



A Key Principle or a Key Partner? The Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy towards Africa

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Abstract

According to Iran's constitution, expanding relations with Africa has always been one of the strategic principles in the country's foreign policy; all previous presidents have therefore sought to expand the country's relations with Africa. Rouhani, however, pursued a different policy in Africa. His arrival in the office marked a considerable shift in Iran's foreign policy. Rouhani's African policy, compared to his predecessors, presents a peculiar case, because rhetorically he highlighted the importance of improving relations with Africa, but in practice, he almost neglected Africa at least in terms of trade and official visits. In other words, in Rouhani's presidency, Africa remained as a key principle in the IRI's foreign policy but not as a strategic partner. This paper uses a qualitative content analysis for analysing Rouhani's rhetorical positions on Africa. By adopting the constructivist theory of IR and the importance of policymaking theories, the paper also argues that due to the geopolitical importance of Africa, Iran's relations with Africa, although insignificant, remained unchanged. In Rouhani's time, however, relations declined significantly due to his Westward policy. In discussing this policy shift, the role of both structure and agency are important and emphasize the reactionary nature of Iran's foreign policy.

Keywords: Africa, Foreign policy, I.R of Iran, President Rouhani

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1. Introduction

Maintaining and developing relations with Africa has always been one of the key principles of I.R of Iran's foreign policy. The Constitution, which generally sets out the country's foreign policy strategies, in Article 152 states that Iran's foreign policy is based on "the rejection of any kind of domination, ... the defense of the rights of all Muslims; non-alignment in relation to the domineering powers; mutual peaceful relations with nonaggressive states" (Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran, 2014, p. 32). Article 154 also emphasizes that the I.R. of Iran "supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world" while completely abstaining "from any kind of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations" (Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran, 2014, p. 33). The South and anti-imperialist principles were recognized, directly and indirectly supporting the expansion of Iran's relations with Africa, and making Africa a strategic partner for Iran.

Africa's importance is not limited to ideological principles: its strategic location, rich resources, and vast markets have encouraged various presidents to expand their relations with Africa (Shahvar, 2020, p. 68). Politically, Africa has also been important to Iran and has special qualifications to support Iran in international institutions. Due to their shared experience of Western colonialism and anti-Western and anti-imperialist resentment, certain African countries (such as Zimbabwe, Sudan and South Africa) sympathize with Iran's anti-Western and anti-imperialist rhetoric (Chimarizeni, 2017, p. 42). A number of African countries are inhabited by Muslims (especially in the north) and hold non-aligned positions that could potentially ally with Iran and endorse Iran's international position. Some of these African countries have been temporary

members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) and the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) (Lob, 2016, p. 327). Iran therefore hopes to gain the political allegiance and support of these countries for the resolutions or reports submitted against it in the UNSC or the IAEA (Onderco, 2016, p. 259; Chimarizeni, 2017, p. 43; Shahvar, 2020, p. 62). These constitutional, ideological, economic, and political considerations have encouraged various Iranian presidents to expand the country's relations with African countries. It was only during President Rouhani's presidency that the level of political and economic relations declined and Africa's political and economic potential was almost neglected (Bagheri & Lob 2022, p. 1).

Rouhani's victory in the first round of elections was interpreted as the beginning of a "change in foreign policy" (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016, p. 1; Haji Yousefi, 2018, p. 236) and his supporters hailed him as a "champion of change" (Milani, 2013, p. 1). Rouhani came to power with the aim of creating an "imminent shift in Iran's international engagement" (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016, p. 1) and a "significant turning point in Iranian politics" (Zarif, 2014, p. 7). But in this shift in Iran's foreign policy, the situation in Africa has shrunk from a strategic partner to a marginal region. This paper argues that Rouhani, during his presidency, always insisted that expanding relations with Africa was a top priority, but in practice, at least in trade relations and presidential trips, he ignored Africa's strategic importance. That is why this paper argues that Rouhani's foreign policy in Africa is more rhetorical than practical, and that the position of Africa for him is marginal rather than strategic. Rouhani's main goals in reforming foreign policy were "rebuilding the economy, resolving the nuclear issue, and ending Iran's international isolation" (Akbarzadeh & Conduit,

2016, p. 4). To achieve these goals, he did not consider any significant role for Africa, and from the very beginning of his presidency, he set his foreign policy as a Westward policy. According to Rouhani, the only way to improve the economy was to lift international sanctions, integrate into the global economy and attract Western foreign investment (Haji Yousefi, 2018, p. 236). He also explicitly attempted to distance himself from his predecessor, Ahmadinejad, who had returned foreign policy to the early days of the Islamic Revolution (Hunter, 2010, p. 229) and had an aggressive approach to the West (Haji Yousefi, 2018, p. 234).

With the failure of Westward policy, after Trump's withdrawal of the JCPOA in 2018, Rouhani adopted a new policy that leaned towards the East (China and Russia). Even in this new approach, there was no significant place for Africa, although Rouhani repeatedly stated that relations with African countries should be deepened; he claimed that the establishment of close relations with Africa is one of the principles of Iran's foreign policy, and there is sufficient intention in his government to establish such relations [S.No¹. 6, 16, 32]. Yet, in practice, the Iranian president showed minor interest in Africa because he wanted to secure foreign investment and technological know-how to support the development of the Iranian economy. He did not see such capacity in Africa; as a result, African countries were not on the list of his practical foreign policy priorities (Vatanka, 2016, p. 2) and his foreign policy toward Africa remained rhetorical rather than practical. Rouhani's peculiar policies in Africa highlighted the issue of change in Iran's foreign policy and brought the importance of a president, as an agency, to the fore. In this paper, I argue that Iran's

1. This abbreviation stands for the 'statement number' indicating Rouhani's statements which are listed in the appendix.

foreign policy strategies in Africa have remained stable, but due to the importance of the agency (mainly due to variation of different presidents' vision of world politics and approach towards Africa) in different governments, some tactical changes have taken place. Rouhani's rhetorical commitment to Africa is a sign of Africa's strategic importance to Iran, but his practical policies are indicative of a tactical shift in relation with Africa.

2. Methodology

In this paper, through a qualitative content analysis methodology, as one of the most common methods for analyzing people's discourse (Runion, 1936; Almond, 1954; Prothro, 1956; Benson, 1961), I will investigate Rouhani's rhetorical positions on Africa. As such, all Rouhani's political discourse, that is, speeches, letters and meetings with the topic of 'Africa' and 'African countries' during his tenure (until the date 13/09/2019), which have been issued and published on the 'official website of the President of Iran¹' were searched and collected. First, the terms 'Africa' and 'African countries' were searched; this brought any statement that Rouhani had made about Africa. Then, to consider statements that could be made next to the names of specific African countries, the names of 22 African countries were searched separately. Since the focus of this paper was Iran's relations with Africa, only the names of countries with political, economic or cultural relations with Iran were searched. To being, Iran's 5 major trade destinations (South Africa, Kenya, Senegal, Sudan and Egypt) were searched, followed by the countries in which Iran had embassies (Tanzania, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, Angola, Botswana, Ivory

1. www.President.ir/en

Coast, Niger, Uganda, Zambia, Malawi, Mali, Burkina Faso, DR Congo, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia).

The result of the above-mentioned searches was 65 statements¹ (in relation to 21 African countries) that were presented in various cases, including meetings with officials of various African countries, meetings with new Iranian ambassadors to African countries, congratulations, or letters sent to African countries. To avoid focusing solely on rhetorical change and ephemeral shifts, Rouhani's African policies in practice have also been considered. Accordingly, in order to have a more comprehensive qualitative method, both Rouhani's rhetorical stances and practical policies were taken into consideration. To study Rouhani's practical policies, Iran's foreign trade records (2018-2018) and Rouhani's diplomatic trips (2013-2019) were analyzed as secondary data analysis.

3. Theoretical Background

Foreign policy is not a series of fixed and unchangeable strategies, but a group of policies that can change based on changes in international and domestic factors (Blavoukos & Bourantonis, 2014, p. 483). Iran's foreign policy is no exception to this rule and many writers highlight the influential role of domestic factors such as religion, history, traditions, economics, ideology, identity and political culture (Naghizadeh, 1381 [2002 A.D.]; Adibzadeh, 1387 [2008 A.D.]; Sariolghalam, 1390 [2011 A.D.]; Ghahremanpour, 1394 [2015 A.D.], Haji Yousefi, 2018), as well as external factors such as the structure of the international system (Haji Yousefi,

1. The full titles of these statements are listed in the Appendix.

1384 [2005 A.D.] on changes in Iran's foreign policy. The foreign policy process is a very complex issue, in which both internal and external factors influence the decision making process of policy makers.

Among the various schools of International Relations, constructivism more accurately explains this complexity, and is therefore more appropriate to use for explaining the process of change in Iran's foreign policy. Neorealists and neoliberals with an exclusive emphasis on the importance of material interests (Fierke, 2013, p. 189), who imagine humans and states as atomistic and self-interested actors as well as the presentation of a standard form of instrumental rationality among all political actors (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 206), usually underestimate the importance of ideational factors and heterogeneity of actors. The idea of rational choice assumes that states, in a predetermined context, engage in goal-oriented behaviors (Brown & Einley, 2005, p. 48), and are influenced by objective realities. International politics, however, is largely "a world of our making" (Onuf, 1989). To overcome the shortcomings of the traditional theories of International Relations, constructivism is used in this paper as an approach that emphasizes the combination of both ideational and material factors.

Neorealists and neoliberals' conception of "materialism" denies the importance of the causality of ideas, norms, and values, and their notion of "rationalism" ignores the unique features of society, identity, and interests. By challenging materialism and rationalism, constructivists emphasize the importance of individual values, ideas, interests, and identities in the analysis of international relations (Reus-Smit, 2005, p. 206). Constructivism, with its emphasis on the social dimension of international relations (norms, rules, and language), enables the researcher to understand and

explain the importance of individuals' perspectives in changing countries' foreign policies, such as Gorbachev's "new thinking" at the end of the Cold War. Constructivists, unlike neorealists and neoliberals, who over-determinate the role of structure, emphasize the role of *agency* and highlight the process of interaction. In this regard, actors are "not completely free to choose their circumstances, but to choose in the process of interacting with others" (Fierke, 2013, p. 189). To highlight the distinction between *agency* and *structure* and in a way to operationalize this theoretical stance, it is necessary to define these two terms clearly. As explained by Stuart McAnulla (2002, p. 271), "agency refers to individual or group abilities to affect their environment". For instance, in discussing the US Presidency, commentators frequently mention the talents or weaknesses of George W. Bush and his style, psychology and character as issues of agency. In contrast, "structure usually refers to context; to the material conditions that define the range of actions available to actors", such as globalization, international institutions and environmental threats. In this paper, using constructivism, I argue that Rouhani's view of world politics and his orientation to the West (US and Europe) before 2018 and to the East (China and Russia) thereafter, can be explained through the importance of *agency* and its interaction with the structure.

4. A Historical Overview: I.R. of Iran's Foreign Relations with Africa until 2013

Since the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, different administrations/presidents have implemented different policies and tactics regarding Africa, which can be divided into different

periods. The periodization of Iran's foreign policy in Africa has been presented on different bases: certain scholars divided it on the basis of the identity of the ruling faction (Lob, 2016, pp. 316-318); certain scholars made the categorization on the basis of different presidents (Muvahidi-Qomi, 2009, p. 76), while others divided the foreign policy on the ground of specific domestic and external factors (Hunter, 2010, pp. 226-231; Shahvar, 2020, p. 61). Given the importance of both personality and political culture of presidents and policymakers in Iran's foreign policy (Haji Yousefi, 2018, p. 241), this paper divides Iran's foreign policy in Africa based on presidential mandates into 5 periods. In this section, by drawing on the existing literature, I give a historical overview of four periods (1979-2013) and in the next section by drawing on my data¹ I discuss Rouhani's African policy both in rhetoric and in practice.

In the first period (1979-1989) (Abolhassn Banisadr², Mohammad Ali Rajai³, and Ayatullah Ali Khamenei's⁴ presidency) which was highly affected by idealistic and revolutionary ideas, based on 'no-east, no-west' principle and south-south cooperation, in this period, Iran sought to spread Islamic and revolutionary ideas in Africa (Sarkheil & Mohammadi Fard, 1397 [2018 A.D.], p. 87). Sending religious scholars, establishing religious schools, and receiving seminary students from various African countries were among Iran's cultural activities in this regard (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], pp. 7-76). Politically, supporting the anti-

1. A qualitative content analysis of Rouhani's all Africa statements (the detailed application of this method is discussed in the methodology section).

2. Iran's 1st president (04 Feb. 1980 – 22 Jun. 1981)

3. Iran's 2nd president (02 Aug. 1981–30 Aug. 1981)

4. Iran's 3rd and 4th president (13 Oct. 1981 - 30 Aug. 1989)

apartheid movement, front-line states, independence fighters, and non-aligned movement were on Iran's top agenda (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], pp. 8-87). Hunter (2010, p. 226) argues that some realistic factors, such as growing difficulties with trade with old partners in Europe and Asia and gaining support from the third world in its imposed war with Iraq were also important in Iran's rising interest in Africa. In this period, Iran doubled its embassies in Africa, promoted diplomatic visits (for example the then-president Khamenei visited Libya and Algeria in 1984, toured Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Angola, Mozambique in early 1986, and attended the Eighth Annual Summit of Non-Aligned Nations in Zimbabwe in late 1986 (Hovsepian-Bearce, 2016, p. 90). Furthermore, Iran provided some help, such as developmental activities (Lob, 2016, p. 313) and Red Crescent's hospitals to several African countries (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], pp. 7-76; Hunter, 2010, p. 227). Initiating developmental activities (Lob, 2016, p. 313) and supporting anti-apartheid movements significantly improved Iran's image in Africa (Hunter, 2010, p. 226). It is however important to note that because of the harsh consequences of the imposed war, Iran could not develop considerable economic relations with African countries and its non-oil trade amount with Africa in this period [1979-1989] was only around 789 million dollars (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 87).

In the second period (1989-1997), Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency¹, the foreign policy approach was more realistic (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 80) and reactionary. In fact, Iran's African diplomacy in Rafsanjani's tenure has been

1. Iran's 5th and 6th president (03 Aug. 1989 – 03 Aug. 1997)

divided into two sections; before the U.S.'s sanctions¹ (1988-1995) and after that. In his early presidency, Iran's foreign policy was to improve its "relations with the west, adjusting to the new Russian; and expanding relations with Asia", thus relations with Africa was no longer a top priority. This shift in Iran's African diplomacy was a reflection of its economic needs, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the ineffectiveness of relations with African countries in the past decade. It is however important to note that even at this time, Iran's relations with Africa were not completely suspended, and there were a number of high-level diplomatic visits. For instance, between 1988 and 1994, a number of African leaders, notably Tanzania's president (Mwinye), Zimbabwe's president (Mugabe), Kenya's president (Moi), Uganda's president (Museveni), and Nelson Mandela, visited Iran and President Rafsanjani, accompanied by a large delegation, visited Sudan in 1991 (Hunter, 2010, p. 228).

In Rafsanjani's two final years, the westward policy was halted and the relation with Africa became important again. In 1996, by growing tensions between Iran and the west and the imposition of the U.S. trade sanction against Iran and Rafsanjani's need to improve the country's economic situation, developing relations, especially economic ties, with African countries became a top priority (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 87). Iran's developmental activities, which had begun in Africa in 1985, were therefore intensified in this period (Lob, 2016, p. 317; Shahvar, 2020, p. 63).

1. 'As part of the Clinton Administration's *dual containment* (of Iran and Iraq) policy in the Persian Gulf in March 1995, Washington banned trade with Iran's oil industry. Two months later Washington prohibited any trade with Iran' (Lefebvre, 2019, p. 142).

The second shift in Iran's African diplomacy was manifested in Rafsanjani's second visit to Africa, during which the Iranian president toured six African countries (Kenya, Uganda, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and South Africa) in the fall of 1996 (Hunter, 2010, p. 228). Following the president's visit, the number of Iran's embassies in Africa rose to 20 (Sarkheil & Mohammadi Fard, 1397 [2018 A.D.], p. 87) and its non-oil trade with Africa in rose to 1482 million dollars, which was doubled compared to the previous government (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 87).

In the next administration (1997-2005), Mohammad Khatami's tenure¹, the renewed interest in the African continent continued to expand. President Khatami, by proposing the idea of 'Dialogue of Civilizations' tended to normalize the international image of the country (Nasiri, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 220) and replace Iran's paradigm of anti-imperialist struggle with cooperation (Hunter, 2010, p. 77). The idea of 'Dialogue of Civilizations' provided African countries "the diplomatic flexibility and geopolitical capital" for closer relations with Iran (Lob, 2016, p. 321). Preventing extremist ideas amongst African Muslims, benefiting from African countries' favorable votes in international institutions, and breaking Iran's economic and political isolation were from the main reasons for developing relations with Africa in this period (SarKheil & Mohammadi Fard, 1397 [2018 A.D.], pp. 2-91). Alongside his détente policy with the U.S (Rezaei, 2019, p. 8) and neighboring countries (Houshisadat, 2018, p. 324), Khatami improved Iran's relations with African countries as well (Hunter, 2010, p. 228; Shahvar, 2020, pp. 61-64) and a considerable amount of diplomatic exchange took place between Iran and Africa. In the earliest years (1998), the prime minister of Kenya visited Iran and

1. As Iran's 7th and 8th president (03 Aug. 1997 – 03 Aug. 2005)

President Khatami visited Sudan in 2004. Khatami's landmark visit, which significantly improved Iranian-African relations, was his tour of seven African countries: Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Benin, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, and Uganda in 2005. The focus of Khatami's trip was improving economic cooperation and easing Iran's private sector's engagement in Africa's development (Hunter, 2010, p. 229). Consistent with the previous gradual growth of trade with Africa, the existing statistics show that Iran's non-oil trade with Africa in Khatami's administration reached 2159 million dollars, which demonstrated an approximately 50% increase (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 87). Due to Khatami's conciliatory foreign policy and *détente* with the United States, and introducing the concept of the "dialogue of civilizations", there was an auspicious international condition towards Iran at this time (Nasiri, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 220). This outcome provided African countries with "the diplomatic flexibility and geopolitical capital" to pursue closer relations with Iran (Lob, 2016, p. 321). It is important to note that Khatami increased Iran's political and economic relations with Africa alongside the *détente* with the West, whereas Rouhani adopted a zero-sum approach, in which improving political and economic relations with the West became the singular focus, leading to the downgrading of relations with Africa to their lowest level.

In the fourth period (2005-2013), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency¹, Iran's African policy experienced another shift and returned to its first decade of revolutionary and anti-imperialism rhetoric. In his presidential campaign, Ahmadinejad declared that his main goal is to return to the values and principles of the early years of the revolution, which in terms of foreign policy meant the

1. As Iran's 9th and 10th president (03 Aug. 2005 – 03 Aug. 2013)

expansion of relations with the third world countries, as well as Africa (Hunter, 2010, p. 229). This approach could be understood under Iran's constitutional principles of anti-Western, anti-Imperialist and south-south relations (Golmohammadi, 2019, p. 93). The growing Western pressure and the imposition of economic sanctions on Iran were among the important factors in bringing Iran closer to Africa because Ahmadinejad wanted to counter that pressure by attracting African countries' political and economic support (Hunter, 2010, p. 229). In this period, Iran's relations with Africa were based on the following objectives; benefiting from African countries' political support in international institutions over issues such as nuclear programs and human rights, expanding relations with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and regional organizations, improving the foreign trade with Africa, establishing trade centers across African countries to extend mutual and multilateral economic ties, and spreading the Islamic and Iranian culture (Bagheri, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 43). It is important to note that, contrary to what certain alarmists have argued (Manjang, 2017; Lefebvre, 2012 & 2019), Iranian presidents (except Rouhani) established and expanded relations with Africa, less because of expansionist or hegemonic motives and more as a defensive and reactive measure against the international isolation and economic sanctions imposed by the U.S and the UNSC.

The first step to expand relations was the high-level of diplomatic exchange between Iran and Africa. Ahmadinejad, unlike his previous counterparts who made their African visit in the later years of their tenure, in his first year of presidency made a trip to Africa. By attending the seventh OAU summit, held in the Gambia in 2006, after having received an observer status at OAU in 2005, he showed his serious intention to expand relations with Africa

(Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 80). He also visited Senegal on the occasion of the 11th summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference in March 2008; the Senegalese president had visited Tehran three times, which resulted in the expansion of economic ties between Iran and Senegal. Sudan's president visited Iran in 2006, and Ahmadinejad returned his visit in 2007, which led to improving economic and military cooperation between the two countries. The president of Gambia in December 2006 and the presidents of Zimbabwe, Gabon, Djibouti, and Malawi visited Iran in September 2006 and May 2008, followed by Mali and Eritrea in 2008. In February 2009, Ahmadinejad toured 3 African countries: Djibouti, Kenya, and Comoros; the main purpose of these visits were boosting economic ties (Hunter, 2010, p. 230). To create a long-term framework for Iranian-African relations, the idea of holding an Iranian-African Conference was also suggested in 2007 and a delegation from the African Union Commission visited Tehran in 2008 to assess this possibility (Hunter, 2010, p. 229). These high-level diplomatic visits and efforts significantly increased the Iranian-African trade. In 2005, the total amount of Iran's trade with Africa rose from 362 million dollars to 577 dollars (Movahedi-Qomi, 1388 [2009 A.D.], p. 89). Africa's share of Iran's total non-oil foreign trade (in export) from 2009 to 2011 exceeded one percentage and in 2012 and 2013 reached its historical peak at 2.4% and 2.6% (Figure 1).

5. Rouhani's Rhetorical African Policy

Given the differences between Rouhani's rhetorical stances and his foreign policy in practice, his approach towards Africa is discussed herein two sections; rhetorical and practical. In this section,

drawing on a content analysis of Rouhani's African statements, I discuss his rhetorical stances about Africa. One of the main themes in Rouhani's statements was highlighting the importance of relationship with Africa for Iran. As discussed earlier, building relationships with African countries was a key principle in previous administrations as well. By emphasizing his intention to expand and deepen relations with African countries, Rouhani indicated that such relations are a 'key principle' in his foreign policy. The call for 'developing mutual ties' was also highlighted at least once in the meeting with twenty-one African countries' representatives. Rouhani offered various areas to enhance mutual ties in different fields, such as culture, technology, tourism, industry and science, but the call for development in economic (especially banking and financial cooperation) and political relations were more highlighted [S.No.5,6,7,9,10,11]. The highest demand, which was made for improving financial cooperation, was mainly due to the intensification of the U.S. sanctions against Iran (the presumed maximum pressure), which restricted Iran's foreign economic activities to a greater extent in this period than the previous periods. In the call for promoting political relations, issues such as 'cooperation with Iran in international institutions' (such as UN, International Atomic Energy Agency, and Non-Aligned Movement) and 'fighting terrorism' were highlighted [S.No. 6]. Iran's call for coordination in fighting against terrorism in Africa was new and had not been proposed by previous presidents. From a legitimacy standpoint, this initiative could also help Iran to counter the U.S narrative regarding Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism. Consistent with previous presidents, Rouhani's rhetorical focus on Africa was in fact a response to international isolation and the U.S economic sanctions, which again indicates the reactionary nature of Iran's foreign policy.

Rouhani, in his statements stressed that the existing relations have to be 'developed', 'deepened' or 'promoted,' and this has to be done urgently because it is 'a top priority' [S.No.16]. This call implies that Rouhani not only intended to retain previous relations, but also wanted to promote them urgently. To insist that these are not just some words or diplomatic curtesy, Rouhani emphasized the 'determination' of his administration in building such relationships [S.No.32]. The necessity to stress 'determination' can be associated with a perceived need to counter speculation that Rouhani has no intention for the development of relations with Africa. This speculation could be related to Rouhani's focus on "resolving the nuclear issue", as one of his three main foreign policy goals, (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016, p. 4), which resulted in more concentration on 5+1 negotiations and more relations with the West. Especially during his first term, Rouhani dedicated his entire foreign policy machinery to the nuclear negotiations, which completely occupied the time of his trusted aides in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Ahouie, 2020, p. 20). Iranian foreign policy machinery was so consumed by the nuclear talks and their aftermath that it had little time or resources to devote to other issues, including developing relations with Africa. Established in 2005, the African Headquarters (*Setād-e Afriqa*) in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible for organizing and unifying all public efforts to expand economic relations with Africa. Under Rouhani, this organization was almost deactivated and some trade counselors at Iranian embassies in Africa were called home (Mashregh News, 1399 [2021 A.D.]; Sadeghinezhad, 1400 [2021 A.D.]). These counselors were tasked with increasing and facilitating Iran's public and private sector trade with countries in Africa and elsewhere. This westward orientation can be manifested

in Rouhani's diplomatic visits or foreign trade record¹. Shariatmadari (1395 [2016 A.D.]), the then executive deputy of president, also in celebrating African Day and in addressing African ambassadors in Tehran, assured them that "Iran still is determined to develop and reinforce its relations with all African countries in all fields".

6. Rouhani's African Policy in Practice

Despite the verbal emphasis on the importance of Africa as a "top priority," as well as a significant determination in expanding economic, political and cultural relations with various African countries, little effort was made to implement such policies in practice. This section, by analyzing Iran's foreign trade and Rouhani's diplomatic visits, discusses Rouhani's practical steps to advance his African policy in practice. Iran's annual foreign trade records indicate that during this period, Iran's foreign trade with Africa decreased periodically (Figure 1). These data illustrate the fact that in the last two years of the previous president (2012 & 2013), Iran's exports to Africa reached its highest level in 10 years with 2.6%, but since Rouhani took office in 2013, Africa's share of Iran's exports declined and never reached above 2%. Africa's share of Iran's imports increased slightly, but this increase did not reach more than 0.6% (Figure 1).

Comparing the share of Africa with the share of other continents during these 10 years, the data show that the share of Africa from Iran's exports with an average of 1.8%, compared to Asia with an average of 86.92% and Europe with an average of 10.32% is truly

1. These issues are discussed in more detail in the next section (Rouhani's African Policy in Practice).

insignificant (Table 1). This comparison also illustrates that in the last years of Ahmadinejad's tenure (2011 & 2012), Iran's exports to Europe decreased by approximately 8%, while Iran's exports to Asia increased by the same amount in the same years. Similarly, the percentage of Iranian exports to Africa doubled since 2012. These statistics indicate that with the escalation of sanctions against Iran in his last two years, Ahmadinejad turned to Asia and Africa. In contrast, at the beginning of Rouhani's presidency (2013-2018), Iran's exports to Europe doubled and exports to Asia decreased by approximately 5% (Table 1). The percentage of exports to Africa also gradually decreased from 2014 to 2018. This comparison suggests that Rouhani's foreign policy priority in practice, even after Trump's election in 2016, was more toward the West than the East or the South, at least in economic terms.

In terms of political relations and the highest level of diplomatic visits (presidential visit), Rouhani demonstrated minor interest in Africa. By the year 2019, three African presidents¹ visited Iran and four countries² officially invited Rouhani. Despite these visits and invitations, Rouhani did not made any trips to Africa by the end of 2019. He made more than 35 foreign trips by the end of 2019 (Akharin Akhbar, 1397 [2018 A.D.]), in which he visited 56 countries in Europe, America and Asia. Preliminary analysis of the contents and goals of these trips indicates that the focus of his trips, before Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA was to develop Iran's economic relations under this agreement, and focused, after the US withdrawal, on dealing with Trump's unilateral policies (Tavassoli,

1. President of Ghana in 2016 [S.N.39], President of South Africa in 2016 [S.N.11] and President of Zimbabwe in 2017 [S.N.26])

2. Tanzania [S.N.6], South Africa (ISNA 1395), Ghana [S.N.38] and Zimbabwe (SASA 2017)

1397 [2018 A.D.]). Rouhani was reluctant to make a periodic trip to Africa or even a trip to an African country, while all former Iranian presidents¹ visited Africa at least twice. Records of Rouhani's visits indicate that his foreign policy was westward and that his efforts to resolve the nuclear issue were the focus of his foreign travels, and that his visit to Africa was not considered at the presidential level. It is important to note that Rouhani's West policy slightly changed since Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA, making him pursue an "Eastward policy". Even in Rouhani's Eastward approach, China and Russia were the main alternatives to the West, and there was no significant place for Africa. Rouhani's unbalanced attention to Western countries depicts the fact that Africa does not play a significant role in Rouhani's vision of world politics.

7. Conclusion

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's foreign policy has undergone extensive changes (such as Khamenei's revolutionary approach, Rafsanjani and Khatami's de-escalation policy, Ahmadinejad's confrontational policy), but in all these periods, Iran's relationship with Africa has always been in a gradual rise. These strategic relations with Africa has been due to Africa's geopolitical and strategic importance to Iran (due to its large Muslim population, large market, rich resources, strategic location, and non-aligned positions). It was only during Rouhani's presidency that the level of political and economic relations declined and Africa's political and economic potentials were almost neglected. Despite all the verbal

1. Except Banisadr (04 Feb. 1980 – 22 Jun. 1981) and Rajai (02 Aug. 1981–30 Aug. 1981) who due to very short tenure could not have a chance to visit Africa.

emphasis on the importance of Africa, Rouhani's practical policies have not had any significant outcomes. Rouhani, like his predecessors, emphasized the importance of Africa in his political discourse, but unlike his predecessors, he did not expand the country's relations with Africa in practice by increasing trade or official visits. In other words, rhetorically, Rouhani sustained Africa's strategic position (as a key principle in Iran's foreign policy) but in practice, he changed the position of Africa as a key partner for Iran.

This shift in Iran's foreign policy highlights the significant role of "agency" and policymakers. However, it does not deny the importance of "structure" and the international environment. In fact, there is an interaction between the agency and the structure in Iran's foreign policy decision-making process (see also Bagheri and Lob 2022). Although the principles of the constitution have always guided the conduct of foreign policy, the various policies of Iranian presidents have often been a response to international issues. For example, to counter the Western pressure on Iran (mainly by imposing international sanctions and isolating Iran), various governments have moved closer to Africa as a way-out strategy. In response to this pressure, Rouhani decided to negotiate directly with Western powers. After failing in his Westward policy, he turned to the East (although not as deep as his Westward policy) and Africa continued to be neglected. Rouhani's different approach to Africa highlighted the fact that the most important factor influencing these reactionary policies has been the political values of the presidents and their perspective on world politics, which emphasizes the importance of the agency. Previous presidents, including Rouhani, pursued reactionary policies, but it was the political values of each president that determined which path to

choose: The South, the East or the West. However, it is important to note that the strategic importance of Africa, which is mainly due to the continents' geopolitical importance as well as the Iranian constitutional values and principles, remains unchanged. Rouhani's rhetorical commitment to Africa depicts Africa's strategic importance, but what can be changed are tactical and temporary policies. This means that with the new president in office (even with a stable international system and same structural conditions), Iran's foreign policy priorities may change, especially considering that the political values of the newly elected president Ebrahim Raisi differ to a great extent from those of Rouhani.

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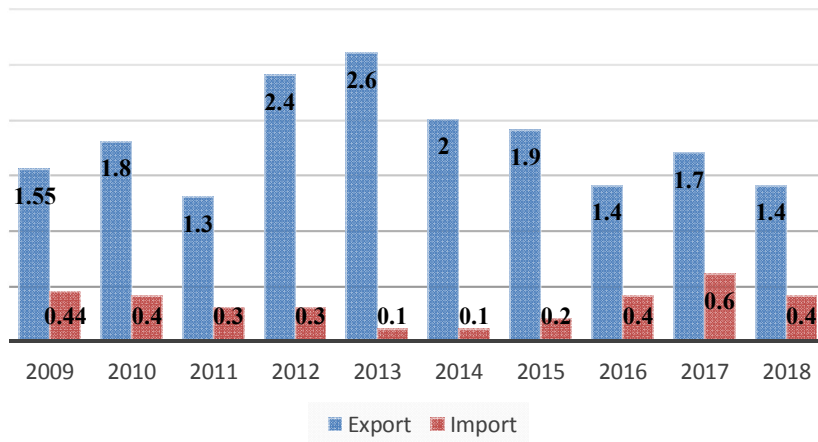
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Figure 1. Africa's Share (%) of Iran's Totaol (Non-Oil Based) Foreign Trade



Sources: Trade Promotion Organization of Iran (1388, 1389, 1390, 1391, 2013: 3, 2014: 3, 2017, 2018), Kamali Ardakani (1398 [2019 A.D.]

Table 1. Different Continents's Share (%) of Iran's total
(non-oil based) Foreign Trade

Continent		2009 1388	2010 1389	2011 1390	2012 1391	2013 1392	2014 1393	2015 1394	2016 1395	2017 1396	2018 1397
Asia	Export	82.13	83.5	91.3	91.5	87	87	88.2	85.9	85	87.7
	Import	60.48	61.1	72.03	68.2	65	69	66.4	60.4	61.8	59
Europe	Export	14.82	13.3	6.5	5.3	10	11	9.6	11.6	12.5	8.6
	Import	35.92	36.5	25.8	28.7	33	28	30.9	33.8	34.7	37.5
Africa	Export	1.55	1.8	1.3	2.4	2.6	2	1.9	1.4	1.7	1.4
	Import	0.44	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.6	0.4
America	Export	1.27	1	0.7	0.7	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.8	0.6	0.2
	Import	2.63	1.7	1.63	2.3	2	2	2.2	4.9	2.6	2.5
Oceanica	Export	0.22	0.4	0.2	0.02	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
	Import	0.53	0.3	0.24	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.2	0.4	0.3	0.4

Sources: Trade Promotion Organization of Iran 2009: 17-27, 2010: 16-26, 2011: 18-28, 2012: 18-28, 2013: 3, 2014: 3, 2018

Appendix: Rouhani's African Statements

01. Felicitating South Africa's national day, 27 April 2019.
02. Meeting with new South African Ambassador to Tehran, 16 October 2018.
03. Felicitating South Africa's national day, 30 April 2018.
04. Meeting with the president of Republic of Azerbaijan in Baku, 28 March 2018.
05. Meeting with the new Ambassador of Nigeria to Tehran, 14 October 2017.
06. Meeting with the Tanzanian Foreign Minister, 11 October 2017.
07. Meeting with the Speaker of the National Assembly of South Africa, 02 September 2017.
08. Meeting with the Speaker of Kenya's National Assembly, 25 September 2016.
09. Meeting with the Speaker of the Council of the Nation of Algeria, 18 September 2016.
10. Press conference with the President of South Africa (Jacob Zuma), 24 April 2016.
11. Meeting with the President of South Africa (Jacob Zuma), 24 April 2016.
12. Iran, South Africa ink 8 pacts, 24 April 2016.
13. Meeting of high-ranking delegations of Iran and South Africa, 24 April 2016.
14. Congratulating Ethiopia's National Day, 02 June 2014.
15. Meeting with Iran's new ambassador to Kenya, 17 May 2016.
16. Meeting with the Minister of International Relations of South Africa, 11 May 2015.
17. Felicitating South Africa's national day, 27 April 2015.
18. Congratulating Senegal's National Day, 04 April 2015.
19. Meeting with the Senegal's New Ambassador to Tehran, 20 April 2015.

20. Meeting with the Senegal's President in New York, 28 September 2015.
21. President Rouhani deplores Nigeria incident (Zakzaki Arrest), 16 December 2015.
22. Felicitating Senegal's National Day, 06 April 2019.
23. Meeting with the President of the National Assembly of Senegal, 16 January 2018.
24. Felicitating Senegal's national day, 04 April 2018.
25. Meeting with the new Ambassador of Senegal to Tehran, 16 October 2018.
26. Meeting with the President of Zimbabwe, 07 August 2017.
27. Meeting with the new Iranian Ambassador to Zimbabwe, 14 August 2016.
28. Felicitating Namibia's Independence Day, 21 March 2018.
29. Congratulating the re-election of President of Ivory Coast, 11 November 2015.
30. Meeting with the Minister of Culture of Senegal, 07 August 2017.
31. Meeting with the New Guinea Conakry's Ambassador, 10 February 2014.
32. Meeting with the Burundi's new Ambassador to Tehran, 24 February 2014.
33. Meeting with the Speaker of Ivory Coast's Parliament, 18 February 2014.
34. Meeting with the Minister of International Relations of South Africa, 15 June 2014.
35. Congratulating Kenya's Independence Day, 12 December 2014.
36. Felicitating Ghana's Independence Day, 06 March 2019.
37. Meeting with the new Ghanaian Ambassador to Tehran, 20 January 2018.
38. Meeting with the Vice President of Ghana, 06 August 2017.
39. Meeting with the President of Ghana and a high ranking delegation, 14 February 2016.

40. Press Conference with the President of Ghana, 14 February 2016.
41. Inking agreements with the President of Ghana- 14 February 2016.
42. Meeting with the Foreign Minister of Ghana, 26 August 2015.
43. Meeting with the Iran's new Ambassador to Ivory Coast, 18 August 2019.
44. Meeting with the Foreign Minister of Ivory Coast, 17 October 2016.
45. Meeting with the Speaker of Ivory Coast's Parliament, 18 February 2014.
46. Felicitating Niger's National Day, 04 August 2018.
47. Congratulating Niger's Independence Day, 18 December 2017.
48. Congratulates Niger's national day, 19 December 2016.
49. Congratulating Niger's President on his re-election, 02 April 2016
50. Felicitating Niger's National Day, 17 December 2014.
51. Meeting with the Speaker of the Parliament of Uganda, 22 February 2017.
52. Congratulating Zambia's Independence Day, 24 October 2017.
53. Felicitating Malawi's Independence Day, 06 July 2015.
54. Meeting with the new Malian Ambassador to Tehran, 02 February 2019.
55. Meeting with the new Malian ambassador to Tehran, 27 October 2015.
56. Congratulating Mali's Independence Day- 22 September 2014.
57. Meeting with the new Congolese Ambassador to Tehran, 09 March 2019.
58. Felicitating Democratic Republic of Congo's National Day, 01 July 2018.
59. Congratulating DR Congo's Independence Day, 30 June 2015.
60. Felicitating DR Congo's Independence Day, 30 June 2014.
61. Meeting with the new Ambassador of Sierra Leone to Tehran, 02 February 2019.

62. Felicitating Sierra Leone's Independence Day, 28 April 2018.
63. Congratulating Sierra Leone's President on his election, 17 April 2018.
64. Meeting with the new Sierra Leone's Ambassador to Tehran, 31 October 2016.
65. Congratulating Sierra Leone's Independence Day, 27 April 2015.