

IRANIAN INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES IN AFRICA

October 1, 2012

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper provides an overview of Iran's primary foreign objectives *vis-à-vis* Africa as well as the role of Iranian intelligence institutions, cultural ministries and agencies as well as economic foundations (*bonyads*) in realising these goals in Africa.

2. IRAN'S PRIMARY FOREIGN OBJECTIVES

The basis of Iran's foreign policy is described in article 152 of the Iranian constitution as the "*Preservation of independence...its territorial integrity and the defence of the rights of all Muslims*". It is based on the former Supreme Religious Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini's concept of *velayat-e-faqih* ("Supreme Religious Guardianship"), or the right of clerics to rule over the Islamic community. This implies enforcing absolute authority over the populace, and extending this authority to all Muslims, i.e. "exporting the revolution" to support their co-religious supporters abroad. According to the Iranian interpretation, Muslims throughout the world constitute a single community – the *Ummah* – who must be ruled by a single government. Thus the religious leaders of Iran assert that by virtue of the 1979 revolution they have acquired the status of "guardians" of all Muslims throughout the world.

2.1 Primary foreign objectives *vis-à-vis* Africa

Contrary to official Iranian rhetoric, which describes its relations with Africa as "enduring and solid", the opposite is true, namely that Africa is not high on Iran's list of foreign policy priorities. However, Iran changed its focus in the last couple of years because it believes that growing involvement in Africa will enable Iran to break from international isolation and rival the West.

A clear distinction in policy *vis-à-vis* Africa can be made between the successive administrations of President Mohammad Khatami (1998-2005) and the administrations of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-beginning of 2013). Common to both periods are the objectives of expansion of Islam in East and West Africa, and promoting economic interests in Southern Africa. However, a shift occurred during the Khatami administration with Iran becoming more pragmatic, while it exchange the rhetoric of the revolution with *détente* and cooperation to realise its national, especially economic interests, in Africa. At the time

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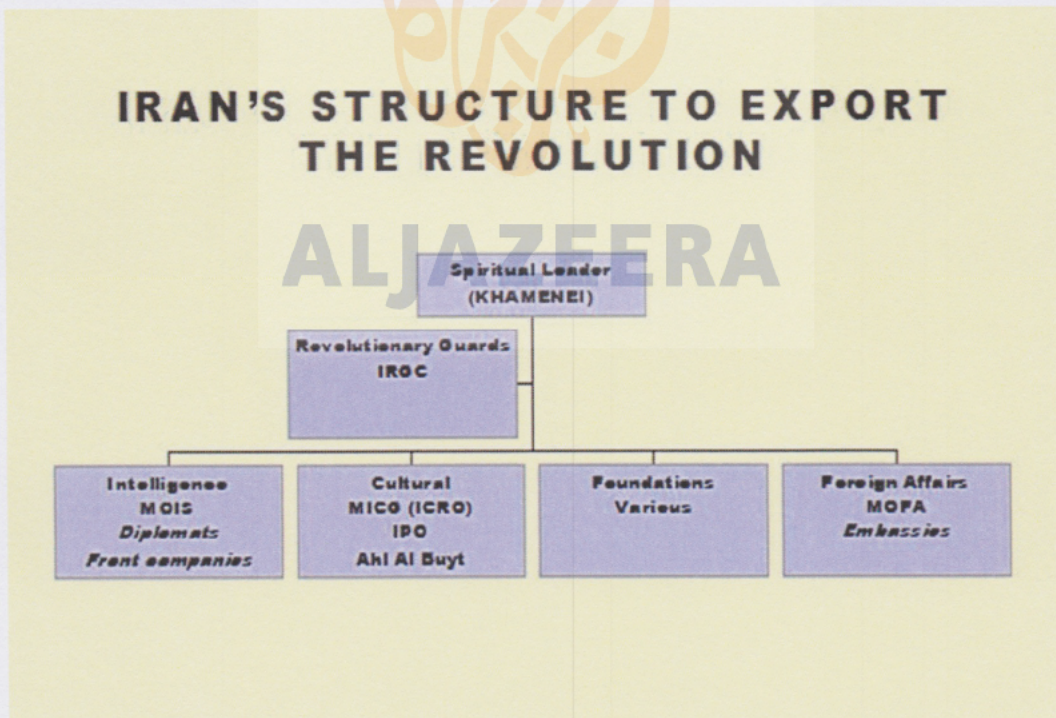
Khatami identified the "driving forces" of his policies as comprising three elements:

- ✓ A "dialogue between "Civilizations" on the international level;
- ✓ "Détente" with neighbouring nations;
- ✓ Establishing and broadening international contacts via the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC).

This trend continued under Ahmadinejad until 2010/11 when the current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reasserted the hard-line approach and reaffirmed and enhanced Iran's relations with Islamist movements and networks with the capacity of destabilising those countries closely aligned with the USA and its allies. This forms part of the Iranian strategy to counter USA initiatives and the international sanction regime against Iran.

3. AGENCIES INVOLVED IN AFRICA

A variety of organisations are concerned with realising the Iranian objectives in Africa.



3.1 The role of the intelligence ministries

The Iranian intelligence /security establishment exists in broad terms of a plethora of religious-revolutionary committees, military and policing structures as well as political and economic institutions. However, cohesion and co-ordination are insufficient and their reporting structures too varying to describe them as being part of an "intelligence or security community" in the true sense of the word. It would be more correct to describe Iran as having a complicated network of security and military organisations that coexist and supervise each other. The reasons for this situation can be found in the Islamic revolution of 1979 when the new clerical establishment did not destroy the imperial structures that were in place, but added an additional layer or parallel structures loyal to the new revolutionary government. As a result all political, security-military and intelligence institutions were given clerically controlled supervisory bodies, which have the defence of Islam and the revolution as their principal objective. In short, within the Iranian system one set of institutions would report to the president as the political, but relatively powerless, figurehead, while the religious-supervisory bodies report directly and only to the Supreme Religious Leader who has ultimate control.

The resulting dualism has over the years caused much friction between the president and the Supreme Religious Leader. For example, during the Khatami years there was intense competition with the more pragmatic and reformist Khatami and his supporters, before Khamenei ultimately regained control over the security, intelligence and military structures and decision making processes. This situation changed during the administration of Ahmadinejad. While Ahmadinejad and Khamenei at first worked in tandem (until around 2009/2010), the situation changed after the start of Ahmadinejad's second term when the two leaders came into direct conflict when Ahmadinejad and his inner-circle attempted to enhance direct presidential control over the intelligence establishment. This led to intense competition and the current situation where formal intelligence structures appear to be of lesser importance when compared to Khamenei's current committee system, headed by Sa'eed Jalili, the chief nuclear negotiator and Secretary General of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) – the main body responsible for oversight as well as defence and nuclear decision-making. This infighting has resulted in contradictory strategies being adopted (also in Africa) by the said leaders or initiatives by Khamenei to overrule the strategies previously adopted by Ahmadinejad.

▪ The Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS)

MOIS remains the leading Iranian intelligence structure despite the current confusion regarding attempts by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its intelligence service – *Sazemane Ye Ete'elaate Sepah Pasdaran Enghelobi Eshlam* – that is attempting an intelligence take-over. This implies the creation of one integrated Iranian intelligence service under IRGC control, which would report directly to the Supreme Leader. However, this objective has not yet been realised and Khamenei appears to prefer the committee system referred to above.

MOIS' primary responsibilities¹ are multi-fold, while it also closely cooperates with other members of the Iranian "intelligence or security community" such as: the IRGC, the *Al Quds* or Special Forces of the IRGC, J2 (a training and logistical structure in the Iranian military) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) as well as cultural ministries and economic foundations for cover purposes. In addition to MOIS-controlled operations and assets, MOIS is also involved in some joint operations with the IRGC / *Al Quds* and also proxy forces like Hezbollah.

▪ Role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)

MOFA's role in foreign policy making is limited – it is mostly decided upon at the SNSC-level, which emphasises that MOFA's role is primarily to implement foreign policy, also with regard to Africa. It plays a key role in the export of the Iranian revolution. Iranian embassies are also used by members of other departments e.g. the IRGC, its *Al Quds* Forces, members of the Committee on Foreign Intelligence Abroad and the

¹ The Iranian Constitution describes MOIS's responsibilities as:

- The gathering and assessing of information.
- Imposing Khomeini's philosophy of *Velayat-e Faqih*, or "Islamic Rule," on the Islamic Republic of Iran. This implies enforcing absolute religious authority over the populace, and extending this authority to all Muslims, e.g. "exporting the revolution" to support their co-religious supporters abroad.
- Support of Iran's foreign policy interests.
- Collecting intelligence, engaging in liaison and supporting operations in relation to Islamic fundamentalist movements.
- Suppressing Iranian dissident organisations.

Additional responsibilities not mentioned in the constitution are:

- To act as coordinator of all intelligence (security, military and intelligence).
- Act as "leading" organisation of all intelligence activities.
- To be the custodian of all security and intelligence files.

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Committee on the Implementation of Actions Abroad as well as the Ministry of Guidance and Propaganda.

Iranian embassies' fulfil a central role in the Iranian intelligence process throughout the world, also in Africa. Apart from its traditional official functions, embassies also provide official and non-official cover for operations executed from Iranian embassies, consulates, overseas branches of the *bonyads*, Iranian businesses (the carpet industry is a popular one), mosques and Islamic Cultural Centres outside Iran. Cultural Centres in particular is important for the distribution of funds to groups such as Hezbollah, which support Iranian national interests. Due to the current economic sanction regime against Iran the importance of the *bonyads*' will increase since they have huge investments outside Iran and control over hundreds of companies, which could be used to avoid sanctions.

MOIS operatives also work under the guise of the Ministry of Guidance and Propaganda, employ cover with Iran Air [the official airline of Iran], act as students, and as members of opposition groups. A primary focus is to spread Iranian influence through local Islamic communities, collecting information on science and technology, infiltrating and influencing local Muslim communities in foreign states, and procuring military hardware.

▪ Role of cultural ministries and agencies

The overall responsibility for the propagation of Iran's revolutionary message lies with the **Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance (MICG)**. The specific task of spreading the Islamic revolution abroad rests on the **Islamic Cultural Relations Organisation (ICRO)**. ICRO's primary tasking is to direct and control the dissemination of pro-Iranian and Shi'a propaganda in foreign countries, including the building of amongst others mosques, cultural centres and schools. ICRO is further involved in establishing cultural ties with countries and organising conferences. Cultural attaché's, stationed in Iranian embassies are charged with enhancing ties with Muslim communities and people of Iranian origin, while students are recruited for Islamic studies in Iran - sometimes by offering free bursaries for any studies in Iran. The MOIS is usually involved in the activities of ICRO and uses the ICRO to conduct talent spotting for the recruitment of sources and to establish contacts with Shi'a and/or pro-Iranian groupings in foreign countries.

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The *Islamic Propagation Centre (IPO)* is another cultural agency with close contact with the MICG. The IPO was formed shortly after the Iranian revolution in 1979 to promote Twelver Shi'ism as the official Iranian religion or ideology. IPO distributes books, leaflets, and tapes, and promotes Shi'ism through the electronic and printed media. The IPO works in close coordination with cultural centres and attaché's abroad and also sends clergy abroad to disseminate revolutionary ideology, creating a network of pro-Iranian clergy.

Working in unison with the IPO and ICRO, is the *Ahl al-Buyt* (Family of the Prophet), which was established in 1990. Although the *Ahl al-Buyt* describes itself as an academic research body, studying Shia Islam, it is internationally involved in 1) promoting Shi'ism and increasing Shia influences in traditionally Sunni communities, 2) the dissemination of Iranian propaganda and 3) promoting the concept of an Islamic revolution. The *Ahl al-Buyt* is specifically active among poorer communities, will usually establish cultural centres and/or Muslim schools and will liaise with the Iranian cultural attaché, if a country has diplomatic ties with Iran. The *Ahl al-Buyt* also works in unison with the MOIS to collect information, do talent spotting or to radicalise Muslim communities. It has offices around the world and in Africa respectively, in Senegal, Uganda, Mali, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique and South Africa.

▪ Role of Iranian foundations (*bonyads*)

Bonyads came into being after the revolution to administer the Pahlavi Foundation or funds from the former government. Over time *bonyads* developed in vast conglomerates with a controlling interest over approximately 40% of the Iranian economy. The most important *bonyad* and presently the most influential one is the *Bonyad-e Mostaz'afin* or (Foundation for the Poor and Suppressed and War-wounded), which reports directly to Khamenei. Due to its controlling stake in the Iranian economy the *bonyad* also plays a key role in foreign and security policy and directly transferred funds from its own coffers to Khamenei. *Bonyads* are also used as cover structures for intelligence operations and the channelling of funds to proxy groups like Hezbollah.

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4. FOCUSES OF IRANIAN INVOLVEMENT IN AFRICA

- **Exporting the revolution and Shi'a Islam in Africa**

This objective remains a traditional focus of Iran, but is constrained by the religious differences between Shi'a Iran and Africa where the majority of the *Ummah* adheres to the Sunni strain of Islam.² Consequently, Iranian influence is limited to those areas where there are Shi'a communities. Main groups are found in East and West Africa (e.g. Tanzania, Zanzibar, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Morocco, Senegal, Mauritania, Niger and Guinea) where Shi'a communities have settled and emerged as the driving force behind the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in the region. As a result of Iranian influence, Shi'a Lebanese are invariably Hezbollah supporters.

While a sustained religious campaign is currently visible in e.g. Morocco, Algeria, Mali, Tanzania / Zanzibar, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia and Egypt – the respective conflicts are either part of the current “Arab transformation” or part of the fall-out of these changes. It is mainly Sunni-driven and has resulted in the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi groups throughout the MENA-region. It should also be noted that Iran is increasingly competing with Saudi Arabia who is attempting to broaden its own religious (Wahabi / Salafist) and economic footprint in North Africa. Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also of increasing importance in this regard. However, Iranian advancement of this focus is coincidental since its revolutionary aim is closely tied to its economic interests – currently of growing importance to Iran.

Presently, Iran's attempts are focused on Libya – where it lost ground after the people's revolution and it is now attempting to re-establish a foothold through support (e.g. funding and training) to a variety of Islamist elements both in and outside government. However, Iran's main focus currently appears to be Egypt. Relations were severed by Iran after Egypt signed the 1979 peace treaty with Israel and were exacerbated by the late President Anwar Sadat's hosting of the deposed Shah of Iran. For the past few years, however, both countries have been preparing the way for a restoration of relations. The presidential victory of Mohamed Mursi, as the Brotherhood's candidate in June 2012 gave new impetus to this process and adds pressure on Israel and

² Statistics to make a clear distinction between the two schools are absent, but 2009 statistics reveals that the Muslim population in Africa stands at about 27% or 446 million out of a total African population of 1.02 billion people.

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particularly, the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty. Egypt also gave Iranian ships passage through the Suez (just after the political change in Cairo), thus allowing Iran to illustrate to Israel and the USA its increasing capacity to pressurise Israel from nearby. This objective of Iran thus eventually permits Iran to counter Israel-USA initiatives against Iran.

▪ **Enhancing political and diplomatic support for Iran**

This focus involves most African countries since Iran requires support from the international community at large in international forums such as the UN General Assembly, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to counter the Western initiated sanction regime against Iran. A particular requirement is to ensure support for Iran's right to develop a "full national nuclear fuel cycle", (in other words its "inalienable" right to nuclear technology and the conversion of uranium).

▪ **Enhance economic opportunities in Africa**

Growing Iranian economic opportunities was the key to Iran's involvement in Africa from the time that the first Persian / Shi'a communities arrived in particularly, East Africa as far back as the 10th century – a focus that has grown in importance as Western pressure on Iran continues.

Iran's economic involvement in Africa encompasses the whole of Africa with key countries in each region. For example: Tanzania, Sudan, Uganda and Kenya in East Africa; Algeria and Morocco in North Africa and Nigeria and Senegal in West Africa. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) in central Africa and Zimbabwe, Mozambique and South Africa in southern Africa are the other foci of Iranian foreign policy.

However, this list should not be seen as complete or exclusive of any other African country since Iran is utilising every opportunity to advance its economic interests on the continent.

Typical of the Iranian involvement in the mentioned countries are: The establishment of Joint Commissions and the signing of Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) to enhance political, economic, trade, mining, scientific, agricultural, health, education and military cooperation with its African counterparts. It also includes joint projects – to source scarce minerals, the training of African military personnel (either locally or in

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Iran) and construction projects by the Iranian *Construction Jihad* – also serving as front organisation - of for example, harbours and refineries in Mozambique.

High-level visits to Africa also take place on a regular basis including by the Minister of Foreign Affairs to attend to bilateral affairs, conferences and summits. A number of Presidential visits, by both Khatami and Ahmadinejad have also taken place during their respective administrations, mainly to the primary countries above.

Iran also provides weapons to African countries. However, the West and some African countries perceive this to be arms smuggling and Gambia has for example, severed its relations with Tehran in November 2010 after Nigeria intercepted Iranian weaponry, which was apparently destined for the Casamanche secessionist rebels in southern Senegal. It is also alleged that Iranian weaponry is smuggled from Sudan via Egypt (the Sinai) to the Gaza to assist Hamas in its struggle against Israel.

▪ Counter the increasing USA-Israeli threat

Iran has intensified its economic activities in Africa due to the changing international environment (e.g. the increasing international sanction regime and the threat of an Israeli-USA counter-proliferation strike against Tehran). Its objectives are three-fold:

- ✓ **To find and ensure alternative markets for Iranian oil and gas products.** Iran is apparently also searching for storage depots for its oil on especially, the East coast of Africa.
- ✓ **Gain African support for the continuation of Iranian export activities.** In this regard Iran has for example, received permission from Zanzibar (and probably some other African countries) to re-flag its oil tanker fleet. Zanzibar has allowed Iran to re-flag more than 150 of its ships. However, this Iranian attempt failed when Tanzania was threatened with targeted economic sanctions by the USA in August 2012. Consequently, Tanzania forced Zanzibar to end this practice. **Note:** *To increase the Iranian capacity at avoiding sanctions and gain access to markets and technology Iran has recently decided to deploy IRGC officials in its embassies in key countries with that particular objective.*

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- ✓ **Searching for alternative uranium sources.** Iran continues with its search for alternative sources for uranium since its own stocks are of poor quality and almost depleted. Three countries are of importance: South Africa, who is not willing to supply Iran again; Algeria which has its own IAEA supervised nuclear programme and is a close supporter of the Iranian quest to develop an independent peaceful nuclear capacity and Zimbabwe. The latter is of particular importance since it agreed in 2011 during the visit by President Ahmadinejad to Zimbabwe to supply Tehran with the required resource. **Note:** *There is currently no evidence if this agreement has been activated.*
- **Enhancing its support for international terrorist groups and networks in Africa**

As international pressure mounts on Iran, it has become increasingly involved in exploiting the disorganisation within Al Qaeda, after the death of Osama bin Laden, to its own advantage. As a result Iran has launched a comprehensive strategy regarding the African and Muslim worlds. It entails the following:

- ✓ The creation of a new international extremist network in which Iran could exert influence and control. To realize this objective Iran ordered its operatives in Africa to engage and organize as many of the terrorist movements as possible so as to fill the increasing vacuum left by Al Qaeda's deterioration. Al Qaeda and the Lashkar-e-Toiba (LET) are the primary targets of this initiative.
- ✓ Africa was decided upon as the key experimental focus for Iran's initiative to create a coordinated and integrated internationally driven and orientated "terrorist movement". Africa was also described by key Iranian officials "as the new war zone for terrorism". Senegal, Mali and the Horn of Africa were identified as key zones where "terrorism" could rapidly be revived and organized to advance Iranian interests.
- ✓ Operations in Africa are the first and primary objective, but the intention is to expand later to other areas such as the USA, the UK, Germany, France and Israel.

Since a detailed discussion of terrorism falls outside the scope of this paper, it is important to conclude by emphasizing that Iranian supported

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or funded terrorist activities have increased since 2011 when this initiative was first uncovered. Additionally, networks throughout Mauritania, Mali, Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and Somalia have become increasingly active. Sophisticated arms from the former Colonel Ghaddafi's armoury have also ended up in the hands of terrorist groups, particularly in Mali where it has led to a total deterioration of the political and security situation.

Further, it has already led to greater cooperation between key terrorist movements based in Asia, the Middle East and in Africa. For example, Al Qaeda in consultation with movements like Al Shaba'ab, Hisbul al-Islam and others have decided to loosely join forces for the sake of expanding and enhancing the global terrorist network.

5. KEY OBSERVATIONS

Based on the above and particularly, the changes in the international environment it is possible to make three basic observations:

- The Iranian *modus operandi* discussed above has remained broadly unchanged although a shift is becoming visible towards enhanced IRGC involvement and an increase in the importance of business / economic related activities.
- The status of Africa, like Latin America, has been elevated given Iran's increasing attempts to avoid the impact of the growing sanction regime.
- Africa has been selected to become the primary zone of conflict with the West in an attempt to advance Iranian foreign policy and intelligence objectives.