

## Report

# The impact of the South Africa-Iran relations on the African Union

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South Africa and Iran have resumed full political and economic relations following the P5 +1 Nuclear deal. What effect will the renewed relations between South Africa and Iran have on the "political consensus" within the African Union (AU). [Amine Landoulsi - Anadolu Agency - Getty Images]

## Abstract

Like many African nations, South Africa's foreign policy tends to mirror the political positions of the African Union (AU). One key area of divergence, however, is South Africa's strong relations with Iran. In recent years, South Africa has set itself apart from many other AU members by siding with Iran on key international votes at the United Nations Security Council and within the International Atomic Energy Agency.

With the easing of international sanctions against Iran, the AU faces new choices about diplomatic normalization. South Africa, which wields considerable influence in the AU, will play a key role in this process and likely advocate for closer ties with Iran. However, pushback from Iran's main regional rival, Saudi Arabia, will likely complicate the foreign policy positions of AU member states. The issue has the potential to cause discord within the AU, as countries like Nigeria, Sudan, and Egypt will advocate positions friendly to Saudi Arabia at the AU.

This paper traces the South African position towards Iran, from the mid-20th century to present. It then investigates possible outcomes of Iran rejoining the international community, and assesses the threat posed to foreign policy consensus within the AU.

## South African foreign policy since 1994

For many years the international community turned a blind eye to South Africa's foreign policy as it strayed from mainstream international opinion. This situation is changing fast

as more countries are showing impatience and irritation towards South African foreign policy positions—especially regarding Iran.

Nelson Mandela once praised Iran, Libya, and Cuba and berated those who disagreed with him to “go jump”. He made this provocative statement at a press conference alongside US President Bill Clinton, yet emerged from the press conference unscathed, without any backlash from the international community or Clinton himself. This was in spite of the antagonistic political positions of the US towards these countries and their leaders at the time.

A new attitude towards South Africa, however, suggests that the foreign policy honeymoon that the country enjoyed since the dawn of democracy in 1994 is over. Increasingly, South Africa has been publicly criticized as it continues a foreign policy out of step with many of its allies.

In 2011, South Africa’s confusing position on Libya invited a barrage of criticism from Africans and Arabs alike. South Africa was involved in stalling United Nation Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1973, and later, after ratifying the resolution, criticized its implementation. From its perch as a non-voting member of the UNSC, South Africa backed Resolution 1973, which authorized the NATO operation, yet several months later President Zuma blasted the mission, saying, “The resolution is being abused for regime change, political assassinations, and foreign military occupation.” (1)

South Africa’s support for Iran in the ongoing Syrian civil war is another policy position out of step with the majority of its allies. The alliance between Russia and Iran in supporting the regime of Bashar Al Assad in Syria is testing the collectivism of the AU foreign policy. Disregarding the destruction wrought by the Assad regime, South Africa has positioned itself firmly on the side of the regime’s main supporters, Russia and Iran. This has affected the attitude of the AU towards the conflict in Syria. South Africa has abstained from voting on a Security Council resolution on Syria, claiming the resolution was biased in favor of the opposition. Western nations were left perplexed and other onlookers were just as puzzled. (2) South Africa is one of the powerhouses within the AU it therefore possesses a significant amount of influence to sway decisions. South Africa also hosts the Pan African Parliament in Midrand, a few kilometers from the capital Pretoria. Within the AU, several nations strongly oppose Iran’s position in Syria, particularly, Egypt, Sudan, and Nigeria—South Africa’s rival.

The debacle between South Africa and the United States on the implementation of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), a piece of legislation approved by the US Congress to improve economic relations with Sub Saharan Africa, is another case of South Africa falling out of step with its allies. US President Barak Obama officially suspended South Africa's Growth and Opportunities Act on 15 March 2015, effectively setting a new deadline for American poultry to be allowed into the country. (3)

The declining global reputation of South Africa was on display during President Jacob Zuma's recent visit to the United Kingdom, where he was portrayed by local media as out of touch with global political reality. The reception President Zuma received was a far cry from the reception that his predecessor Nelson Mandela enjoyed when he visited the UK for the first time as head of state in 1996. This is not to suggest that British media commentary should be used as a political yardstick. However, it certainly reflects how the attitudes towards South Africa have changed over the years.

### **South African-Iran relations**

In recent years South Africa has not been neutral on Iranian issues—rather, it has pursued a pro-Iranian agenda in international fora, particularly as a voting member of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Contemporary policy positions such as this are rooted in an earlier history.

The support that countries like Iran provided to South Africa during the struggle against apartheid continues to dictate relationships in post-apartheid South Africa. The African National Congress (ANC) maintained a healthy relationship with the revolutionary forces in Iran before the declaration of an Islamic Republic of Iran. Oliver Tambo, the former president of the ANC in exile, was among the first to send words of congratulations to Ayatollah Khomeini after the victory of the revolution was declared in February 1979.

The warm relations between South Africa and Iran can be traced back to the rule of Reza Shah Pahlavi. When he abdicated in 1941 he was exiled in South Africa until his death in 1946. The relationship extended to his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who visited the country during the apartheid era and was well received by then Prime Minister John Vorster. After the revolution in 1979, Iran severed all ties with apartheid South Africa and imposed sanctions.

Under President Nelson Mandela relations were reestablished, and these renewed relations centered on Iran's nuclear ambitions. In 1997, Mandela's government discussed

selling enrichment expertise from its own nuclear program to Iran. Javad Vaidi, an Iranian official from the Islamic Republic's National Security Council, reported that South Africa even offered to sell uranium oxide concentrate to Iran and proposed to take part in the stalled enrichment activities in a memorandum of understanding signed in December 2005. (4) This was against the backdrop of widespread global opposition to Iran acquiring nuclear capability. In general, South Africa has maintained a clear position regarding Iranian nuclear ambitions. South Africa has argued that the IAEA—rather than the UN Security Council—should be assigned arbiter of Iran's nuclear program. This argument has rested on two pillars: first, that the IAEA possesses unique technical expertise, which makes it best placed to decide on matters of nuclear energy; and second, that dealing with Iran's nuclear program constitutes "mission creep" for the UN Secretary Council into areas beyond its core mandate. (5) South Africa preferred the nuclear negotiations to take place within the larger, multilateral body of the IAEA, rather than the narrow, North-dominated Security Council. Along these lines, South Africa has repeatedly called for the United States and Israel to cease their threats against Tehran and its nuclear program and has suggested that all embargos, including arms and financial restrictions, be dropped in order to encourage greater diplomatic engagement. (6) According to South Africa, this support for Iran was grounded in a broader support for countries of the Global South to be empowered in global political decision making. Thus, as far as South Africa was concerned, support for Iran was not specifically about nuclear power, but a principled position regarding solidarity of the Global South.

This advocacy helped South Africa earn a favorable business environment in Iran. Since the reestablishment of economic relations, South Africa has increased business investments across several sectors in Iran. SASOL, a state owned energy company, made significant investments in Iran and established a joint venture, Ayra SASOL, with the Iranian National Petrochemical Company. SASOL subsequently sold its shares of the joint venture for an undisclosed amount after taking about \$300 million USD in write-downs. South African telecommunication giant MTN has large interest in the Iranian market. MTN owns 49 percent of Irancell, though it has been prevented from repatriating dividends due to international sanctions. MTN said it hopes to repatriate about \$1.1 billion USD in dividends accumulated once Iran's nuclear deal with world powers was finalized. (7) Interestingly, MTN is also the dominant force in Nigeria, and was recently handed a \$5.2bn fine for flouting regulations. The question is whether the MTN's troubles in Nigeria is a coincidence or is somehow related to MTN involvement in Iran. This business conflict could be a harbinger of larger conflict between the two African powerhouses and, ultimately, within the AU.

## **The impact of South Africa-Iran relations on the African Union**

Foreign policy is a set of principles of governments that defines their external relations with other countries, and serves as an instrument to achieve the interests of a nation. (8) This usual formulation of foreign policy, however, is complicated within multi-national bodies such as the African Union that must take into consideration the disparate views of member countries.

Typically, most AU member countries have shared similar interests, especially regarding peace, economic development, and prosperity. Members have, therefore sought to adopt a single foreign policy position, and used the AU as a vehicle to reinforce and amplify that position. Furthermore, because most African states are relatively weak politically and economically, it is often in members' interest to close ranks on key issues, as it would be futile to embrace a standalone position. Also, the tendency of many foreign countries—including China, Russia, the United States, and recently Turkey—to deal with Africa as if it were a single country has reinforced the pattern of bloc positioning on issues.

The prospect of normalized relations with Iran threatens to disrupt the foreign policy consensus that has in most instances prevailed within the AU. The forces of polarization within the AU likely will be driven by the anti-Iran bloc, namely Sudan, Nigeria, and Egypt. Sudan, a close ally of Saudi Arabia, recently cut diplomatic relations with Iran following recent attacks on the Saudi embassy in Tehran. (9) Sudan was among the first countries to close their embassy in Tehran; it was a public gesture of solidarity toward the Arab states that see Iran as disruptive in the region.

Nigeria remains concerned and agitated by the influence of Iran within its own borders. Nigerian cleric Ibrahim Zakzaky—the spiritual leader of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, Nigeria's most prominent Shia movement—has been accused of pursuing a disruptive campaign on behalf of Iran. According to Nnamdi Obasi, Senior Analyst on Nigeria at the International Crisis Group, the IMN's goals are twofold: "to ensure more stringent application of Islamic legal and administrative systems... then ultimately to create an Islamic state in Nigeria." (10) In recent years, Nigeria has drawn closer into Saudi Arabia's orbit. Nigeria is now part of the Muslim Coalition against Terrorism, formed in 2015 by Saudi Defense Minister Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Egypt, too, is firmly entrenched within the Saudi-led coalition that has pledged to fight terrorism—and push back against Iranian advances—in the region. (11)

## Looking ahead

South Africa has taken steps to maintain its privileged place within the AU. South Africa lobbied strenuously to ensure that its former foreign minister Dr. Nkosazana Zuma was elected as Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), making her the most powerful pan-African politician and policy chief. Her appointment brought prestige to South Africa, but also guaranteed a very strong position within the African Union. Significantly, Dr. Zuma is one of the architects of South African policy on Iran. During her tenure as minister of foreign affairs, South Africa took strong pro-Iran positions at the IAEA and the Security Council. Months after the passage of UN Resolution 1747—which tightened sanctions on Iran—Dr. Zuma came to the defense of Iran, stating that further negotiations, not sanctions, are the best path forward. “At every point we have called for dialogue and negotiations and in the current crisis encourage all parties to spare no effort to seek a comprehensive and sustainable solution. South Africa and the international community do not wish to see Iran develop nuclear weapons and also do wish to see war over Iran’s nuclear program.” (12) It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the relationship she established with certain powers in Iran during her tenure as foreign minister is likely to continue as Iran rejoins the international community. Importantly, her involvement at the helm of the AUC comes at the time when new governing and foreign policies are being devised. This means that her involvement at this stage will ensure that, although the AU is located in Ethiopia, power of the AU will continue to reside in South Africa.

Iran’s return to the international community—at a time of heightened turmoil and rivalry in the region—is likely to create division with the AU. As Iran and Saudi Arabia pull AU members in opposite directions, the AU is likely to experience increased polarization. It will be important for South Africa to balance its historic allegiance with Iran with its strong interest in a harmonized African Union.

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