era (2005-2013) is seen as a turning point in Iran's policy towards Africa, with increased diplomatic visits and cooperation agreements during this period (Şeker 2017). This study, on the other hand, aims to contribute to the literature by analyzing Iran's Africa policy through a combined historical, religious, economic, and strategic lens, using three selected case countries, Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana, as focal points for the analysis. Therefore, since Iran's expansion efforts have not been analysed simultaneously in the context of the three countries, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature.

This article consists of four main parts. In the first part, the historical development of the concept of Third World/underdevelopment and Iran's approach to this concept will be discussed in a theoretical framework. In the second part, the historical background of Iran-Africa relations will be analysed and the differences in the African policies of the politicians who came to power after the revolution will be revealed. In the third part, the geopolitical, economic and religious contexts of Africa's relevance in Iran's foreign policy will be assessed. In the last part, Iran's use of soft power elements will be explained through case studies of Nigeria, Senegal and Ghana. This structure aims to provide a comprehensive analysis by combining both the theoretical and practical dimensions of the study.

Theoretical Framework

The term "Third World" is used by many to refer to developing countries, such as poor states in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania. But when the term was coined in the 1950s, there was no connection to poverty. In his theory of the "Three Worlds", the French scholar and public figure Alfred Sauvy, who explained it in 1952, emphasized the *Tiers Etat* (Third State) of French society before the Revolution of 1789, which at that time consisted of people who lacked privileges, and then categorized the countries of the world according to their participation in the Cold War (Sofjan 2023).

Accordingly, the First World countries were the capitalist countries, the Second World was represented by the socialist bloc, and the Third World were the nation states that did not directly participate in the bloc conflict. This means that this theory was part of the Three-World model used during the Cold War, and marginalization of those who were deemed unimportant. So, at the time, the Third World was simply used to refer to a country that was not considered capitalist or communist. In other words, in these years, the Third World was also a generalized name for countries that had just emerged from the grip of life-isolationism and had not yet completed their development.

Over the years, the term “Third World” has lost its original meaning and has come to be used to describe countries experiencing significant levels of economic underdevelopment. From this point of view, it would be appropriate to briefly discuss underdevelopment.

Being underdeveloped does not actually mean the absence of improvement. Underdevelopment, which is the concept that brings inequality to the forefront, Rodney explained by linking it to higher productivity of a certain segment of society (Rodney 2011, 13-14). As such, underdevelopment is a tool for developing a critical perspective on the conditions that lead to imbalance in a positive and negative production environment. Underdevelopment therefore strives to explain situations that emphasize historical, socio-political and economic contingencies that give one country or region an unfair advantage over another when compared to other ones. Especially concrete examples of this concept, which is directly related to third world countries, can be found in the African continent (Maoism.ru 2018).

Under the influence of religious ideals, Iran embarked on a dramatic shift in its foreign policy after the Islamic Revolution, preferring to develop relations with underdeveloped Third World countries that aim to challenge the established order and challenge the status quo. These developments became prominent in the rhetoric of the leaders, especially during the Ahmadinejad era, with a greater focus on Third World countries (Arghavani Pirsalami 2013, 83) and during the Reisi administration, this was concretized through diplomatic contacts. Based on the Third World theory, Iran has attempted to foster its ties with the countries in the region, especially using the language factor among sociocultural values and controlled Shiism among religious phenomena as a political tool.

By using the sociocultural method, Iran is trying to spread its cultural heritage among African countries, to ensure that its language is learned, and most importantly, to deal with them in the direction of its own strategy. In this context, Iran can convert the states that are described as Third-World countries through opening strategic, and cultural Iranian centers, providing language education in schools operating in Africa, granting scholarships to African students and providing opportunities to receive education in Iranian universities (Abdullah 2016). On this axis, it can be said that Iran's attitude is strong in Nigeria, Cameroon in West Africa, Uganda in East Africa, and some South African countries by means of the support of below:

- Embassies
- Iranian Cultural Centers
- Iranian Language Centers

- Revolutionary Guards
- Institutions operating in different fields (Sadeghi and Hajimineh 2019, 223).

In addition, Iran's cultural presence in Africa illustrates itself mostly in West Africa and to a lesser extent in East and South Africa. When evaluated based on these countries the Islamic Movement Party of Nigeria, led by Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, has a great role in the spread of Iranian culture, especially in Nigeria (Lewis 2020, 3). At the same time, within the framework of the strategy implemented by the Iranian Cultural Centers operating here, cooperation with Nigerian TV channels has facilitated the influence of other African countries through them. As a result of the cooperation of the Iranian Cultural Centers with the Al-Africa Islam TV channel in Nigeria, a Quran contest broadcasted in Nigeria was organized in 19 African countries too (AhlulBeyt News Agency 2016).

Besides, Iran is trying to attract people to its side by opening language centers in many African countries and teaching Islamic values and the Persian language. An example of this can be cited in the epitome of Senegal. During the official meeting of Iran's Ambassador to Senegal Einollah Gasev and the Minister of Higher Education and Research of Senegal in Dakar, the idea of establishing a Persian language course in higher education institutions in Senegal was proposed by Iran. Senegalese officials also expressed that they welcome this idea and stated that they believe that the realization of this proposal, considering the common points, will positively affect Iran-Senegal relations (Ministry of Education 2016).

Taking advantage of the language factor as well as the dysfunctionality of broadcast channels in the context of sociocultural values, Iran follows the model of the pro-Iranian Hispan TV channel broadcasting in Spanish. (Bouvier 2024) Therefore, in 2017, the channel launched the "Hausa TV" program (Mehr News Agency 2017) broadcasting to more than 50 million Hausa speakers specially in Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana and other African countries. Despite being published in a broadly spoken African language, it is largely uninterested in African affairs, focusing instead on the challenge of the "Axis of Resistance" versus Israel and the role of Shia Islam in Africa.

On the other hand, in trying to turn Shiism into a political tool under its control, this state took advantage of the fact that Shiites were already oppressed by the majority Sunni Muslims and that Africans were more inclined to religious defence than their crucial concerns. Even the major Western countries are aware of this fact and have figured out that they cannot do it without the axis of faith in the political calculus in Africa. So, they have a certain discomfort with the instrumentalization of Islam. But

they must also refrain from any action that could provoke the anger of the Muslim community, which is now a substantial driving force in many African countries (Camara 2021). And this imposes limitations on their activities in the region. Realizing this, Iran utilizes the religious factor more effectively to create an anti-Western front consisting of African states and to establish partnerships that will strengthen its position within the “Axis of Resistance”. In this regard, Iran takes advantage of two elements in the regions where it has interests to turn Shi’ism into the dominant sect.

The first of these is the use of Taqiyya for Ahl al-Bait by hiding their identity (Demir 2018). The second is the introduction of development and humanitarian aid projects to get into the hearts and minds of people, as Christian missionaries did in poor countries (Awad 2019, 1). Iran utilizes the second element more effectively in its foreign policy activities in the African continent. Although the countries that settled here have rich wealth, they are just as unequipped and financially inadequate in terms of putting them into operation.

Historical Background of Iran-Africa Relations

Although the African continent was not a distinctive region that paid attention to Iranian foreign policy, it has emerged as a region where Iran has been trying to expand its sphere of influence since the 21st century. In fact, the roots of relations between Iran and the African continent go back to ancient times. While looking at history, it is seen that cooperation for commercial purposes came to the fore in relations that went back to the imperial period. People of Persian origin immigrated to East Africa in the 16th century, and during the Pahlavi period, economic relations were developed mostly with South African countries (Chimarizeni 2017, 39). Essentially, Reza Shah Pahlavi remained in exile in South Africa from 1941 to 1946, and bilateral relations were sustained during the reign of his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi (Fakude 2016, 4). However, bilateral relations were tried to be developed in different periods, after the Islamic Revolution, Iran broke all ties with apartheid South Africa and commenced to impose sanctions, and with this, Africa was thrown into the background in Iranian foreign policy. Only towards the end of the 20th century, the course of international relations began to change, and after the collapse of the apartheid regime, Iran again brought its relations with the African continent to the fore. On this axis, economic relations started to evolve, and South Africa imported almost 65-90% of its oil needs from Iran (Onderco 2016, 256). In parallel with this, the current religious leader Ali Khamenei, who was the president during the reign of Ayatollah Khomeini,

visited African countries, including Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Angola, in 1986 (Keynoush 2021, 35), and made various agreements, especially on the development of infrastructure. However, Iran's interest in Africa emerged at a declining level during the reign of Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was elected President after Khomeini's death. Because during this period, Rafsanjani only visited Senegal in 1991. Like Rafsanjani's government, interest in Africa decreased relatively during the period of Mohammed Khatami, who was elected President after Rafsanjani. Especially during the Khatami period, which was called the new era of the external policy of Iran (Kaya and Şartepe 2016, 4), the discourse of exporting the revolution was moved away, as Iran was focusing on softening its relations with the West. The fact that Africa received the attention that it deserves in Iranian politics began with the reign of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was elected President in 2005. Ahmadinejad tried to keep relations with Africa at the highest level by adopting the "axis of resistance" discourse formulated by Ali Khamenei. Thereupon, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, in a speech in New York, underlined that "Iran does not have any limitations or obstacles to the development of its ties with African countries" (Warner 2011) and expressed that Iran is willing to enlarge and strengthen its relations with Africa in 2008. In addition, especially South African countries have taken a stand in favor of developing economic relations with Iran, and providing the domestic economic needs played a major role in this. Although there was a decrease in the course of relations with Africa during the period of Hassan Rouhani, who took the presidency after Ahmadinejad, he underlined that there are no barriers to the development of bilateral relations between African countries and Iran, in the meeting held with the King of Lesotho and the President of Zimbabwe in 2017 (Middle East Monitor 2016).

The official meetings between Iran and African states did not finish, and in October 2017, the President of Tanzania met with Rouhani during his visit to Iran. While emphasizing the economic cooperation between the two countries, the President of Tanzania mentioned that "Tanzania plays a transit country role for Iran in providing access to East Africa" (Tasnimnews 2017). Upon this, Rouhani stated that "Iranian companies are ready to enter development projects covering the whole of Africa, including Tanzania (ISNA 2017). Such official visits were made regularly between the parties, and this is accepted as evidence that Africa has not lost its importance in Iran's foreign policy, on the contrary, it is trying to be more prominent. This is supported by the statement made by President Ebrahim Raisi, who took office in 2021. While emphasizing the need to expand relations with non-Western countries, Raisi underlined that Africa would play a central role in this axis and signaled that Iran would seriously activate all its capacities for cooperation with

African countries (Naeni 2021). By taking a step that had not been taken for 11 years, Raisi visited three African countries (Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe) in July 2023. During this visit, 21 agreements were signed in various fields, including oil, telecommunications, and information technologies, and the African continent was seen as an important region of opportunity (Naeni 2023). During Raisi's term, Iran aimed to increase its trade and economic relations with Africa to weaken Western influence and mitigate Western sanctions (Karr et al. 2024). Masoud Pezeshkian, who took office in July 2024, expressed his desire to strengthen relations with African countries in his message titled "*My Message to the New World*", using the term "Global South." (Daressalam 2024) The energy, economy, and trade relations initiated with many African countries during Raisi's presidency are expected to continue under Pezeshkian (Movahed 2025), who seeks to open a new window of diplomacy with the West (Slavin 2024). The Third Iran-Africa Conference on Economic Cooperation in April 2025 in Tehran with the participation of President Pezeshkian is a visible sign of this. The conference was attended by more than 20 ministers, 14 deputy ministers and senior officials from various countries of the African continent (Etemad Online 2025).

The Prominence of Africa in Iranian Foreign Policy

While researching Iran's foreign strategy, firstly it would be appropriate to focus on the priorities or targets determined by this country within the framework of its external policy. In this axis the objectives adopted by Iran are as follows (Clawson 1994, 42):

- Being self-sufficient in the field of economy, policy, and military.
- To take advantage of the deterrence policy by eliminating the elements that will pose a risk for Iran.
- To direct attention to the out of the border rather than the internal issues, in line with the success of the revolution.
- Effectively taking control of regions where it has its own interests (for example, Africa).
- To provide Iran as a regional power through realizing these goals.

In the context of the objectives, the reason why Iran attaches importance to Africa should be categorized under four main headings. This includes issues such as the fulfillment of needs covering the economic, political, military, and religious spheres. If examined in more detail, it is possible to list them as follows:

Economic Dimension

Iran seeks to capitalize on Africa's natural resources by investing in the exploration of uranium reserves. The country aims to achieve significant gains by highlighting Africa's potential and deploying financial assets (Shahvar 2020, 60) to support Iranian companies in projects such as energy pipelines, telecommunications, dam construction, and silage production. Additionally, Africa, with its abundant raw materials for food and industrial production, offers a lucrative market for Iranian products (African Natural Resources Center 2016, 4).

Political Engagement

Iran aims to solidify its influence in Africa by securing the support of both African states and multinational corporations operating on the continent. However, Iran faces opposition from Israel, which seeks to maintain control over its activities in the region. Another key reason for Iran's interest in Africa is its desire to garner support from various African countries in resisting the sanctions imposed by the U.S. and Western states due to its nuclear program (Chimarizeni 2017, 38). Iran has successfully gained such support from African nations like Gabon, which, despite its observer status at the United Nations, opposed sanctions against Iran. Furthermore, Iran leveraged its energy reserves as a political tool, offering oil to African nations at discounted prices in exchange for political backing. Kenya, for example, also supported Iran, motivated by its own ambitions to develop a nuclear power plant within the next decade (McAnenny 2014). In this context, Kenya seeks to benefit from Iran's expertise to help achieve this goal.

Strategic Objectives

To advance its strategic ambitions in the region, Iran is targeting the establishment of military bases in Africa. However, this ambition faces several challenges. To strengthen its influence, Iran is deepening its ties with Eritrea, utilizing Iranian tankers and military ships, and enhancing its naval presence at Eritrean ports such as Massawa and Assab (Stratfor.com 2012). Eritrean opposition forces have voiced concerns that Iran may be establishing a naval base at the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. In response, Iran clarified that its presence

in the region is linked to potential defense needs in case of future threats. Moreover, Iran is also leveraging other African countries, such as Somalia and Djibouti, for illicit activities (Calabrese 2020). It uses land routes in East Africa, which facilitate the smuggling of weapons, to transport illegal arms to targeted nations. Simultaneously, these routes help Iran circumvent Israeli actions and allow the movement of smuggled goods back to Iran (Mari 2017, 61).

Religious Factors

Africa's predominantly Muslim population—comprising both Sunni and significant Shi'a communities in countries like Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, Uganda, Mali, and Tanzania—makes the continent strategically important for Iran (Shahvar 2020, 60). Even though the overwhelming number of African Muslims are Sunni, the prevalence of Shiism is also noteworthy. Given the contest between Iran and Sunni-led states in the region, this religious outlook is one of the factors that make Africa appealing for Iran. Under Saudi Arabia's leadership, Sunni-majority countries in Africa have adopted a Saudi-centric version of Islam that opposes Iran's approach (AlSaied 2021). Iran, therefore, seeks to strengthen its influence among Shiite segments in Africa, leveraging religious ties to foster support.

As outlined, Africa holds strategic importance for Iran for multiple reasons. To capitalize on this, Iran is pursuing a political manoeuvre to secure its interests on the continent. Specifically, Iran is working to establish a favourable position before a Sunni-led opposition can emerge. Its strategy unfolds in three phases:

- **Phase One:** Developing bilateral relations with African countries.
- **Phase Two:** Advancing the concept of dialogue among divergent civilizations.
- **Phase Three:** Strengthening cooperation to eliminate the “axis of evil” states under U.S. leadership.

These phases align with Iran's broader soft power strategy, which aims to enhance its influence in various regions, including Africa. To achieve its goals, Iran employs various methods, and a comprehensive examination of these strategies is necessary to understand the full scope of its approach on the African continent.

Case Study Applications

When Muslims in Africa are considered in general, it can be said that this region is a place where Muslims live intensely. Most of them in this region also live in Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Congo, and Ghana. It is possible to understand this numerically in more detail from the table below.

Table 1: Number of Muslims/Shia's in Africa³

Country	Total Number of Muslims	Total Number of Shia's
Nigeria	104.700.000	3.000.000-7.000.000
Senegal	15.500.000	1.000.000
Ghana	1.900.000	less than 1.000.000

As it can be seen from the table, the frequency of settlement of the Muslim population in Africa differs from country to country. For this reason, Iran is trying to embody its existence by moving to regions where Muslims live more often and where the Shiite section constitutes a minority among the Sunni section in different ways. In this context, it is worthwhile to examine in detail Iran's utilization of the religious method in three main countries. Nigeria, which has the largest Muslim population, Senegal, which is in the middle segment of the population rankings, and Ghana, which is known for having a much lower than average Shia population.

Nigeria

Nigeria, the most populated country in Africa, is home to many religions, Islam and Christianity are the most widely accepted religions among them. Of these religions, especially the arrival of Islam in Nigeria needs to be emphasized. Because the reason why this religion is the most accepted one in Nigeria is due to its ancient roots. Those who brought Islam to Nigeria in the 9th century were Muslims from Egypt. Throughout the country, this religion expanded through the Fulani Muslims who migrated to Nigeria after the fall of the former Songhai kingdom in the 15th century (Njoku 1995). However, in the 20th century, especially after Nigeria gained independence in 1960, an Islamization program became widespread in the country. And thanks to this program, 100.000 people accepted Islam, (African Studies

³ The table was created by the authors based on information collected from different sources and used in the article.

Centre Leiden 2016) and the importance of Islam in Nigeria increased even more. In addition, it should be emphasized that the Muslim community in Nigeria is also divided into two sects. While almost 60 million of the Muslim community living there belongs to the Sunni sect, there is no clear statistical information about the number of people in the Shiite sect. Some sources claim that there are 4 million Shiite Muslims in Nigeria, and according to some, the number of Muslims is near 10 million (Szrom 2010). Since there is no clear figure, Shiite Muslims are considered as a minority here. For this reason, Iran is trying to be more active in this region, so that the Shiites here are no longer a minority. In this regard, Iran plans to attract the Sunni section of the region to its side. It has resorted to different ways to achieve this desire, and the Islamic Movement Party of Nigeria facilitated its attitude on this field (Elijah et al. 2021, 6). This party is trying to make Islam the dominant religion throughout the country.

Briefly looking at the history of the Islamic Movement Party of Nigeria, one should examine the issues in Nigeria in the 1970s (Onapajo 2017, 82-83). As a matter of fact, the tension between Muslims and Christians living in Nigeria, as well as various Muslim segments, started to increase gradually during these years, and Nigeria turned into a country where Islamist groups were in conflict. From the late 1970s, some Nigerian Muslims began to call for the Islamization of public life more loudly than in the previous two decades (Thurston 2017). On this axis, under the leadership of Ibrahim al-Zakzaky, the Islamic Movement Party has been more active since the 1980s. The main reason for this was the Iranian Islamic revolution that happened in 1979.

Inspired by the Iranian revolution, al-Zakzaky, who is a Sunni, wanted the government to be overthrown in the same way in Nigeria and to establish a system based on Islamic law. In fact, he introduced himself as a Shiite Muslim in his preachings in Northern Nigeria in the 1980s-1990s (Soonest 2019). Therefore, Iran supported the Islamic Movement Party of Nigeria, known as the jihadist party, and through this party, it provided military training to hundreds of Nigerians in the camps in Northern Nigeria, as in the Hezbollah camp (Schoonover 2013). The largest area of activity of this party is in Northern Nigeria. With the support of Iran, although this party wants to turn Shi'ism into the dominant sect in Nigeria, the number of anti-Shiite supporters is increasing in Nigeria. This segment, which describes themselves as anti-Shiite supporters, is a Salafi movement. They are generally representatives of Sunni Islam around the world and find Shi'ism inadequate for Islam.

On this axis, Nigerian Salafists accuse the Shiites of denying the completeness of the Quran, while the Shiites claim that the Nigerian Salafists

are closer to Wahhabis. The emergence of conflicts of opinion because of mutual accusations between different sects causes a civil war in Nigeria. And this is in the interest of Iran. By taking this as a basis and in the name of ending the discrimination against Shiite Muslims, Iran expands its sphere of influence easily in Nigeria. For this, the best method is to attract Sunni Muslims to their side, which is tried to be realized through the planned Shiite institutions. For the establishment of such institutions, Iran wants to establish the Institutional Network of Shiites in Africa. The first step towards this goal was taken on 10th August 2016. Secretary-General Abu Jaafar has taken initiatives such as the establishment of the "Ahl al-Bait African Union", which will become the reference of African Shiites and highlight the values of peace among societies across the continent (Yaymout 2016).

Iran's active use of religion in Nigeria is mainly due to this reason: before the 1990s, most Islamic scholars in Nigeria were unaware of the basic beliefs of Shiism. This is because most religious scholars, especially in Northern Nigeria, were using the Jalaleyni Tafsir. Hence, the Shiites did not have enough adequate sources of information to keep their religious beliefs alive. In this situation, the spread of Shiism in the region was not possible. Therefore, the Iranians took advantage of the lack of knowledge of Islamic scholars in Nigeria and most of West Africa, where scholars limited themselves to the books of the Maliki school of thought (Muhammed and Abdullahi 2019, 37-38).

As it can be understood from the above, Iran has the advantage of religion, which can use it in the following strategy as a political tool. Therefore, it can be included in every region as the protector of the rights of Muslims where Iran has its own interests. All in all, Iran actively uses the religion (Shi'ism) method, which has a wide spectrum, in Nigeria. For this, it does not make any great effort. Iran achieves all this by using Nigerian Shiites, that is, by taking advantage of the country's internal power.

Senegal

There have been economic relations between Iran and Senegal since the period of Reza Shah Pahlavi, and these relations were tried to be continued during the Cold War period. However, due to the political achievements in the African continent, Iran has begun to break off relations with African countries. Thereupon, the Iranian Embassy in Senegal was closed in 1984 due to igniting Islamic propaganda and resumed its activities in 1990 (Leichtman 2009, 324). After that, bilateral relations have ensured more progress, in

which the political changes in the international arena since the 21st century have played a major role. In addition, Iran has made changes in its foreign policy doctrine and has commenced emphasizing the development of bilateral relations with African countries. Since the Ahmadinejad era, the Senegalese government was not indifferent to Iran's making the African issue the focal point of its foreign policy, (Szrom 2010) the establishment of an oil refinery and chemical factory in Senegal, as well as the Khodro automobile factory, and the production of large amounts of cheap oil by Iran can be mentioned as examples of this action. Following this, President Abdoulaye Wade traveled to Tehran twice, in 2006 and 2008, to meet with Khamenei and Ahmadinejad (Rubin 2008, 6).

During this meeting, he made statements that it would be easier to prepare the ground against the great powers, which is a common goal, through the creation of unity between other Islamic countries such as Senegal and Iran. Emphasizing that Senegal sees Iran as an exemplary country facilitated Iran's desire to strengthen its attitude in Senegal based on religion. Because even though Senegal is a 90% Muslim country, Sunnis ruled by Sufi leaders dominate there.

In general, although the Sunni section predominates in Senegal, (Leichtman 2009, 325) the existence of Shi'ism here dates to ancient times. But its institutionalization depends on the Islamic Institute, which was established in Dakar, (Séne 2016, 45) the capital of Senegal, in 1978 with the support of the Lebanese Diaspora. This institute allowed Shiite Islam to become more widespread in Senegal, and thanks to its activities, mosques and madrasas that serve to adopt Shi'ism throughout the country were built and an atmosphere was created there for the Sunni and Shiite populations to share the same environment and to develop themselves in terms of religion. Although all of these are positive developments in Iran's increasing effectiveness in Senegal by using the religious method, relations between these two countries were interrupted in 2011. The main reason was the event that took place in 2010. Even though a peace agreement was signed in Dakar in 2004 between the Senegalese government and the Casamance Democratic Forces Operation, which was established in 1982 to fight against the government for independence, (Foucher 2018, 265) this force continued its separatist activities and in 2010, a bloody incident resulted in the death of Senegalese soldiers.

After this incident, the Senegalese government claimed that it procured the weapons used by the members of the Casamance operation from Iran and took a decision to break off its relations with Iran in 2011 (Aljazeera 2011). But even though Senegal is a country with a population of

15,500.000, this country is the first of the five countries that maintain its weight in Iran's Islamic policy in Africa and where civilians have the most positive thoughts about Iran among African countries. For this reason, it was important for Iran to restore relations even after reaching the breaking point. Based on this, at the 12th Islamic Summit with the theme "*Muslim World: New Challenges and Expanding Opportunities*" in Cairo in 2013, (OIC/SUM 2013) Iran made a statement that it asks for restoring its relations with Senegal. At the same time, the President of Senegal Macky Sall, who took a stand in favor of the restoration of bilateral relations, tried not to make the mistake of his predecessors during the restoration of relations and to attract attention again so that Iran invested in Senegal.

Albeit all the issues that happened between the two countries, Iran does not give up on Senegal and wants to convert most of the Sunni group there to Shi'ism. This is due to the existence of Sunni operations targeting Shi'ism such as Hizb al-Tarqiyya, (Diouf and Leichtman 2009, 243) Mustarshidin, (Diouf and Leichtman 2009, s13) and Jamaat Ibadu Rahman in Senegal. The fact that they continue their discriminatory activities against Shi'ism by taking the Sunni section on their side prevents Iran from using the method of Shi'ism in the axis of its expansion strategy. This could pose a great threat to Iran in the future. Thus, Iran has been in favor of developing high-level relations with the Senegalese government. Accordingly, while receiving the credentials of the new Senegalese ambassador to Tehran, former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani emphasized his readiness to develop relations between the two countries and called for cooperation in the scientific, cultural, technological and academic fields as well as in the field of Islamic sciences. During the meeting, Rouhani described Senegal as a "gateway" for Iran's links with Africa, which was taken as a green light for the development of bilateral relations (Irangov.ir, 2021).

Afterwards Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri, who is in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, to discuss the issues of concern to the Muslim world due to the Gaza issue, met with the President of the National Assembly of the country in 2023. "The attempt to organize the regular meeting of the African Peace and Security Forum is a demonstration of Senegal's endeavors to re-establish Africa's identity and strengthen the independence of all African countries," the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister said, pointing to the deep-rooted ties between the two countries and Iran's capacities in various fields and wishing the continuation of the parliamentary relations between the two sides (Mfa.ir 2023). Bagheri also emphasized the need to develop cooperation among the parliaments of other Muslim countries, which could also be useful in stopping the inhumane actions of the Zionist regime in Gaza (Mfa.ir 2023).

Ghana

After the Islamic revolution, one of the states that Iran wanted to enlarge Islamic propaganda was Ghana, another state in North Africa. Ghana is a country with a population of almost 20 million, where 17.6% of this population is Muslim, especially among Muslims (Index Mundi 2021) where the Sunni section is dominant, but there are also Shiites in the north of the country. In addition to this, Christians and people belonging to other religions also live there. For this reason, this country is a democratic country where people from different religions live together and have a Presidential system. In this context, it is normal to celebrate the holidays of different religions in Ghana. In addition to religious festivals such as Christmas, Boxing Day, and Easter, two new holidays have also been organized since 1995 under the auspices of the national Sheikh Osman Nuhu Sharubutu: Eid-al-Adha and Eid-al-Fitr. These two new holidays were also accepted as official days like other festivals (Prempeh 2015). As it can be understood from what has been said above, Islam is one of the common religions in this country, and sectarian divisions exist here as well. Parallel to this, the following question comes to mind: Why did the enlargement of Shi'ism occur in Ghana, which has a Shiite population of almost one million?

Undoubtedly, the Islamic Revolution in 1979, as in other African countries, and the migration of Lebanese Shiites to Ghana in 1980 played a major role in this. Namely, the fact that the Lebanese Shiites, who made their own trade, opened a Shiite school here and commenced to expand Shi'ism throughout Ghana (Shia Africa 2025) This nuance did not escape the attention of Iran and caused Iran's to support them since the end of the 20th century. On this axis, Iran first gained the favor of the internal powers and resorted to divergent ways (education, social, humanitarian, media activities, and proposed projects) to make Shi'ism the dominant ideology in Ghana.

In the axis of educational activities, the main purpose of Iran has been to institutionalize Shiite propaganda in Ghana. For this, the Ahl al-Bait Foundation was first established in Ghana. The primary aim of this foundation was the establishment of the Islamic University of Ghana, which operated as a continuation of the Institute of Islamic Literature, which started its activities in 1986 with 15 students who took the course called Islamic Theology (Mohammed 2017, 11). And, as a result, the beginning of the transformation of this institute into a university was started in 2000, and after all accreditation procedures were accomplished in 2001, it turned into a full-fledged university. The motto of this university is knowledge, belief, and service and while in 2000 there were 35 students, this number increased

to 1800 in 2011. Among the students, the majority are Sunni Muslims. At the same time, a private school named Lady Fatima Girls, which is funded by this university and recognized by the Ghana Education Service, has been established in Ghana. The major mission of this school is to train both Muslim and non-Muslim girls as professional women with the highest levels of education and to provide opportunities for the academic and professional development of poor women in rural communities (School and College Listing 2025).

The second foundation built by Iran in Ghana in the field of education is the Imam Hussein Foundation. This foundation was set on the proposal of the Iranian Embassy and Shiite Ghanaians at the international seminars held on behalf of the Islamic Union in the Kumasi Central Mosque in 1988-1989 (Bompani and Frahm-Arp 2010, 114). At the same time, the al-Kawthar Foundation was created, both foundations are active in the realization of educational and media activities of Iran in Ghana. With their contribution, there are Al-Kawthar and Pen magazines published in English. In addition, the media activities of the Shiites include the programs broadcast on the NET 2 channel every Friday, as well as the creation of websites. Two centers for sewing training, financed directly by the Iranian Embassy within the framework of social and humanitarian aid activities, operate in Kokoda, and Temali, while dispensaries operate in Kwami, Mamobi, and other towns.

On the axis of the proposed projects, Iran-Ghana relations should be reviewed in the aspect of recent times. Because the main goal of new initiatives in recent years is to expand the vision of spreading Shi'ism throughout Ghana. In this regard, bilateral meetings and agreements reached a level of great importance. Parallel to this, a memorandum of understanding of agriculture, tourism, sports, and education was signed between Iran and Ghana in 2013 (Modern Ghana 2013). New arrangements in the field of education were proposed at this time and expressed the idea of opening a Persian language department at the University of Ghana.

Simultaneously, Iran's Ambassador to Ghana, Nosratollah Maleki, made a speech for the Daily Graphic Staff in 2017. He talked about Iran's activities in Ghana and emphasized the quality of the service provided in the context of social and humanitarian aid projects. Expressing the advantages of the Iranian clinic here in the field of health, he underlined that both the economic and political relations between the two countries depend on deep roots (Graphic Online 2017). Such initiatives have continued at the level of high-level representatives, with Iran's former Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian expressing his hope to deepen cordial relations with Ghana in all areas of mutual interest. The 7th Joint Cooperation Commission meeting

was held in Tehran in 2022 with Ghanaian Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism Mohammad Awal Ibrahim. Amir Abdollahian said that the meeting revealed Iran's pragmatic approach to developing relations and pointed out that a delegation should be sent to Ghana to draw a road map for the relations between the two countries (Tehran Times 2022). As these developments have accelerated, bilateral relations have gained momentum and even the 45th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution of Iran was celebrated at the Embassy in Accra in 2024 (Iran Press 2024). All these are accepted as an indication of the current situation between Iran and Ghana which turned into a positive and constructive direction.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Iran's engagement with Africa, particularly after the Islamic Revolution, is not merely a reflection of cultural affinity or humanitarian concern, but rather a deliberate and ideologically driven soft power strategy. By instrumentalizing Shiism as a tool of religious diplomacy, Iran seeks to construct an anti-imperialist solidarity, counterbalance Western and regional rivals such as the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, and establish long-term political influence on the continent. On this axis, Iran wants to embody its presence in different parts of the African continent. As Iran seeks to implement its expansion strategy, especially in Sunni-populated regions of Africa, it plans to pave the way for the spread of Shiism there. This is perceived as the greatest threat to the shield of Sunni states that is planned to be created by Saudi Arabia against Iran.

Accordingly, it supports many opposition groups in Africa and tries to attract them to its side. As detailed in other chapters, the most obvious example of this is the incident in Nigeria. The Islamic Movement Party of Nigeria, which calls for the Islamization of public life, has received support from Iran and has been responsible for the spread of jihadist rhetoric, especially in Northern Nigeria. On the other hand, under the name of religion and educational activities, Iran is also trying to strengthen its hand in some African countries in terms of Islam. The most concrete indicator of this has been Senegal. There are two main reasons behind the choice of this country. The first is that the volatile relations between the two countries have been badly damaged after the Casamance operation, and the second is that Senegal has a majority of Sunni Muslims. The Islamic Institute played an important role in this context and its activities led to the construction of mosques and madrasas across the country, which served to promote the adoption of Shiism. The main purpose of this was to create an environment where

Sunni and Shia populations could be assimilated religiously by being in the same environment. At the same time, Ghana was another African country where Iran tried to institutionalize Shiism under the name of educational propaganda. Especially in Ghana, which is known to have the least Shiite population and needs support, Iran has tried to create an opportunity for the institutionalization of religion-based education by helping to open schools providing primary, secondary and higher education. It can be concluded that the educational activities initiated by Iran in Ghana serve Islamic propaganda in the context of Shiism.

However, the Shi'ism method used by Iran in the axis of this expansion strategy has social, political, and religious effects. In fact, Iran wants to take advantage of all these effects, yet it may have consequences that can affect states in the international arena and even bring them to the brink of war. Because as we know, Shi'ism and Sunnism are two sects of Islam and are generally based on Islamic values. But there are issues that are not mutually accepted among their adherents. This manifests itself in the emergence of adverse reactions and effects in social, political, and religious fields. In social terms, the propaganda of Shi'ism not only causes Muslims to be divided but also causes great powers to discriminate against Muslims. Politically, since it uses religion as a political tool, it is perceived by other states to interfere in their internal affairs. From a religious point of view, Islamic values can be thrown into the background, and Islam can be misinterpreted in the world. For this reason, Iran should halt using a provocative method such as religion as a legitimate political tool in the implementation of the strategy of expansion in Africa to realize its foreign political interests.

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to analyze Iran's outreach strategy, which is tried to be confined within its own borders, through the conventional tools that it believes to be effective, and especially to verify the problematic of whether political Islam is an influential tool in the region in question. In this context, it analyzes Iran's Africa policy through the theory of underdevelopment and the Third World by combining historical, religious, economic and strategic perspectives, utilizes the case study method and focuses on Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana. The main findings of the article are that Africa, although decolonized, is still fragile and vulnerable to intervention; as in other regions, religion is the soft underbelly of the people here, and Iran is one of the states that is trying to fill the void in the region in the current geopolitical conditions. And Iran invests particularly in education and language policies in the cultural sphere, while in the religious realm, it seeks to establish an ideological sphere of influence by promoting the discourse of the "axis of resistance" through the Shiite sect. This strategy is employed not only at the regional level but also on a global scale to legitimize its anti-Western rhetoric and to mitigate the effects of international sanctions. At the same time there has been a lack of previous studies focusing solely on three countries within the scope of the theory and methodology used in the study, it is thought that the article will fill the gap in literature in terms of reaching more objective information by using sources from different languages.

KEYWORDS

Geopolitics; Third World; Soft Power; Expansion Strategy

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