



## **Iran and Sudan Plan and Begin to Execute Moves to Dominate Central and Western Africa**

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### **Abstract**

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The governments of Iran and Sudan are preparing for a major strategic surge into western Africa, into both the Sahel and the shores of the Gulf of Guinea. The moves have already gained momentum and challenge Iran's and Sudan's major sponsor, the People's Republic of China (PRC), as well as the West.

The ultimate objective of this surge is to consolidate control and/or influence over this extensive region and its considerable oil, gas, uranium, and other minerals (rare metals and rare earth) reserves. At the same time, the surge would pre-empt and prevent both the US/West/NATO presence and the spread of anti-Shi'ite *takfiri-jihadist* entities.

The surge is of such importance to both Iran and Sudan that they are willing to risk a crisis with their primary great power sponsor, the People's Republic of China. If successful, this surge would transform the status of West Africa.

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## ANALYSIS

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***The Central African Republic has become a key player, working under Sudanese and Iranian direction, in jihadist action, geared to take advantage of the West's declining influence in Western and Central Africa, even if it challenges the interests of their traditional ally, the People's Republic of China.***

Iran's clerical Government has sought to become a major power in West Africa since the early 1980s, once the Khomeini Administration consolidated its domestic power base after the fall of the Shah in 1979. From the beginning, Iran worked in close cooperation with radicalized members of the Lebanese Shi'ite community along the shores of the Gulf of Guinea (and these evolved into *HizbAllah* networks). At the time, Iran cooperated with Qadhafi's Libya (mainly in the Sahel), including the conduct of sophisticated terrorist strikes such as the September 19, 1989, mid-air explosion which downed UTA flight 772 over Niger. Since the late 1980s, Iran's main partner in Africa has been Pres. Umar Hasan Ahmad al-Bashir's Sudanese Government.

Khartoum followed Tehran's lead and policies to such an extent that it would evolve into Tehran's proxy on many key issues.

However, greater global developments since the turn of the 21st Century affected the regional ascent of Iran and Sudan. In order to secure the rapidly expanding Chinese economic penetration into the area, Beijing demanded growing stability and warned both Tehran and Khartoum that challenges to, or disruptions of, economic development would not be tolerated. Both Tehran and Khartoum had to abide by this stricture, given the growing importance of Iranian-Chinese and Sudanese-Chinese relations. Moreover, the PRC compensated both countries with lavish military and economic aid, as well as lucrative oil contracts.

As well, Iran could not ignore the intense US-led Western anti-terrorism activities in the Sahel in the aftermath of 9/11. Therefore, both Tehran and Khartoum decided to lower the profile of their activities in order to avoid unnecessary conflict and confrontation. After all, the US-led West was attempting to locate and destroy Tehran's *takfiri-jihadist* nemeses in the region. Hence, Iran and its local *HizbAllah* allies focused on building long-term infrastructure, clandestine networks, and underground weapon caches throughout West Africa. Toward this end, Iran delivered several huge weapon consignments by ship to Gulf of Guinea ports. One of these shipments was captured by the Nigerian security forces in late October 2010.

Meanwhile, Sudan returned to focusing on its traditional zone of influence in the Horn of Africa with Iran monitoring closely from its military and intelligence facilities in Assab, south Eritrea.

Iran, however, did not disengage completely from the growing upheaval and insurrection in the Sahel. Throughout the period of relatively low profile in the first years of the 21st Century, Iran remained the primary source of munitions, explosives, and other military goods for all anti-government forces irrespective of their ideologies all over West Africa. Most insurgencies could not have been sustained logistically and militarily without the Iranian supplies. Consequently, Iranian intelligence was able to establish presence on all the continental lines of communications, as well as establish good relations and operational cooperation with all subversive forces in this vast area irrespective of their goals and motives. Almost all of these munitions and weapons were pushed into West Africa via Sudan, where Iran established a large network of storage sites.



In Spring and Summer 2011, the huge stockpiles of weapons which Qadhafi had built for sponsoring “liberation wars” in Africa started falling into *jihadi* hands. Many of these *jihadi*s were protégés of Iran’s *Quds* Forces, while many others received shelter and support in Bashir’s Sudan. With their help, as well as with help from HAMAS senior operatives first led by Abdul Latif al-Ashkar (who would be target-killed by Israel near Port Sudan on April 5, 2011), Iranian intelligence launched a huge effort to buy complete Libyan strategic storage sites, first in Benghazi and the rest of Cyrenaica, and then in the Libyan deep south. The Libyan *jihadi*s sent several convoys of weapons and munitions to their brethren in the Sahel via Sabha and Chad, as well as several convoys to their brethren in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula.

However, far greater quantities of chemical weapons, missiles, rockets, small arms, ammunition, and other military equipment went to Sudan via Kufra. These convoys were escorted by *jihadi*s from Sudan who entered Libya during the war. In the first half of 2012, Libya-origin weapons, munitions and other military equipment began appearing on the Iran-dominated supply lines from Sudan into the entire west Africa.

The Iranian-Sudanese surge into west Africa seemed to be on track again.

Iran has been adamant about controlling the extensive uranium deposits in the Sahel for its own nuclear program, as well as about denying the oil and rare metals to the West while expediting Chinese access in return for strategic favors. The French and US military intervention against the *jihadi* insurrections in the Sahel in early 2013 only reinforced the Iranian and Sudanese resolve to vastly expand their own operations across the entire west Africa.

However, there was a new twist in the Iranian-Sudanese strategy.

In addition to reinforcing support for, and cooperation with, AQIM and other *jihadi* groups, Khartoum, fronting for an invisible Tehran, also reached out to local governments which were increasingly apprehensive of US and Western presence. Khartoum pointed out that the US-led West was provoking civil strife (in the name of democracy) and insurrection (by ethnic groups, tribes and Islamist-*jihadi* communities). Khartoum promised local governments that it would capitalize on Sudan’s special relations with AQIM and other ethno-centrist and *jihadi* groups in order to help them — the besieged governments — with national reconciliation for as long as the US, France, and the West were sidelined.

Increasingly frustrated and concerned at the heavy-handed US and Western intervention, several governments expressed strong interest in the Sudanese mediation offers.

Meanwhile, Iran continued focusing on its growing involvement in the war in Syria.

Starting in early 2013, Tehran became apprehensive about a US-led NATO military intervention in Syria. The primary grand-strategic achievement of Iran is the consolidation of a Shi’ite-dominated on-land axis from Iran via Iraq and Syria all the way to the *HizbAllah* bastion on the shores of the Mediterranean. The consolidation and sustenance of this axis has cost Iran and its various proxies (*HizbAllah* as well as Iraqi, Syrian, and Pakistani Shi’ite militias) a lot of blood and treasure. Despite its great successes to date, Tehran is cognizant that the launch of a major air campaign against Syria — ostensibly under the definition of imposing a “No Fly Zone” — would threaten the existence of this axis. Moreover, Iran’s brewing rift with HAMAS in both Gaza and Syria makes the alternate on-land route via Palestinian-dominated northern Jordan impossible.

Hence, the possible strategic changes in the Middle East made it imperative for Iran to establish alternate supply routes for *HizbAllah* and Syria via the Mediterranean. These supply routes would be by ship, from Sudan



via the Suez Canal to the Levant. Thus, Tehran decided to vastly expand the forward storage and supply base in Port Sudan in order to better and quicker sustain the war effort in Syria and Lebanon.

Initially, Iran and Sudan agreed to simply expand and upgrade the forward base for the supply of the HAMAS and other *jihadist* entities in the Gaza Strip and the Sinai. Stronger storage bunkers were already being built in Port Sudan in the aftermath of the Israeli bombing of the Yarmuk missile factory and missile depots near Khartoum in late October 2012. The new strategic forward basing in Port Sudan would enable Iran to quickly deliver weapons to clients and proxies all over the region. Concurrently, Tehran instructed the *HizbAllah* in Spring 2013 to prepare secure coastal facilities considered crucial for sustaining Iranian military supplies key to Assad's and *HizbAllah's* momentum in Syria.

In May 2013, there was a sudden sense of urgency in Tehran because of developments in West Africa.

The Nigerian security forces exposed an *HizbAllah* network in Nigeria and unearthed the huge arms cache it had buried. More than the arrest of a few *HizbAllah* operatives, Tehran was alarmed by the corrosion of the weapons in the cache which made them inoperable. Iranian intelligence experts now worry that the many other caches buried and concealed by *HizbAllah* Lebanese operatives along the coast of the Gulf of Guinea are in similarly unusable shape. Hence, there emerged an urgent imperative to vastly expand on-land logistical axes to push large quantities weapons to both feed the *jihadist* up-surge throughout the region and restore the corroded caches throughout the region.

(The capture in Nigeria in late October 2010 of the Iranian weapons ship, whose key operatives were convicted and sentenced by coincidence also in May 2013, convinced Tehran that use of smuggling operations via sea-ports was a too risky a route even though they enable larger weapon shipments.) Iran and Sudan concluded that the military infrastructure in Sudan must be vastly expanded and reinforced in order to sustain the push into west Africa as well as withstand possible retaliatory strikes.

Thus, Iran's decision to surge westward across western Africa all the way to the coasts of the Atlantic was the dominant factor behind the strategic changes in Sudan.

The pace of construction of the Iranian military facilities throughout Sudan picked-up in Spring 2013. In May 2013, the pace and scope of the construction of the Iranian naval, military and logistical bases in Port Sudan grew markedly. IRGC engineering units in civilian clothes and a vast army of Sudanese workers build both logistical piers to rapidly download and upload vessels, and military piers to support warships and submarines. Further away from the port, the Iranians and the Sudanese are building several new clusters of fortified bunkers and other storage sites. Both the new piers and the fortified storage sites would be able to handle tanks and combat vehicles, missile systems, self-propelled artillery and other heavy weaponry.

In mid-May 2013, the IRGC units started the construction of fencing, watchtowers, and fortifications, as well as the construction of fortified air-defense positions where SAM batteries would be deployed.

By now, the extent of the Iranian-Sudanese activities is difficult to conceal.

Khartoum and Tehran increasingly worry that Israel, the US, or other Western powers, are closely monitoring progress and even might attempt to sabotage the new port facilities. Iranian security experts warned that their new facilities were virtually adjacent to Port Sudan's oil exporting installations.



In mid-May 2013, South Sudan was to start exporting its oil through the oil loading facilities in Port Sudan. Tehran worries that when oil customers of South Sudan — the staunch friend of the West and Israel — arrive with tankers they will be in excellent position to spy on, and even strike, the Iranian sprawling military facilities in Port Sudan.

Hence, on June 8, 2013, Sudan's Pres. Omar al-Bashir suddenly announced the halting of the export of South Sudanese oil via Sudan's pipeline. Bashir announced, with great populist theatrics, his decision to close the oil pipeline in a public rally in Khartoum. On stage, Bashir turned to Oil Minister Awad al-Jaz, who was standing behind him, and gave him instructions on State matters. "Tomorrow you ... will order the oil companies to close the pipeline," Bashir told al-Jaz with the microphones open and the TV cameras rolling.

Bashir then turned back to the cheering public and explained that his decision was in response to South Sudan's continued funding of rebels in the southern parts of Sudan. Bashir said that the "decision follows careful study of all its consequences and repercussions". The crowd started cheering.

"Sudan will not allow revenues from oil exports from South Sudan to be used to buy arms for rebels and mercenaries," Bashir declared. It was a public politics undertaking designed to maximize political rewards for Bashir. Despite pressure by the US, the PRC and several world powers on Khartoum to abide by the March 2013 agreement between Juba and Khartoum, Bashir remains adamant. Ultimately, however, tight implementation of Bashir's cut-off was postponed and some export of South Sudanese oil was still taking place by late June 2013. But the die is cast. On June 21 2013, Bashir reiterated that until South Sudan implemented "all agreements by 100 percent, no barrel of oil will be piped to Port Sudan".

Protests from Beijing, long a major patron of Sudan and a consumer of South Sudanese oil, were ignored by Khartoum.

Meanwhile, hectic preparations were, by late June 2013, taking place in Khartoum for the escalation of the surge into western Africa. Both Iran and Sudan consider the Central African Republic (CAR) a crucial venue because the CAR permits movement westward around the chaos in Darfur and the French presence in N'Djamena. Moreover, Bangui provides quick access to the Gulf of Guinea, as well as to the sub-Saharan east-west roadway which passes through the region's main capitals — those which Khartoum has been recently courting — all the way to Dakar.

On June 17, 2013, Pres. Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and President Michel Djotodia of the Central African Republic oversaw in Khartoum a series of secret multi-national discussions which would now facilitate a dramatic break-out westward for Sudan, Iran, the CAR and their allies.

Djotodia is the first Muslim to lead the CAR, significant since only 15 percent of the population is Muslim and most of them practice tribally-influenced offshoots of Islam. Djotodia, in contrast, was a councilor in the CAR Embassy in Sudan but based in Darfur where he was converted to Islamism-*ihadism* by his Sudanese hosts. He is convinced in the Sudanese tenet that a strong *ihadist* kernel is indispensable to ensuring the loyalty and cohesion of any revolutionary movement irrespective of its openly declared ideology or policy.

Indeed, the key internal security and intelligence positions in Djotodia's Seleka coalition are held by fellow *ihadists* and their own stalwart tribal-*ihadist* militias. Hence, Djotodia is convinced he is beholden to Bashir's Sudan for his own ascent to power. Little wonder that the CAR's Christian majority fear that Djotodia and his Muslim allies from the north intend to impose an Islamist regime on the nation.



Back in early 2013, Khartoum convinced Djotodia to renege on his understandings with Paris and Bangui: the January 2013 Libreville Agreement. The Seleka coalition launched a new offensive which culminated in their occupation of Bangui on March 24, 2013, and the overthrow of then-Pres. François Bozizé. During the offensive, the Seleka forces also attacked the AU forces, killing several South African and Ugandan troops.

Djotodia did not forget Khartoum, and soon after assuming power in Bangui started sending quantities of CAR diamonds to his friends in the Khartoum-backed *Janjaweed* militias in Darfur to help fund their genocidal struggle.

Subsequently, Djotodia moved quickly to transform the CAR into a “grey zone” at the heart of Africa.

The CAR is being transformed from a *de facto* haven for various armed groups, due to lack of governance in the remote areas, into a willing and active sponsor and facilitator of revolutionary groups and criminal networks in order to further undermine regional stability. Thus, while Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) groups of varying size were tolerated in parts of the CAR since 2008, the growing cooperation between Bashir and Djotodia changed the importance and rôle of the LRA. In late April 2013, Joseph Kony was invited to Sudan and promised supplies and shelter in return for military cooperation in both the CAR and Uganda.

The CAR is thus becoming a hub of subversion in the heart of the Africa with geopolitical ramifications extending far beyond the borders and capabilities of the CAR itself.

Thus, the June 17-18, 2013, visit to Khartoum by Djotodia and his delegation constituted a major up-grade of the CAR’s rôle in, and contribution to, the Iran-Sudan alliance. In their first private meeting, Bashir assured Djotodia of Sudan’s commitment to supporting and economically sustaining the CAR in return for the CAR’s playing a greater rôle in the continental designs of Iran and Sudan. Djotodia agreed wholeheartedly, setting the tone for the subsequent discussions between numerous senior officials.

Sudanese and Central African senior intelligence officials discussed how to better utilize the LRA in order to force the Ugandan forces out of the CAR.

Sudan’s ultimate objective is to use LRA forces based in the CAR in order to destabilize the Republic of South Sudan, and then use its territory to have LRA forces reach and destabilize Uganda. Kony has already committed to pursuing Sudan’s strategy. Sudan and the CAR agreed in Khartoum that the first step in this endeavor would be flying LRA forces currently being sheltered, trained and equipped in Sudan to Tambura (in the eastern CAR, off Tambura, South Sudan).

The Sudanese and Central African Republic senior intelligence officials also met in Khartoum with counterparts from Chad in order to upgrade and refine the tripartite security cooperation deal between their countries. Back in 2012, the three countries agreed to form a joint force in order to monitor their common borders and ostensibly “prevent rebel attacks”. As amended and refined in Khartoum, the tripartite security cooperation deal between Sudan, Chad, and the CAR now regiments and facilitates the flow of convoys with military aid and supplies westward shielded and secured from Western forces and their local allies.

Most important is the groundbreaking regional security agreement discussed and committed to on June 17, 2013, by a large group of senior officials co-chaired by Bashir and Djotodia. The Sudanese delegation was led by Defense Minister Abdelraheem Muhammad Hussein, Presidential assistant and veteran intelligence senior official Nafie Ali Nafie, and National Intelligence and Security Services chief Mohamed Atta al-Mawla Abbas.



Also around the table were delegations of senior intelligence and security forces officials from the Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Mali, and Mauritania.

The delegations discussed and agreed on close strategic cooperation to restore Arab-Muslim preeminence to the entire region of West Africa. The representatives committed to the consolidation of mutually loyal and supportive regimes, as well as to assisting other regional countries to establish Muslim-dominated governments and to have them join their alliance. The senior officials discussed practical modalities for jointly breaking-away from stifling Western influence and demands for reforms. They agreed on cooperation in resolving security and economic crises and suppressing democratic opposition forces.

Significantly, all countries present also committed to helping Egypt and Sudan in their “sacred struggle” to sustain the Arab rights to and dominance over the Nile waters. Thus, the June 17, 2013, agreement constituted a major and strategically profound shift in the regional posture and assertiveness. If implemented, West Africa will not be the same.

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Thus, as the West — led by the US and France — is contemplating the surge into the Sahel in order to contain AQIM and other jihadist and tribal insurrections, the real challenge will be the Iranian-Sudanese surge aimed to transform the entire West Africa and deny it to the West. *Al-Qaida* in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the other insurgencies will be but instruments of a grand strategic design and surge.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State. He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (*New York Times* No. 1 Bestseller & *Washington Post* No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (*New York Times* Bestseller & *Foreign Affairs Magazine* Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports. Mr Bodansky is a Director at the Prague Society for International Cooperation, and serves on the Board of the Global Panel Foundation and several other institutions worldwide.



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